

'The Dresser,' the San Jose Rep takes on a valentine to the stage

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It is one of the most beloved valentines to the theater ever written.

In "The Dresser," a classical actor once hailed for his tour-de-force performances is now forced to tour with heartbreaking results. Sir, a cantankerous English thespian sliding into senility while drowning in his cups, leads a motley troupe of Shakespearean actors through the provinces during the London Blitz in World War II. A constant drumbeat of air-raid sirens, ego clashes and unrequited love stories punctuate Sir's 227th performance of "King Lear."

"It's a play that celebrates the world of the theater, and the way it can sustain us -- especially since the people in the world of 'The Dresser' are struggling against almost absurd odds to put on their performance of 'King Lear.' They have to contend with a leader who is losing his capacity, a country at war, physical and emotional deprivation -- yet they still believe they can pull something wonderful off," says Rick Lombardo, artistic director of San Jose Rep, where the revival runs tonight through Feb. 20. (It is in previews until its opening night on Wednesday.)

"And running a nonprofit theater company in these last few years has sometimes felt quite like the world of this play," Lombardo adds.

Based on the life and times of the late Sir Donald Wolfit, a distinguished British actor often exiled to playing the hinterlands, the tragicomedy is perhaps best remembered for the sublime 1983 film version, which starred Albert Finney and Tom Courtenay. At the Rep, two of the Bay Area's most consummate actors, Ken Ruta and James Carpenter, step into the immortal roles of Sir and his redoubtable valet Norman, two men valiantly fighting to uphold their craft amid the chaos of wartime.

"The role of Sir requires someone who can be an acting icon, and who represents that more in the Bay Area than Mr. Ruta?" says Lombardo. "And any play about lifetimes spent in the tireless pursuit of greatness in the theater requires two actors with a vast amount of their own experience -- and Ken and Jim bring that in huge quantities. This play is really a comedy and a tragedy, like the great Shakespeare tragedies, and these two actors dive into both with abandon."

For the record, Sir may get top billing in the universe of the play but Norman is the soul of Ronald Harwood's classic 1981 backstage drama. Indeed, the title character is the ultimate underdog, a fussy budget who loves Sir so much that he sacrifices his own sense of self to keep the old ham on his feet at all costs. Meanwhile, outside the stage door, the nation struggles to survive its most harrowing hour.



Actor Ken Ruta rehearses for the play "The Dresser" at the San Jose Repertory Theater in San Jose on Jan. 20, 2011. (Gary Reyes /Mercury News) (Gary Reyes)

"It truly is a heroic thing they are doing," Ruta says. "The theater is what kept the actors going during the war but it is also what kept the audiences going. I have always been in love with history and that is what is so moving about this play -- its connection to the past."

Based on Harwood's own experiences as Wolfit's valet, this play-within-a-play sucks us into a universe where intimate events feel epic, and tragedy flirts with the absurd.

"This is the kind of play that you could rehearse for six months," Carpenter says. "It's that complex, the language is so rich and involved that you have to be incredibly precise. The play demands all you've got and it forces everyone to step up."

That's why Harwood's homage to the boards ranks right up there with "All About Eve," "My Dinner with Andre" and "Slings & Arrows" in the hearts of theater buffs. It captures the intoxicating blend of pathos and greasepaint that makes a life on the stage so addictive.

"These days if you want to have a life, have a family, you have to do TV because the theater don't pay nothing anymore," Ruta says. "But when you are up there doing it, it's so wonderful, there's not a worry in the world."

For some, the cost of that transcendence is high. Norman is the glue that holds Sir together as he staggers through soliloquies, tantrums and storm scenes onstage and off. It's no mean feat as bombs burst overhead and Norman's own emotions threaten to explode.

"Norman cuts both ways," Carpenter says. "He has glorious qualities but he is driven by neuroses, the pain is so raw and palpable that it's rough playing him. To be truthful, you have to go to a very dark place. By the end of the day, I'm toast."

For his part, Ruta admits that playing an aging tragedian whose memory is fading fast also resonates on a personal level. At 77, he is no stranger to the ravages of time.

"I can remember when I could learn a whole new part in a weekend. That doesn't happen anymore," he says with a sigh. "Fortunately I have played Lear four times so I know it quite well."

While the intense bond between Sir and Norman is the crux of the play, the cast of characters also includes Sir's diva of a wife, her Ladyship (Lombardo's wife Rachel Harker in her Rep debut), who plays Cordelia well into middle age; Irene (Blythe Foster), the ingenue willing to be seduced for a shot at stardom; Madge (Lynne Soffer), the lovesick stage manager; and Oxenby (Blake Ellis), a wannabe playwright and Sir's rival. The sense of camaraderie that unites actors, even those who loathe and despise each other, is palpable here. During the famous storm scene, for instance, the entire troupe jumps into the breach to provide the sound effects the tyrannical Sir demands.

"There is so much truth here, so much that speaks to the life of the actor," Ruta says. "Being part of a company is a rare and wonderful thing, a quality that this play captures. It makes you want to try harder and climb higher to be worthy of it."

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Through: Feb. 20

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio

Tickets: \$35-\$74; call 408-367-7255 or visit www.sjrep.com

