

Never, never, never, never, never!

Often hailed as one of the most extraordinary manifestations of pentameter in English verse, this line from Act 5 of Shakespeare's *King Lear* has been given a new twist by the Royal Shakespeare Company's current production at the Courtyard Theatre Stratford, directed by Trevor Nunn. McKellen winces as he rasps out each distorted syllable. It is delivered in a state of agonised self-consciousness, each repetition of the word producing a slightly different barbed inflection. Its insistent break-down complements and trumps the intermittent noise of dogs which Nunn has chosen as the sound-track to his production. The delivery of the line is accompanied by the production's signature: a series of manic gestures to Lear's right-hand side. In such a way, McKellen's Lear homes in painfully on our concern for consciousness as the definition of our self-hood and our understandable preoccupation with the diseases of old age. This Lear even begins in a relatively advanced state of decrepitude. But, already beyond full-blown rage in the early scenes of the play, he is characterised, even in his apparent forms of madness, by intelligence. In true Beckettian fashion, consciousness, particularly a powerfully playful self-

consciousness, becomes the precise mode in which Lear's agony unfolds as it removes itself not just from the specifics of kingship but, seemingly, from its seventeenth-century origins. More than ever in this production the play seems to relocate itself to the domain of the isolated and cruelly injured modern psyche.

This is Shakespeare's tragedy as I encountered it as an undergraduate at Leeds, reading it alongside Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* and Beckett's plays. From this perspective, the bare boards of the stage doubling as the cliff at Dover for the blinded Gloucester become the epitome of its gruelling existential irony. It is also, as my lecturer Geoffrey Hill then pointed out, a play about the conflict between generations, between, as he put it, 'the flashy old' and 'the spivvy new'. In Nunn's version this is redrawn, certainly in the first two acts, as a conflict between the boorish old and the mannered young. One of the main strengths of this production is the powerful delineation between these generations and the consequent axis of suffering endured by Lear and Gloucester (the latter played admirably by William Gaunt) which dominates and reinterprets the last third of the play. It is their double-act rather than that of Lear and the Fool which best captures the searing contemporaneity of this production.

Some of our best contemporary writing has for some time now been focused on the new range of dementias which, in the affluent West at least, have come to signal our identity in an increasingly aged population. Long before the popular successes of John Bayley's *Iris* (1998) and Linda Grant's *Remind Me Who I Am, Again* (1999) Tony Harrison's poetic film *Black Daisies for the Bride* (1993) explored this disconcerting territory, winning the Prix Italia in 1994. With the

permission of their next of kin, Harrison's moving drama used a group of women suffering from Alzheimer's in High Royds Hospital in Menston just north of Leeds to form the basis of his film. Their current state of mental break-down is juxtaposed in typically daring fashion with photographs of them on their wedding days. Reviewing it at a recent screening at the University of Leeds as part of a reading by the poet himself in celebration of his seventieth birthday and of the publication of his *Collected Film Poetry* (Faber), it was apparent how this at times harrowing spectacle forms an integral part of Harrison's generous and unflinching humanism. What struck home most powerfully, however, was the point at which the verse gives way – literally – in the face of the sufferers. A brief glimpse, a flicker of returning consciousness in Muriel, Kathleen, or Maria becomes a moment of terrifying recognition impossibly caught between agony and redemption. Presented with music in the form of song or dance the 'subjects' of the film steal the show with their own haunting 'epiphanies': brief fragments of

a past erupt at the instigation of lyric energy. But it is impossible to determine whether these are returns from the obscuring blizzard of the disease or mere reflexes of a destroyed synapse. The decaying brides of Harrison's film present their own uniquely moving challenge to his insistent verse. Their own contortions of language, sometimes a single phoneme repeated ad infinitum – or their seemingly trapped gestures – challenge the attendant consciousness of the poet's commentating couplets.

The distortion of the line 'Never, never, never, never, never!' so that it is barely recognisable as trochaic pentameter provides an interesting artistic parallel. In its combination of intelligence and apparent derangement manifested in a form fractured almost to the point of animalistic noise McKellen's Lear similarly captures the tenor of our times.

John Whale

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*Stand* regretfully reports that Michael Hamburger, a long-time contributor to the magazine whose work last appeared in volume 6 (3), has died. His most recent collection of poetry, *Circling the Square* was published by Anvil in 2006. More will follow in the next issue of *Stand*.

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*Stand* congratulates Jay Merrill, whose forthcoming short story collection *Astral Bodies* (including 'Lady of the Spin', first published in *Stand*, 181) to be published by SALT this summer, has been nominated for the Frank O'Connor short story Book Award.

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