

THE DRESSER

A Play about Love

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Photos: by Kevin Berne



James Carpenter, as Norman the dresser, tries to convince Sir, (Ken Ruta) Laying down, that the show must go on.

San Jose, California – “**THE DRESSER**” the classic British drama that is being presented at San Jose Rep, is a play where Ronald Harwood, its playwright, utilized all the dramatic nuances of his art to shape a play with love as the central focus. Paradoxically, when love is really obvious and demonstrated over and over, the only love that’s true is ignored.

As a play, **THE DRESSER** has a subtle parallelism with “King Lear” (the character that Sir, the actor plays) but the parallelism is presented in such a subtle manner by the playwright that the audience is unaware of it, until the end. The main character, simply called Sir, (Ken Ruta) is the aging actor of a small regional theatre that is so old that the walls are crumbling, all the costumes are worn out and in the year 1942, when the action takes place, when watching a performance at night, the audience can hear the air raid sirens howling at the distance, see the flashes of light as the bombs fall and feel the buildings’ walls shaking with the explosions.

Sir, (Ruta) is a Shakespearean actor who one night plays “King Lear” and the next night “Richard the III.” disregarding the circumstances. Norman, (James Carpenter) another elder man, who probably could use somebody younger to take care of him, is Sir’s “dresser” a name given to a valet who night after night helps him put on his faded regal costumes, glues his fake mustache and long beard to his face, and after placing on his head the ragged old wig adjust his polished metal crown on his head. In addition, Norman serve Sir drinks, listens to his problems, encourages him by telling him he is great, and without losing his subservient attitude towards the actor for one second, addresses him as “Sir.



L to R, Her Ladyship (Rachel Harker), Sir (Ken Ruta) and Norman (James Carpenter) in SJREP production of "THE DRESSER"

The play, directed by Rick Lombardo, begins inside Sir's dressing room at the theatre, (creatively designed by Ken Dorsey) shortly after the air raid sirens had stopped howling at the distance and no more bombs are falling. It is almost time to start tonight's 227th Sir's performance, of "King Lear," but the Sir, who plays the leading role, is missing.

Norman informs Her Ladyship (Rachel Harker) Sir's daughter and also the actress who plays the role of "Cordelia" in Lear' play, that during the afternoon, he saw Sir in state of collapse. Sir had gone to the market where he got naked and started stomping, weeping and shouting. Not knowing what to do, Norman had taken him to the hospital. Madge (Lynne Soffer) the Manager of the theatre, and Ladyship, (Harker) agree that for the first time in 15 years they may have to cancel the performance because they cannot play Lear without the king and Sir is ill. "I never imagine that it will end like this," says Norman.

Knowing how close the actor is to him, Norman believes that he can help Sir if he is allowed to go to the hospital to talk with him. But Her Ladyship reminds him that her father is very ill and he needs rest. But Sir has never missed a performance before and he won't miss this one. Opening the door of his dressing room, he announces that he has checked himself out of the hospital and is ready to perform that night, in spite that he cannot remember his first lines.

As Norman (Carpenter) helps Sir change into his costume and people go in and out of the room, we see the interactions of Sir with the rest of the characters. We also observe the different kinds of love, unfolding around him, some expressed in actions and some expressed in dialogue by the characters. In the process, we learn that Madge, apparently had been in love with Sir for 15 years doing all sorts of things for him, as the manager of the theatre, hoping that one day he become aware of her love. Tonight she gets his ring, but it is not the engagement ring that she longed for all her life. Sir tells her it is only a gift. On her part, her Ladyship reveals that her filial love for her father, induced her to be with him and care for him for all these years, as a result she wasted her youth, playing small roles in plays presented in filthy theaters.

"THE DRESSER" does not tell us much about Norman (Carpenter) background. We don't know if he is married or not, or if he has a family. Yet his actions allow us to get to know him well. He is always helping Sir, constantly building his self esteem by telling him that he is a great actor and that lots of people are waiting to see him at the theatre. He also consoles him when he cries. If he feels physically weak, Norman holds him to allow him to stand up. When Sir forgets his lines, it is Norman who says them aloud so that Sir can remember them. In Norman's constant giving, without asking for nothing in return, we see an expression of true love

For those familiar with “King Lear” Norman in the play THE DRESSER is a blend of “The Fool,” which has the wisdom that King Lear's lacks, and Cordelia, the only daughter (of Lear) that really loved her father, who unable to understand love that is not expressed in flattering words, not only disinherit her, but ban her from the court.

Many see Sir as an actor whose only love was the theatre. I disagree. Sir is much too self-centered to be capable to love anyone or anything. But since he is an actor, he needs the theatre because, when he is playing a role, he is no longer Sir, (A good for nothing old actor) on the stage; he is the king of England.

The drama THE DRESSER shows the audience the gradual disintegration of the life of one man and the complete devotion of another man to one who ignores him completely, in a combination of excellent direction by Lombardo and superb acting of both Ruta and Carpenter as the main characters.

The play is verbose, but the wonderful acting of every one of its characters: Oxenby (Blake Ellis) Geoffrey Thornton) Juian Lopez-Morillas, Iren (Blythe Foster) as the young starlet, who feign to care for Norman because she craves to play the part of Cordelia, Knight/Albany Drew Benjamin Jones, Gloucester (Jason Kapoor) Knight (Shane Rhoades y Kent (Adam Sessa) keep the audience mesmerize. Without a doubt, “THE DRESSER” is one of the best dramas that the REP has presented.

And at the end, it make us understand the truth in Lear's words when Shakespeare wrote:
HOW SHARPER THAN A SERPENT TOOTH IS TO HAVE A THANKLESS CHILD. King Lear.

For tickets: you can call the Box office at (408) 367-7255 or go to www.sjrep.com