DRAMA

XXI CLUB'S *KING LEAR*

It is usually with some trepidation that a director attempts to stage this, the most epic of Shakespeare's tragedies. But in the case of Mr Armstrong and Dr Jones-Lee, any similar feelings have proven entirely unnecessary. Indeed, that I should be able to pen this review some four weeks after the production is not merely an indication of my own laziness and procrastination: more, it reflects the memorable intensity of the performance itself.



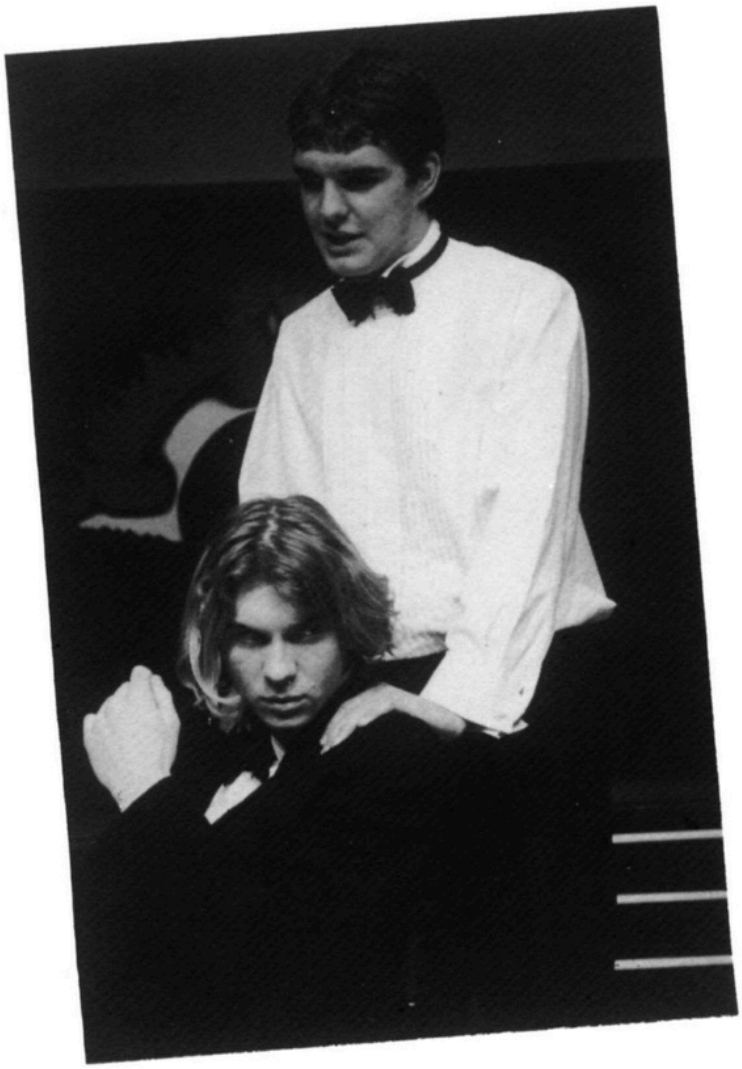
An essential element of any tragedy, according to Aristotle, is that it should make us "shudder with fear and pity". Whether we do ever shudder with fear in *King Lear* is questionable; but what cannot be doubted is that it does indeed excite pity; and this was clearly prevalent in the XXI Club's production. Chris Jones' Lear was indeed a pathetic figure, being obsessed with his "unkind daughters" and his foolish treatment of his dear "child Cordelia". His screwed-up face, racked with both pain and incredulity, successfully conveyed the turbulence of his inner emotions; his stooping form, devoid of energy, showed a man on the verge of mental and physical collapse, his flower-laden hair and the closing of imaginary curtains the depth of his madness. But more pathetic, more pitiful still was the sight of a newly broken man, now unable to "endure", tenderly holding his beloved dead Cordelia - ably played with suitable integrity by Helen Marr -, stroking her face, and weeping the terrible lines, "Thou'llt come no more,/ Never, never, never, never, never!" Yet, as well as feeling pity for Lear, we were also made to feel affection, sympathy and disgust - a clear indication of Chris Jones' outstanding performance.

