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Lear, Primeiros Sintomas dir. Bruno Bravo @Teatro Nacional Dona Maria II, Lisbon

As the title suggests, the emphasis in Bruno Bravo's production was on the man rather than the king. Or rather, the woman playing the role of the man as the main character here was played by an actress (Paula Só). Bravo aimed to create a Lear beyond gender but this is a hard task for either an actor or an actress and often Só seemed to struggle to reach this indeterminate register. Rather than gendering the main character male, therefore, it might have been more helpful to gender them female, especially as the stage relationship with the daughters here was more clearly maternal than paternal.

In the opening scene, Lear and his court seemed to emerge from the bowels of the earth into a quasi-mystical stage setting (Stéphane Alberto). Lear was seated on a massive stone throne that dwarfed him completely. Either side of the throne were two immense stone statues of knights, while the additional knights on either side of them were obviously stage models rather than real performers. This suggested that the Fool's caustic observation (2.2 257-274) that followers desert leaders when they lose their power was a process that had begun long before the play started. Later, when Goneril (Carla Galvão) complained about the behaviour of Lear's knights (1.4. 191-205), some deeply fake 'how dare she!' roars of disapproval came from offstage and played comically with such obvious stage artifice.

Complementing the cross-gender casting of Lear, the Fool was also played by an actress (Carolina Salles) who combined physical and verbal dexterity in an excellent performance as Lear's closest ally. The three husbands of Lear's daughters were cut from the production. This gave Goneril and Regan (Ana Brandão) a greater degree of protagonism in the blinding of Gloucester (Miguel Sopas), for instance, although after her initial "nothing" in 1.1, the actress playing Cordelia (Joana Campos) was more or less silent for the rest of the performance. Even her reconciliation scene with Lear was cut from this greatly distilled experiment (1 hour 45 minutes running time) in what might constitute the theatrical essence of the play. A minimum of stage props, a greatly-reduced cast and excellent choral accompaniments and interludes made this a fast-running and fluid performance. The quality of the speaking of the text by the

performers was maintained throughout, helped by a fluent and contemporary translation by João Paulo Esteves da Silva.

Although not spoken onstage, Cordelia's speeches were not entirely absent from the production. In an intriguing attempt to convey theatrically the distinction between private thoughts and public performance, emotion and policy, poetry and prose, many of the speeches in the play were spoken in voice-overs from offstage. Cordelia's asides during the opening scene, for instance, were delivered in this way, while the actress herself remained silently facing the front. Indeed, all the daughters' speeches in this scene were delivered out into the auditorium rather than to Lear. This emphasized the very public nature of these performances as well as the way in which the need to banish emotion in favour of what was politically convenient created a disconnection between the emotional content of the voice-overs and the onstage bodies and speeches which seemed no more than hollow shells. The combination of spoken and overheard speeches created what became a kind of musical score, underlined by the choral interludes and accompaniments that were such a distinct feature of the performance. The stillness of the characters onstage was broken occasionally by moments when characters faced each other uneasily while avoiding direct contact, emphasizing the consequences of prolonged physical and emotional distance on the public presentation of self.

Edmund (José Redondo) was the master of such doubled discourse. His "Stand up for bastards" speech (1.2. 1-22) was heard entirely in voice-over, illustrating the way in which the voicing of his ambition is banished from the public sphere but structures his private thoughts. Interestingly, Gloucester () also restricted his emotion to the voice-overs, suggesting a familial continuity between the two characters which Gloucester more often disavows. When Edmund refused to show Gloucester the incriminating letter from Edgar in 1.2, his claim that the contents were "nothing" was literalized in this performance as no visible letter passed between them and Gloucester seemed to read the contents from a teleprompt over the head of the audience. The more naïve Edgar (João Pedro Dantas) had to learn this doubled discourse to survive and this worked particularly well in the scenes where he witnessed Lear's growing

madness in the storm (3.6) or led Gloucester to believe he had committed suicide over the cliffs of Dover (4.6).

However, in the second half of the performance, the distinction between private voice-over and performer's public speech was perhaps overused and became less effective. Moreover, voice-over tends to reduce vocal distinctions between performers which meant that when voice-over was used for more than one character, it was not always clear who was speaking. The accelerated ending of the play was particularly confusing in this respect as it was done almost entirely in voice-over and those who did not know the play might not have been able to understand what was happening here. The ending did work well, however, as a visual tableaux, with characters positioned in such a way as to help the audience sense the desolation of the finale. It was a finale which worked well theatrically but not necessarily dramatically.

As she moved uneasily between the characters in this final scene, the actress playing the Fool found herself slightly decontextualized here, especially as there was a clear verbal reference to the fact that "my poor fool is hanged" (5.3 304) when she very obviously was not. Of course, this may have been a reference to Cordelia, but as Cordelia appeared so little in the performance, the suggestion of a parallel between the two truth-tellers in the play was not sufficiently developed. Having said this, the moment when the Fool lowered Cordelia's head onto Lear's inert body was intensely moving. A less-successful moment in the performance was the blinding of Gloucester. Excessively concerned with avoiding theatrical illusion, the actor's flailing arms and cries here were laughable rather than tragic or absurd.

Reinforcing the sense of emotional numbness at the heart of the performance, the stillness of the performers combined with the misty atmosphere, the dark costumes (Stéphane Alberto), judicious lighting (Alexandre Costa) and choral music (Sérgio Delgado) to create the atmosphere of a primitive, pagan world where violence resulted from the excessive emphasis on policy and where the greatest threat to the status quo was not the effects of such violence but the threat that emotional truth might tear apart the foundations of the state. This made sense of Edgar's final advocacy of the need to speak the truth rather than policy, although the way in which Edgar simultaneously placed

the crown on his head as he spoke these words made one doubt whether such a transformation would in fact take place. This was a vital and engaging, though occasionally inconsistent, performance which placed debates over what constitutes a human being in the contemporary context of enforced neo-liberal performances of the self.