

Theatrical magic, fine acting elevate sublime ‘Dresser’

By: [Georgia Rowe](#) 02/09/11 8:45 PM

Special to The Examiner

“The Dresser” requires nothing less than two outstanding actors, and the new San Jose Repertory Theatre production has two of the Bay Area’s finest.

James Carpenter and Ken Ruta are featured in Rick Lombardo’s faithful revival of Ronald Harwood’s backstage drama about an aging Shakespearean actor and the dresser who’s spent 16 years serving him.

Gloom pervades Lombardo’s production, set in 1942 in a theater near London.

Outside, German bombs explode and air raid sirens shriek; inside, Norman (Carpenter) is preparing Sir (Ruta) for his 427th performance as King Lear.

It’s not going well. Sir, emotionally exhausted from playing the mad king, can’t remember his lines, or even recall which play is on the schedule. He appears to be failing fast, and the crowd is already taking its seats.

Norman’s official job is to help Sir with makeup, wigs and costumes. But over the years — and multiple tours of moldy theaters like this one — he’s become essential to the temperamental actor. He coddles Sir, enduring his egotistical outbursts and keeping the rest of the company at bay, all the while fortifying himself with nips of brandy from the flask in his back pocket.

Carpenter and Ruta, both Bay Area theater veterans, are brilliantly cast.

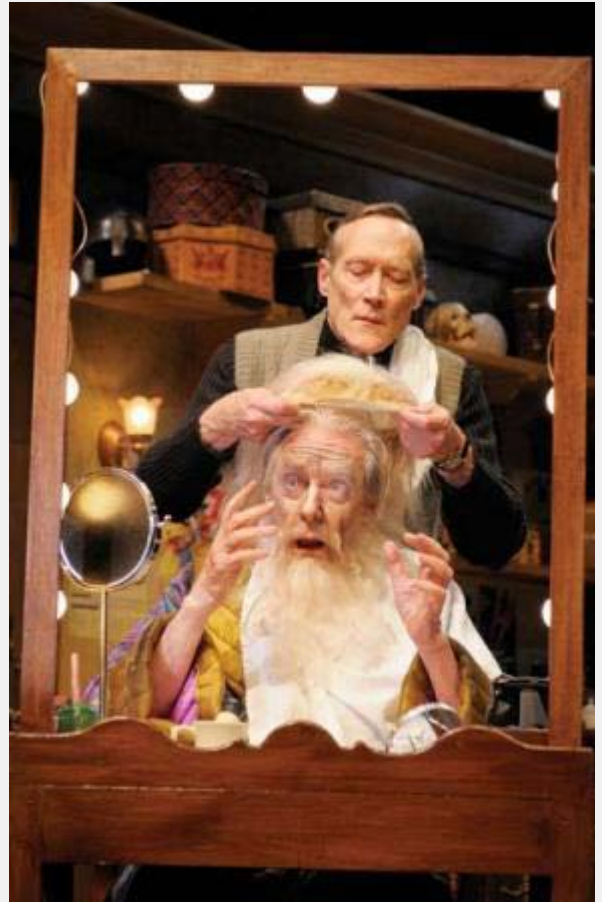
Carpenter’s a tightly wound, articulate Norman, his hands fluttering as he recalls a bit of theater trivia, his face waspish as he guards Sir from the others.

Ruta’s Sir is just as strong: With his rangy frame, rubbery face and robust voice, he embodies the grandeur and decay of the leading man who once held full houses in thrall.

Lombardo’s two-hour, 40-minute production takes us from the dressing room to the theater’s backstage area. The designs — precise sets by Kent Dorsey, evocative lighting by David Lee Cuthbert, beautifully sculpted sound by Steve Schoenbeck and period-perfect costumes by Cathleen Edwards — establish time and place.

The supporting cast is excellent. Three women are standouts: Rachel Harker as Sir’s sad wife, Her Ladyship; Lynne Soffer as the heart-of-gold stage manager, Madge; and Blythe Foster as the ambitious ingénue, Irene. Blake Ellis (Oxenby) and Julian Lopez-Morillas (Thornton) add comic zest.

Harwood gives us a glimpse into the bygone days of repertory theater, letting us feel the anguish of Norman and Sir as they face their twilight years in an impermanent business.



Seasoned pros: Ken Ruta, seated, as a Shakespearean actor on the decline, and James Carpenter as his assistant, are superb in “The Dresser” onstage at San Jose Repertory Theatre. (Courtesy photo)

But “The Dresser” also reveals what drew these characters to theater in the first place. The life is grueling, it suggests, but there’s magic in each fleeting moment; watching Carpenter and Ruta makes it a pleasure to the end.

THEATER REVIEW

The Dresser

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

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays; 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays; 3 and 8 p.m. Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays; closes Feb. 20

Tickets: \$35 to \$74

Contact: (408) 367-7255, www.sjrep.com