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Theater Review | 'Nearly Lear'

# An Answer to a Crying Need: 'King Lear' for Children

By [CHARLES ISHERWOOD](#)

Squeezing one of [Shakespeare's](#) greatest tragedies into a tight 90 minutes is no simple feat. Equally challenging is transforming said work, which also happens to be one of his more death-ridden and violent, into a show suitable for youngsters.

This is the formidable task that the British-born actress Susanna Hamnett and the director Edith Tankus have set for themselves — and accomplish with surprising brio and humor — in “Nearly Lear,” an engaging solo show presented by the [New Victory Theater](#) at the Duke on 42nd [Street](#).

“Nearly Lear” is in fact not nearly “Lear” by any reasonable measure. Ms. Hamnett and Ms. Tankus include just a few snippets of Shakespeare’s dialogue, and it is freely mixed with contemporary slang and casual paraphrase. Gone are about half the play’s major characters. Bye-bye Gloucester’s sons, Edmund and Edgar, and Lear’s loyal Kent.

“Nearly Lear” boils Shakespeare’s plot down to its basic bones, concentrating on the conflict between Lear and his wicked daughters, Regan and Goneril. A new character named Osmond, an upstart servant patterned after the scheming Edmund, seduces both sisters and plays them against each other.

So this is not a show for all those 12-year-old Shakespeare purists. (Although it is recommended for ages 12 and older, I think children a few years younger would find it plenty enjoyable and none too disturbing.) It’s a frisky, funny, vaudevillian gloss on a great play and could certainly serve as a tantalizing introduction to the lifelong pleasures of seeing and reading Shakespeare, who was, among many other things, a great spinner of [yarns](#).

Ms. Hamnett introduces herself as a woman named Noreen who changed her name to Norris and pretended to be a man to apply for the position of Fool at the court of King Lear. There she witnessed the ripping tale she is about to enact before us, but not before warning that it will be grim indeed. Creditably, “Nearly Lear” doesn’t add any sugar to Shakespeare’s sanguinary story, letting the corpses fall where they may.

“There will be bodily fluids pouring out of your eyes and nose,” Noreen promises. She thoughtfully distributes some Kleenex to the front row, showering a snowfall of tissues on one fellow she perceives as being particularly sensitive. She then places the box in view of the rest of us, should we be overcome.

Ms. Hamnett is an energetic, virtuosic performer with a touch of the endearing goofball. Leaping from character to character — a slightly stiff, self-important Lear; a simpering Regan; a snooty Goneril; a sincere Cordelia — she manages to give each character a distinct voice (the varied accents are impeccable), and she

keeps the story in clear focus. Although there are bits and pieces of famous speeches here and there, there's a lot more jokey narration and confiding asides.

Ms. Hamnett uses no costume changes, and the set is merely three linen screens on rollers, but there are a few ingenious, no-frills special effects. The famous eye gouging, which might be expected to be too much for children, is handled with playful humor that keeps it gross enough to be icky without actually being scary. And the storm scene also has its unexpectedly funny aspects.

Noting that care must be taken to establish the power of what is "the worst storm in all of English literature," Ms. Hamnett whips out a spray bottle and descends upon the delighted audience, spritzing indiscriminately. It is the most enjoyable — O.K., maybe the only enjoyable — example of audience participation I've ever witnessed.

Adults familiar with the devastating power of "King Lear" may naturally raise their brows at the idea of the harrowing storm scene's coming across as hilarious. But Ms. Hamnett does not fail to honor the ultimate darkness of the play's vision, even though she makes a point of observing that Cordelia and Lear — spoiler alert! — who are found dead in each other's arms, have never looked more at peace.

Such is the power of the original play that for those adults familiar with it, even this enjoyably light-spirited, child-friendly gloss can at times evoke the fierce emotional pitch of the real thing. I found myself eyeing that tissue box forlornly once or twice.

## Nearly Lear

Adapted from the Shakespeare play "King Lear" by Susanna Hamnett and Edith Tankus; performed by Ms. Hamnett; directed by Ms. Tankus; lighting by Michelle Ramsay; sound by Gavin Fearon; sets by Lindsay Anne Black; company manager, stage manager and assistant director, Steve MacGregor. At the Duke on 42nd Street, 229 West 42nd Street, Manhattan; (646) 223-3010, newvictory.org. Through Sunday. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes.



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## Fool's CliffsNotes make 'Lear' a laughing matter

By FRANK SCHECK

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No need to bother with that revival of "King Lear" arriving in April at BAM. Why sit through the entirety of Shakespeare's classic when you can get pretty much the same story in less than 75 minutes? As the title of Susanna Hamnett's show, being presented by the New Victory Theater, suggests, it's "Nearly Lear."

"There's this guy who got there first," admits the performer early on. But this adaptation by Hamnett and director Edith Tankus distills the tragic tale of the prideful king and his three daughters in an entertaining and accessible fashion that serves as a handy introduction to the play for younger theatergoers.

Telling the story from the standpoint of the Fool, Hamnett enacts most of the characters, as well as a new one, Osmond, the King's servant, who seduces both Regan and Goneril to achieve his own nefarious ends.

The piece runs through the play's major plot points in breakneck fashion, with the performer taking care to include us in the action. She hands out tissues during one particularly emotional moment and, during the storm scene, wanders through the auditorium spraying audience members with water.

The witty adaptation makes particularly clever use of music, beginning with a recording of "Stormy Weather" to set the mood. Later, the ungrateful Regan sings "My Heart Belongs to Daddy" and the evil Osmond is introduced to the strains of "Bad to the Bone."

Mixing Shakespeare's language with her own irreverent interpolations, Hamnett delivers a highly entertaining turn that inevitably underplays the work's tragic elements in favor of broad clowning. The results aren't exactly faithful to the original, but hopefully it will whet youngsters' appetites for the real thing.

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## Aberdeen Press and Journal

written by: Roddy Phillips

t. 01651 840696

m. 07758 367479

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### Nearly Lear

Everyone interested in the theatre and drama should have been at the Aberdeen Arts Centre last night, there should have been queues up and down King Street. Such is the mighty theatrical force that is Susanna Hamnett and her one-woman version of Shakespeare's King Lear – Nearly Lear.

Hamnett is a seriously gifted English actress based in Toronto. Skilled in Shakespeare, clown, vaudeville and storytelling Hamnett created Nearly Lear in 2008 and it's been winning audiences across Canada and America ever since.

Retold through the eyes of court jester, Noreen played with razor-sharp hypertension by Hamnett the tale unfolds at gunfire velocity with more wit, mischief and sheer playfulness than you can legally pack into 80 minutes of live theatre.

Every character is vividly etched and Hamnett plays them all with dazzling verve. The simple set, designed by Lindsay Anne Black, consists of three mobile curtains through which and around Hamnett moves assisted by sound effects and a lively soundtrack.

A film featuring Hamnett's husband and daughter playing King Lear and a young Cordelia acts as a moving coda. There was a lot of young people in last night's audience and Hamnett connected with them immediately bringing Shakespeare to life with a vibrancy they will never forget.

Next spring Nearly Lear plays in New York but you can see this brilliant show tonight at the Lonach Halls Strathdon, on Friday at Haddo House and on Saturday at Johnshaven Village Hall.

Ends

Roddy Phillips