

STEPHEN LOW

THE STRUGGLE TO CHANGE: *KING LEAR* AND *QUEEN GONERIL* AT SOULPEPPER

HOW CAN A PEACEFUL TRANSFER OF POWER TAKE PLACE? How can the younger generation take the reins of power from the old to lead us into a new world—a world that is better than the one we currently live in? Can the change that inevitably occurs as the older generation grows older and becomes unsuitable to lead allow for the inequities and inequalities that exist to be addressed and relegated to the dustbin of history? These are the questions explored in new productions of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Erin Shields' *Queen Goneril* performed in repertory at the Soulpepper Theatre Company at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto.

King Lear is well-known for tackling many of these themes, and this production is no exception. The set, designed by Ken Mackenzie, is dominated by two towering bulwark structures that are wheeled around to demarcate different interior spaces. These castle-like structures make physical the imposing power that is the impetus for the action, although their movement often slows the pace of the play, which takes almost three and a half hours. Black drapes cascade down the wall at the back of the stage, suggesting the opulence of Lear's court as well as the power-hungry ill will that envelops his kingdom in darkness. Above the drapery, a panel of red ominously evokes the blood that will be shed in copious amounts as the characters kill and maim each other in their quest for power. This production also has modern elements, such as laptops, handguns, contemporary costuming, and the appearance of the Red Cross in the final scenes, which resonates in both the medieval world of *King Lear* as well as our contemporary world. It also explores territory beyond questions of how an older generation can go gently into that good night by casting three black actresses in the roles of Lear's daughters: Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. This colour-conscious casting seems to raise the question of how women of colour can struggle

to achieve positions of power after old white men begrudgingly relinquish them, although it takes on a new meaning when paired with *Queen Goneril*.

Queen Goneril is set seven or eight years before *King Lear*, and it asks questions regarding the transfer of power from the old to the young more directly. The play begins with a short video featuring Tom McCamus and Virgilia Griffith, who play Lear and Goneril in both productions. This video gives audiences not yet familiar with *King Lear* the necessary information about Shakespeare's play to understand Shields' prequel, and it also highlights the inequities between the iconic and legendary Shakespearean roles available to men, such as Lear, Hamlet, Richard III, etc., and those available to women, of which they only name Juliet. These inequities are subtly hinted at when McCamus speaks over Griffith throughout the video to "mansplain" some details and even, at one point, to reduce Goneril as a character through the dismissive description of her as a "bitch." As Griffith notes, the role of Lear can be played in the later stages of an actor's career, whereas an actress is fortunate to be cast as Juliet, the ingénue, after which her career can take off or fade into obscurity. The video thus compares the roles of men and women who occupy positions of power under similar circumstances—in this case, the lead role in a play. While men are afforded the luxury of agency as they age, women are not.

The plot of Shields' prequel centres on Goneril's attempts to persuade her aged father to abdicate, allowing her to take the throne in his place. Goneril rightly contends that she is ready for the position, as she has learned how to rule from her father. As Shields writes in the program notes, *Queen Goneril* "is an investigation of our contemporary world in which those who have historically been relegated to the supporting roles are demanding to be centre stage. It's about the challenges of achieving power and leading effectively in institutions that were constructed with only a small segment of the population in mind. It's about interrogating the authority of our most lauded texts and the place they hold in our society." In the opening monologue of the play, Goneril reveals that her efforts to persuade her father to relinquish power are motivated by love. She understands better than Lear that he is old and would be happier living a life of leisure in retirement. This, of course, is opposite to how Goneril's motives are interpreted in many productions of *King Lear*, when she, unlike her younger sister Cordelia, concedes to her father's petty request that each of his daughters put into words how they

love him before they receive their third of the kingdom. Knowing this before seeing *King Lear* would better explain the characterization of Goneril in this production.

Regan, the middle child, is also given greater depth, which is lacking in Shakespeare's play. In *Queen Goneril*, Regan feels invisible in a household in which her father attends to his eldest daughter's education in governing and dotes on his youngest daughter, Cordelia, whom he loves the most. Regan feels stifled and wants to indulge in her youthful desires, which leads her to participate in a party celebrating Kent's return that tragically ends when she is raped by Gloucester, who is a well-known philanderer.