Nor were these feelings merely confined to the protagonist. As Gloucester, Dakis Hagen immediately incited our disgust by his quick condemnation of his honourable son, Edgar. And his gratuitous and sadistic blinding at the hands of the suitably evil Regan (Helen Radice) and Cornwall (Ed Moss) also provoked our sympathy and pity, the effect being heightened by his bleeding eye-sockets. Another character for whom we felt both affection and pity was the Fool, played by Sarah Jones-Lee. Masterly in her interpretation of an unusual role, she managed to show her clear loyalty and love for her master despite the cruel wit lashed upon him by her chastising tongue. The decision to cast a girl in a traditionally male role certainly did more for the performance than merely create a badly needed female part: not only was the relationship between Lear and the Fool rendered suitably more intimate



than would otherwise have been the case, but the Fool's sense of vulnerability during the storm was increased. The combination of this with her shivering body and trembling singing also succeeded in creating a haunting quality underlying the ferociousness of the storm and Lear's shocking madness.

A good play, however, cannot merely rely on the emotive force effected by deep tragedy - a sense of the comic is vital in relieving the audience. This was certainly provided. As the evil Edmund, Simon Shaw succeeded in making his false sincerity funny. His brilliant stage movement and his wicked smile showed his evil energy; and, despite his obvious malevolence, it was difficult to dislike a character who grinned as he readily proclaimed himself "rough and lecherous". Similarly humorous was Tim Livsey as the overtly camp Oswald. His limp-wristed arrogance was quick to transform into a show of pure wimpishness; indeed, he seemed only too keen to submit to the serious and macho Kent, played by James Hutchinson, by falling to his knees and bending over. His continual pouting under a not unliberal amount of blue eye shadow made his immediate appearance always comic.



***King Lear* photos by Margaret Clark**

Other characters had to convey both goodness and integrity. As Gloucester's forsaken son, Edgar, Richard McElroy showed the benevolent spirit of the part; and the interplay achieved with Lear during the storm admirably wound together his false madness with the King's true insanity - confusing for those unfamiliar with the plot. A much clearer role was that of Albany, played by Tom Wheeler. Having been condemned as a "Milk-liver'd man" by his callous, nymphomaniac wife, Goneril (Marie Dougherty), he proceeded to show true strength of character as a force for good determined to defeat the evil, gangrenous world of "all cruels".

Thus it would be difficult to criticise the performers themselves. It would also be unfair to be too hostile towards what was, in the main, an extremely skilfully directed play. But there certainly were instances where the direction could have been improved. It was, for example, odd that during most of the first scene the audience were denied any view (other than his back) of Lear's raction to, first, the "glib and oily art" of his two deceiving elder daughters and, second, the words of the unwilling Cordelia. It was also unfortunate that we should have been denied any sight of the "Men so disorder'd, so debosh'd, and bold" that Goneril felt moved to describe her court as being "more like a tavern or a brothel/ Than a grac'd palace". In addition, the decision to end the performance with only Cordelia and Lear dead on stage was mistaken: the potency of the tragic effect would have been increased had the stage been strewn with further bodies. Moreover, the intensity created during the first half of the performance was sadly lacking for most of Acts IV and V. This, however, should probably be blamed on Shakespeare's text rather than the directors themselves.

Vital in setting the desired atmosphere throughout the performance was the music of Damiano Rea and Brendan Coates. Their taste for the avant-garde heightened the effect of the playwright's bitter, dark language; and thus it was disappointing that the music was employed somewhat sparingly. Similarly, this was also true of other effects: a real sense of howling wind and lashing rain during the so-called storm, for instance, would have added much to its intensity. In the same way, further use of (the almost non-existent) scenery would not have required the audience to rely quite so heavily on their own imaginative powers.

But it is all too easy to gripe. There were indeed some wonderfully artistic touches, the most notable being the starkness of the black and white costuming used during the reconciliation of Cordelia and Lear, emphasizing the honest simplicity of Shakespeare's monosyllabic language. And, considering the many critics who have dismissed *King Lear* as being too deep to translate successfully from page to stage, as a school performance this was truly remarkable. It will indeed be difficult for next year's production to follow its legacy.

Tom Miller (L6S)