

Review: 'The Dresser,' an acting masterclass at San Jose Rep

[By Karen D'Souza](#)

02/03/2011

A lost old man teeters between senility and madness in "The Dresser." Stumbling into his dressing room, the aged actor dons the red robe and white wig of King Lear for the 227th time, and only in that costume can he find himself.

Ronald Harwood pays homage to the heroism of this bravely decaying thespian, known only as Sir, in his quintessential backstage drama. Set during the London Blitz of World War II, the play celebrates the nobility of a ragtag Shakespearean troupe forging ahead in the face of unbeatable odds, exploding egos and omnipresent air raid sirens.

Sensitively revived by San Jose Rep and its artistic director Rick Lombardo, "The Dresser" is buoyed by two of the Bay Area's finest veteran actors, Ken Ruta and James Carpenter, in the key roles of the imperious Sir and his stalwart minion Norman. It's a master class in the art of scene-stealing that is guaranteed to charm the stage-struck. A potent mix of existentialism, poetry and wit, this is a play that exposes the grit beneath the glamour and reminds you why you first fell for the theater.

While the Rep's staging suffers from some static pacing and awkward movement, there's no denying the thrill of watching two theater titans face off in one of the most moving love letters to the stage ever crafted.

Lombardo's production boasts a startlingly vivid set (Kent Dorsey) that captures both the claustrophobia of the backstage realm and its epic scope. Tattered posters, decaying props and moldy costumes line the walls of Sir's dressing room. It's a shrine to a bygone era when Shakespearean actors were venerated as guardians of the culture.



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)

Harwood cleverly echoes the dance between Lear and the Fool in Shakespeare's classic tragedy with his depiction of the maddeningly dysfunctional relationship of Sir and Norman. They need each other as desperately as they need the theater. Like everything in the chaotic, war-torn universe of the play, it's a matter of life or death.

Without Norman, Sir would play Lear smeared in Othello's black face. Without Sir, Norman would have no one to nurse, pamper and cajole. He would have no reason to exist.

As Sir is fond of noting, it's all about struggle and survival. Outside the stage door, bombs are bursting overhead. Inside the theater, Sir has more lines on his face than in his head. He has burned one too many soliloquies into his brain. He is now hounded by his demons, dogged by his mortality, and every time he lets Lear into his fractured psyche, it costs him what little peace he has left.

Ruta, one of most august actors around, etches Sir's plight with great delicacy. He nails the vacant stare of a man lost to his own regret. As he reaches his final curtain call, the once regal man is reduced to tears as often as an infant. With equal parts sadness and irony, he realizes he has dedicated his life to an art form that's as ephemeral as a snowflake; it's melting away before it even hits the ground. Only when he dons Lear's robes does he seem comfortable in his own skin.

Norman, alas, doesn't even have a sense of past grandeur to fall back on. Chugging a flask of brandy, massaging his charge's narcissism with every breath, the fussy taskmaster pushes himself so hard he doesn't even notice that he has been living someone else's life all these years.

The always astute Carpenter hints at Norman's frailty throughout the piece, but he is devastating in the play's final moments. Stroking the Lear wig as if it were a beloved pet, Norman is consumed by the anguish of a servant who loves his master more than himself. The tragedy of anonymous pain cuts deep here.

The intensity of the rapport between Sir and Norman charges every scene. But some of the supporting characters are not as sharply etched. The repartee between Sir and the long-suffering stage manager Madge (Lynne Soffer) never tugs at the heart. And there's not enough zing in the ersatz seduction of the saucy ingenue Irene (Blythe Foster).

Given the bleakness of the play's tragic arc, the comic moments also need more force. And there are a few crucial points where Ruta's back is turned to the audience.

Still, Julian López-Morillas delights as the hapless understudy Geoffrey, quaking in his boots to trod the boards with Sir, and Rachel Harker makes a very tender Her Ladyship, Sir's put-upon wife and co-star.

Indeed, watching Sir's bedraggled ensemble rise above their petty squabbles reminds us of the magic of the stage, its ability to redeem as well as entertain. Sir and Norman aren't the only ones who come to the theater seeking escapism from a weary world, and that's precisely what "The Dresser" provides.

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Check out her theater reviews, features and blog at www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza.

'The Dresser'

By Ronald Harwood

Through: Feb. 20

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

Running time: 2 hours, 45 minutes (one intermission)

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