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**Topeka Civic Theatre debuts classic Shakespearian drama ‘King Lear’**

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By Savanna Maue

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Watching William Shakespeare’s classic drama “King Lear,” the props ranged from steel flasks and pistols to flashlights and cargo pants.

Not something ordinarily associated with classic Elizabethan literature.

But, according to Topeka Civic Theatre’s director, Shannon Reilly, that’s the beauty of Shakespeare’s productions — the words remain striking no matter the time period.

“Shakespeare has been changed and updated and moved so many different times and to so many different locales — I even saw a production one time that was done on the moon,” Reilly said. “But when it comes to Shakespeare he is just such an amazing writer that these movements in times didn’t affect it.”

Reilly decided on the Edwardian era for his production, right before World War I, on the cusp of the British Empire’s fall from power. It was an idea he had after while watching the television show “Downton Abbey” with his wife.

[TCT debuts Shakespearian drama ‘King Lear’](http://www.cjonline.com/photogallery/KS/20180420/ENTERTAINMENTLIFE/420009997/PH/1)

Thursday, the Topeka Civic Theatre and Academy hosted its final dress rehearsal for “King Lear,” one of William Shakespeare’s most popular dramas. The show debuts April 20 and runs through May 5.

In a past season, Reilly said they changed the time period of Shakespeare’s “Much Ado About Nothing,” to which audiences responded well. So with some costume changes and a few tweaks to the script, the time period transformed.

TCT will debut “King Lear” at 7 p.m. Friday, April 20, with shows extending through Saturday, May 5.

Each April the theater selects a Southern classic or Shakespearean production, Reilly said, and rotates every other Shakespearean year between a drama and a comedy.

The theater has slowly tested audiences on their response to The Bard’s tragedies, this being the first year they produced “King Lear.”

“It’s a cast of 30 people,” Reilly said. “We actually had more people audition for this show than we did ‘Mamma Mia,’ which was really amazing to me.”

The production is filled with armed guards and maids, accompanying the royals as they traveled from kingdom to kingdom, offering a perfect opportunity to expose new cast members to a Shakespearean production, Reilly said.

“King Lear” tells the story of Lear, a king, who in his old age, decides to give away his kingdom. He asks his three daughters to confess their love for him, but when the youngest — the favorite — refuses, he falls into a rage and gives his kingdom to the first two daughters, who don’t really love him. From there the story turns tragic as his daughters slowly drive Lear into madness.

“It’s considered Shakespeare’s greatest drama by many critiques simply because it’s a flawed character,” Reilly said. “This is a story of a man who through no other fault but his own, leads him to his own demise.”

As the lead, Lear was the most complicated role for Reilly to fill. But, he knew Lear needed a strong performer that exuded dignity, which is what he found in Walt Boyd.

Boyd is a seasoned TCT actor, with a commanding stage presence. During the final dress rehearsal Thursday, Boyd led the show with his commitment to his character, setting a standard that elevated the entire performance.

Suffering from dementia, Boyd’s character quickly changes from anger to sadness to confusion, all wrapped tightly in Shakespeare’s signature prose.

Toward the end of the first act, as Lear’s mental stability reaches the climax of clarity, Boyd rages into a monologue, whipped by wind and flashing lights simulating a thunderstorm.

“As he starts to fall apart and stand in the middle of this storm that is raging around him and screaming at the thunder, you really do feel horrible for him and terrified by him at the same time,” Reilly said.

Tickets range from $25 to $50.