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**King of Fools: New Moon tackles Lear**

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Flattery will get you nowhere.

That seems to be a running theme for The New Moon Theatre Company. The scrappy indie staged a fantastic production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* last season and followed it up this spring with a competent and mostly compelling production of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Both plays revolve around characters that are studies in arrested development, brutal portraits of men who grew old but never wise. Shakespeare's monarch and Miller's "low man" have even more in common. Both have a weakness for material things and are easily confused by superficial praise and popularity. The two plays are classic tragedies with tragically modern implications.

The story of Lear in brief: an ancient king of ancient Britain, looking to insure a stable path to succession, announces his retirement and also his intention to divide the kingdom equally among three daughters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia, his favorite. Before gifting the lands he asks his daughters to say how much they love him. The elder two shower down praise while Cordelia, who feels much but speaks only according to her needs, says she loves him only as much as a daughter should love her father. Lear misunderstands Cordelia's modesty and the not altogether subtle criticism of her lying sisters. Furiously and foolishly he disowns the "thankless child."

As any generous father might Lear assumes he'll be able to spend his twilight years living with his two loving daughters and their happy families. He asks only for 100 attendent knights. He's denied everything, and turned out to fend for himself in the wilderness. War begins to rumble through the land.

In Act IV the homeless, ragged, angry Lear encounters Gloucester, a nobleman betrayed by his bastard son, then blinded and banished. Gloucester is lead by his legitimate son Edgar, disguised as poor Tom, the mad beggar who's even more ragged than the king.

“Through tattered clothes small vices do appear," Lear says of Poor Tom. "Robes and furred gowns hide all.”

Wisdom arrives too late. In one unassuming line the old blustery King summarizes the moment his life fell apart, offers searing commentary on a sheltered, hypocritical ruling class, and describes, quite clearly, a remarkable modern dilemma. Read any comment thread regarding the Memphis and Shelby County school muddle to and be amazed by the language of blind privilege and pretty ideas used to disguise age-old biases.

New Moon's stylized modern dress production opens strong and finishes strong but loses some momentum along the way.

Bill Baker, who founded the Our Own Voice Theatre Company and works with Playback Memphis is an animated and elfish Lear. Baker is accustomed to working in a more experimental vein, but it's always nice to see him tackle something a bit more straightforward. The broad physical work he's championed over the years serves him well here. The old king's horse-voiced tantrums are childlike and explosive but the language is always crystal clear.

Director Anita "Jo" Lenhart has assembled a strong supporting cast. Kell Christie and Christina Wellford Scott as Regan and Goneril (both powerhouses, both excellent), the always effective Bennett Wood plays Gloucester, and Greg Boller, who played the titular character in Theatre Memphis' interesting if weirdly misguided *Richard III*, does some of his most nuanced work yet as Kent, who believes in Lear and remains loyal even after his banishment.

Lear is, among many things, a play about fools and the various meanings of foolishness. Cordelia (an understated Heather Malone) plays the part at times as does Kent, Edgar (Michael Bolinski), and even Lear himself. But nobody out-fools Lear's court fool played here by,James Dale Green, a versatile character actor who, as a youngster, played Puck in the celebrated Theatre Memphis production of A *Midsummer Night's Dream*, staged by Ellis Rabb. Green's Fool is a sad-faced clown in the spirit of Emmett Kelly, and his delivery couldn't be simpler or more effective. "I'd rather be anything than a fool," he says to Lear. "But I would not be you, nuncle." And there's no doubt that the little tramp means it.

It's been 50-years since a theater in Memphis last mounted a full run of *King Lear*. Why that's the case is a real head-scratcher, all things considered. The show may be more didactic and less nuanced than Othello or Hamlet but, as George Bernard Shaw once noted, one would be hard pressed to craft a more perfect tragedy. This unassuming, if occasionally shocking production may not be perfect, but it's often very good, and scarcity makes it absolutely precious. Catch it while you can.