Cordelia, who is absent for most of *King Lear*, is also given greater depth in *Queen Goneril*. Being the child whose birth ended in her mother's death, Cordelia feels compelled to smile, despite what she might be feeling, with the hope of bringing happiness to a home saturated with domestic tension. These efforts have reified her siblings' attitude that she is merely a silly child, which frustrates Cordelia as she becomes mature. The stories of the three sisters are thus woven together to dramatize the universal struggle to find one's place in a changing world.

Overall, the performances are mixed. McCamus embodies the titular character well—with a bushy beard, overgrown eyebrows, and an aged-man's physicality, he looks very much the part—but his recourse to anger overshadows the madness that plagues the character from the start of *King Lear*. Despite the fact that Lear is often rash, McCamus makes his angry outbursts seem rational, as they are simply an expression of disappointment at the actions of his ungrateful daughters. Of course a father would be upset over their lack of gratitude! Instead of a gradual descent into madness, it only emerges in full force when he finally faces the elements during the storm in the heath. In addition, Jonathan Young's Edmund is too old for the part, as he is far too close in age to Oliver Dennis, who plays his father Gloucester. While Young speaks the text clearly, he also does not come off as the dastardly bastard that he is in both senses of that word. Lear's daughters are competently played by Griffith, Vanessa Sears, and Helen Belay, but they are all too nice, which is justified if you see *Queen Goneril* first but seems out of place if you only see *King Lear*. Damien Atkins' Edgar is well-balanced, as he maintains the necessary innocence to anchor the audience to at least one moral character before and after his descent into the savage, dirty, mad Poor Tom, whom he embodies with impressive physicality and

vocal acrobatics as a disguise to escape Edmund's machinations. Jordan Pettie is also competent as the moral Albany—an underwhelming but necessary character—but Nancy Palk is miscast as Lear's fool. She has too much gravitas as an actress to play such a debased character. And because she, like McCamus, is an actor in the later stages of her career, the occasional touch or embrace of Lear makes her seem more like a sister or wife than a jester, who is supposed to be a source of laughter and ridicule.

While the performances are mostly misdirected and the casting is confusing in *King Lear*, the performances in *Queen Goneril* are strong, and the casting helps rather than hinders the production. Specifically, Lear's daughters, we learn, were born from an African royal whom Lear took as his wife, which tells the audience that the casting choice was not colourblind in terms of how the characters are seen within the world of the play. Their black identity is also addressed directly at several points when the sisters bemoan having to endure racist microaggressions at the court.

Trans actor Breton Lalama plays the role of Oswald with a shaved head and men's clothing, yet their voice hints to their trans identity, which is confusing in *King Lear* but makes narrative sense in *Queen Goneril*. Lalama begins the latter play as a cis-female character—Goneril's maid and lesbian lover—but after Goneril is forced to dismiss her (she is set up as the thief of a cherished music box that reminds Goneril and Regan of their mother) Lalama assumes the disguise of a man named Oswald in order to remain at court. Goneril eventually discovers Oswald's former identity, after which Oswald confesses that this masculine appearance better reflects what he has discovered to be his authentic identity. Goneril then demands that her former lover stay near her side as a male servant, which he does in *King Lear*.

Palk does not play the fool in *Queen Goneril*; rather, she plays a maid whose wisdom matches the actress' stature, and she often makes the most of striking moments. After Lear complains that the hard, stale bread he has been served threatens to loosen another of his gold fillings, for example, Palk tells him that the court is forced to eat hardened stale bread because the grain stores are low and bread must be eaten past its freshness. Later in the play, we see Palk as a maid shifting through a bucket of shit in hopes of finding valuable trinkets that are often accidentally swallowed, and she eventually finds the gold filling her schemes have successfully dislodged from the king's mouth and declares that wading through shit to find a piece of gold to help her and her family survive is an apt metaphor for womanhood itself.

Only with her innate sense of poise can she make digging through excrement look dignified.

In contrast to the disjointed and lengthy production of *King Lear*, *Queen Goneril* is far more cohesive. Despite its excellent performances, well-knit plotting, and beautiful writing, however, its politics often feel heavy-handed and overdone. After all, the play examines rape, miscarriage, arranged marriage, the imperative to smile, transgender identity, women in positions of power, racism, and more within its two and a half hours. These topics are certainly important, but considering that they are also in vogue, *Queen Goneril* feels overwrought in retrospect.