

Queen Lear or a case of High Hopes Dashed

by Phyllis Chesler



Glenda Jackson is and always was a magnificent actor. And she is currently strutting her considerable Stuff , “merely (a) player” on the world’s stage.

And yet. And yet.

Jackson plays King Lear as the consummate Brit at Oxford, perhaps a Don, waspish, cantankerous, clever, spoiled, and somewhat gay. Fair enough. The costumes are vintage 1920s—the cast of Masterpiece Theater’s “Downtown Abby” wear such clothing. The set royally gold, but was moderne, quite minimal.

Directed by Sam Gold, the casting was beyond politically correct. Women, beginning with Jackson, played male roles: Jane Houdyshell played the Earl of Gloucester, Ruth Wilson played the Fool, (rather charmingly, as a clownish tramp in Chaplin’s bowler hat and with a Cockney accent). Interestingly, men did not play the women’s roles—but given the zeitgeist, that’s only a matter of time. The future will soon circle back to the past when only men could play both the

male and female roles.

On the other hand, I have no objection to gender bending on the stage and even less so if it's well done. This was—and yet. It was done with such a heavy hand.

But there's more. The Duke of Cornwall, Regan's husband, (Russell Harvard) was a deaf mute; another actor, Michael Arden, "signed" and spoke for him. I do not believe Shakespeare had this in mind but we're deeply into revising, modernizing, and doing away with the past.

One actor spoke with a pronounced lisp—he's the "out" gay character.

At least six actors were African-Americans—and oh yes, there was original music by Philip Glass throughout.

Oh, dear me, there's also this: They changed the script. The first Act was two hours long with no intermission. This is not Lear as I remember which always had five acts.

What would the Bard think? Is Shakespeare well amused or is he turning in his shroud?