Neptune almost Stratford

by Alan McHughen

Perhaps it is not fair to compare the Neptune production of "King Lear" with that of the Royal Shakespearean Company in Stratford, England, but I will anyway.

The first thing one noticed upon entering the theatre on opening night was the preponderance of nouveau riche socialites who used the occasion to show off their latest fashions. Standard apparel at Stratford is, of course, Levis and sweat shirt. Monday night there was even a turkey in a monkey suit. This was offset nicely by the costumes of the performers, which were constructed out of old potato sacks. The time setting here was supposed to have been about 1000 years B.C. and early 18th century in the Stratford production, which gives some indication as to the immortality of Shakespeare's works (or rather Bacon's works).

Despite the three millenia difference in time setting, the two productions are easily recognizeable as being the same play. Stratford's production was much more extravagant, with real musicians, real rain during the storm scene, and a somewhat more convincing scene involving the plucking of Gloucester's eyes. These, however, were the only differences between the two plays; the quality of acting was surprisingly similar, with Neptune's people fumbling few lines, while Stratford's were a bit closer to perfection. Especially strong performances by Richard Greenblatt (the Fool) and Frank Maraden (the Duke of Albany) helped considerably, with honourable mention going to Roger Barton as Edmund, whose treachery led to the diversification in meaning of the word "bastard", and Patricia Gage, who plays a very gonorrheal Goneril. (Edmund, by the way, takes advantage of a kiss with Goneril in Act 2 to cop an ad-libbed cheap feel. Watch for it.)

Especially effective was the use of the burlap sacs in the costume design and throughout the set. It portrayed the quality of the age and also must have been much cheaper than any alternative. Indirectly involved in the play was the experienced use of the theatre's air conditioners, which were turned up full during the more dry scenes to ensure insomnia.

King Lear is regarded by at least some authorities to be the best production of Shakespeare's day. It contains one of the most dramatic scenes in theatre (the blinding of Gloucester) and many oft-quoted lines. It is a difficult play to follow for someone who does not know the story, since characters change their identity at several places in the script. Reading the play before going is a good idea, even for people who know the play but have been away from it for any length of time.

Some suggestions for the Neptune to improve the quality:

1) Don't use recorded music. Realism is very convincing throughout the play until the woofers and tweeters blare.
2) Same for the rain. A fine mist lit properly appears as a downpour. As it is now, the audience has to imagine rain, instead of seeing it. Tsk, Tsk.
3) Turn down the air conditioners.
4) Ask Denise Fergusson (Regan) to not scream her lines. It was most annoying to the people who were trying to sleep.

All in all, the production at the Neptune came off very well; the technical side was excellent, the acting and directing good. The play is reasonably priced (for a three and a half hour production) and very entertaining.

The Neptune Theatre Company's production of King Lear is, except for a few relatively minor points, comparable to that of the Royal Shakespearean Company, and is recommended to everyone literate with the provision that they have at least a superficial understanding of the story beforehand.

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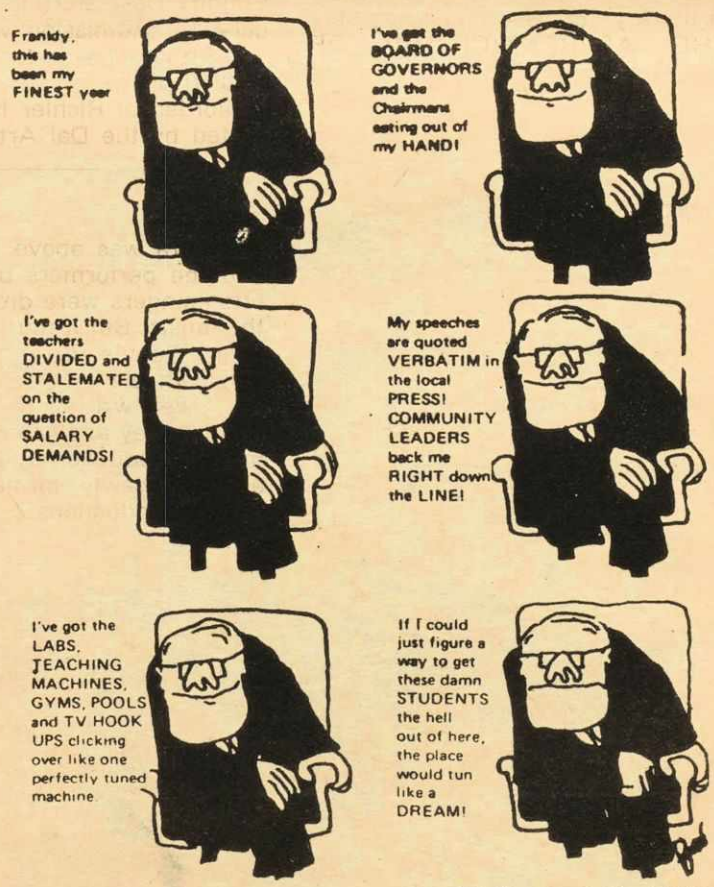

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