

King John (Theatre Review)

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***King John*. Dir. Eleanor Rhode. The Royal Shakespeare Company. Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK.**

Reviewed by *Lisa Hopkins**

As it says in the title of the play to which Shakespeare was probably responding, *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, King John was a problem—to himself, to England, and sometimes to theatre directors. Even I, a hardened theatre-goer of many years' standing, have to stop and think about whether I *really* want to go and see *King John*. But it is the only Shakespeare at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in the whole winter season, so I booked it even though I feared it was going to be troublesome to me too.

It wasn't. On the face of it, there are some odd decisions in this production: King John is a woman, the Dauphin of France has a strong Irish accent, and the Bastard, who keeps having to talk about his size, is played by the smallest adult actor. None of it matters, though, because the production is so consistently successful in finding out where the play's theatrical energies lie. Traditionally, *King John* has been famous for two set-pieces, which can almost be detached from the plot: Constance's lament for Arthur, beloved of Victorian actresses, and the Bastard's "if England to itself do rest but true" speech, something of a watchword in both world wars. Both are here and both are done well, but so too are lots of other bits. I have never heard such sheer power and confidence in John's declaration that he speaks as "England for itself", and I have certainly never seen such a brilliantly funny and anarchic celebration of the wedding between Blanche and the Dauphin, in which food goes flying and the gold balloons which spell out "Just Married" are punctured and rearranged until they read "Just Die". When the arrival of Cardinal Pandulph stops the fight, there is a splendid moment when King John, sobered, picks a fairy cake off the French king's crown and the French king pauses for a moment, looks at it, and says "Thank you". It is a small still moment of calm in the middle of the fraught negotiations.

The fraught negotiations in question being, of course, the Brexit ones. In the months before the 2016 referendum, the RSC warned us about the potential consequences in *Cymbeline*, set in an apocalyptic future, where we are living in caves in Wales. Now, at the latest minute of the hour, we see what happens if you cut yourself off from Europe. It might all be OK: a competent Italian lady cardinal with a Milanese fashion sense might come and bring us back into the fold. Or it might not: there is no mention here of John's successor Prince Henry, and the Bastard's only plan seems to be suicide.

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It is presumably in support of this sense of uncertainty that the production makes what I think is its one mistake. It is generally very helpful to audience members unfamiliar with the plot, particularly in the BBC radio announcer at the beginning, who reports on the coronation and introduces John, his mother (said to have worn Chanel for the occasion), and his niece Blanche. But it is not helpful in its presentation of the death of Arthur. This is brilliantly prepared for in a scene which uncannily couples the trappings of a modern doctor's or dentist's surgery with an iron circle of lit candles—a touch of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, but also a mediaevalising note which makes the proposed blinding comprehensible. What actually happens to Arthur is however totally unclear. He runs along a table with some people standing on either side, he comes to the end, goes over, and two of the people catch him; then next time we see him one side of his face is covered with blood in the eye area and the other is clean. My husband and son, experienced viewers of Shakespeare and not especially stupid, were both baffled, and while I take the point that the death of Arthur is mystified in the play, I did not think this worked. In every other respect, though, I was riveted by this production. And also of course terrified, as we wait to see whether the Hallowe'en horror of Brexit is really going to materialise.