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Theater: Sam Waterston's "King Lear" Disappoints At Public

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KING LEAR ** out of ****
PUBLIC THEATER

King Lear is such a mountain of a play that just getting to the top must feel like an accomplishment. But Sam Waterston is too good an actor to be satisfied with that. He surely wanted to reach the summit and find a fresh perspective on the tale spread out before him. After all, Waterston is an acclaimed stage actor and the star of one of the best TV dramas of all time (*I'll Fly Away*, still bizarrely not on DVD).

Sadly, he has climbed *Lear* but he has not conquered it. Since so much else of it is confused, I will lay the blame

on the shoulders of director James MacDonald for this unfocused, unsuccessful effort. Bursting with talent, this *Lear* feels as if it features a series of different actors giving different performances in different productions.

Minor details arrive and then disappear or simply make no sense in this story of a King who wants to divide his kingdom among his three daughters, angrily shoves aside his favorite when she refuses to stroke his ego and then goes mad when the other two snipe and tear at him with relentless hate. Waterston exhibits signs of palsy or dementia early on, in the scene where his querulous, unreasonable Lear demands his daughters pay him homage. It pops up a few more times, but doesn't seem part of any detailed examination of what makes Lear behave so foolishly.

When the excellent actor John Douglas Thompson goes in disguise, turning the Earl of Kent into a

servant so he can keep protecting Lear, Thompson momentarily dons the voice of a Southern black man. He makes the accent work beautifully with the text (so much so, that I'd love to see a Southern plantation *Lear*, which presumably has been done before). And yet, what the heck is a Southern black man doing with the rest of the characters, who all seem to be from an earlier British era in the fuzzy, Shakespearean past? Another minor character pops up in overalls with the accent of a farmer from the heartland. When battle rages, we hear the sounds of World War I trench warfare for no particular reason. This randomness infects the entire show.

I quite like the chain mail curtain that clinks and clanks every time someone enters and exits. This curtain composed of chains hanging down moves forward and backward to open up or narrow the stage and would be ideal for a play dominated by war and is good here. When it collapses into a pile that Lear can rest on, you are given the show's one modest flourish of originality. Otherwise, the lighting and sound and costumes all feel adequate but uninspired since they've been given no direction. The fight choreography by Thomas Schall is notably weak, though perhaps he was working with neophytes when it comes to swordplay.

One struggles to say something positive. No one is bad, just...indifferent. Enid Graham and Kelli O'Hara have some fun with the viperish sisters. But Kristen Connolly makes no impression as Cordelia and the great Bill Irwin seems utterly lost as the Fool, capering about in an ugly yellow costume and desperately mugging and vamping and trying to make sense of it all. Michael McKean maintains his dignity as the duped Earl of Gloucester. Michael Crane is fine in the role of Oswald until he's given an outrageously broad death scene.

But here's some happy news: this is the first time I've seen Seth Gilliam of *The Wire* onstage. Gilliam may have stumbled a tad on the text during the performance I saw. But he had presence onstage and Gilliam was imbued with a sense of purpose and fun. If a villain can't enjoy the favors of two women of power while playing one off the other, what can he enjoy? I look forward to seeing Gilliam again.

As for Waterston, he surely knows that sometimes a mountaineer climbs the same peak several times before they find the path to the top that's the most satisfying, whether because it's the swiftest or hardest or fulfills some inner sense of the "right" way to climb it. And sometimes they get to the top only to discover it's a cloudy day. Only a return visit can offer the promise of sun and a glorious view.

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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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