

British Theatre Guide

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Bingo: Scenes of Money and Death

Edward Bond

Minerva Theatre, Chichester

(2010)

Chichester Festival Theatre has opened its summer season not with a bang but with a groan as a despondent Shakespeare, towards the end of his days, contemplates his life and the cruelties and injustices inherent in the society which surrounds him.

A surprising imaginative take on the man who is our revered and greatest playwright, yet Bond has taken evidence from legal and financial documents of the time and, with the help of these, painted a picture of a man who is inherently, but ineffectually, kind - yet still signs a document agreeing to the enclosure of a large portion of his land, effectively cutting off the livelihood of his tenants, but guaranteeing him the security of further wealth.

Comparisons are made, not only with one of Shakespeares most famous characters King Lear, but also with the social injustice and inhumanity in todays world. If he could arrive in our modern world he might be amazed to see the technological advancement - trains, planes, computers etc. - but underneath not a lot has changed. Do we ever learn? He was stupefied by the cruelty he saw in such sports as bear-baiting, yet we still have fox-hunting and dog-fighting (admittedly illegal) and our rules and regulations are often as equally restrictive as those in the sixteenth century. We are even instructed in what we should eat - five a day has become the mantra - while their fear of the plague can equate with todays threat of swine flu and AIDS, and greed and avarice are ever present!

There are some particularly noteworthy performances in this excellent ensemble cast. The recently knighted Patrick Stewart, of course, in a resignedly morose interpretation of a world-weary Shakespeare. Catherine Cusack as daughter Judith is cold, hard and judgemental, expressing only slight guilt when her actions have caused a young girl to be whipped and burned. John McEnery perfectly judges the antics of the Old Man with a brain injury - a child with a mans needs - cared for by the Old Woman (Ellie Haddington), a patient, calm and sensible wife, and laughter is revived by the garrulous, drunken ramblings of Richard McCabes Ben Jonson, although he cannot manage to cheer up Shakespeare despite plying him with wine. The news that the Globe has burnt down and the comment Your recent stuff has been pretty peculiar may have had something to do with that.

Stephen Warbeck won an Academy Award with his score for the film *Shakespeare in Love*, and here his music beautifully sets the scene and the atmosphere, also covering the impressively swift scene changes, and Robert Innes Hopkins has been particularly inventive with the sets. Simple in appearance they may be - a hedge, a bench and a gate to represent Shakespeares large garden - but, with the help of a revolve they become a hill, an inn (complete with roaring fire), fields, then an oak-panelled bedroom, and Im still amazed by the incredibly realistic snow.

Director Angus Jackson keeps the action moving briskly along allowing the script to present the picture of a complex character who may have been a genius but who betrayed those who trusted

him, even cutting his wife and daughter out of his will.

Do his plays with cries of sanity and justice give us the essence of the man or is Bonds interpretation the truer? Something to think about.

Running until 22nd May

Reviewer: [Sheila Connor](#)