

KING LEAR--The Storm at Home  
By Chris Hanna  
Wells Theatre  
For tickets: 757-671-8100 or 757-627-1234

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

KING LEAR--The Storm at Home is a memoir of playwright Chris Hanna's very special relationship with his father who died while the work was being developed. I'm not sure this is the play he intended to write. He has said he hoped to bring fresh insight to the final right of passage while providing an intimate new connection to Shakespeare's greatest play.

To begin the project Hanna interviewed Hampton Roads elders, families and health care professionals to explore how we care for our demented, no longer able to function on their own, parents. His idea was to weave their stories into Lear's life and the violent upheaval with his daughters. The action fades in and out between Shakespeare and Hampton Roads. The mix ends up being incompatible.

To tell his tale, with the ever present paternal love and admiration, Hanna has to tame King Lear's apocalyptic story to a middle class domestic dispute. It's as if Lear were given a good dose of Haldol, the drug of choice many nursing homes use to control agitated inmates. Hanna takes away Lear's rage and grandeur to make the play fit his concerns about eldercare and dementia. We get little more than a summary of the plot of the tragedy of King Lear.

In dealing with our contemporaries, Hanna paints a very idyllic picture, for the most part, of patient and caregiver. The down side of the process is relegated to the background and ignored. My own parents died with sound minds. It was their bodies that quit functioning. However, my wife experienced years of her father's mental disintegration and saw her mother decline as well. Assuming the role of parent to one's parents involves incredible emotional and physical demands that range from terror of the unknown responsibility to sadness, grief, frustration and anger. Once my wife in total desperation said she wished her parents were dead, She didn't mean it of course. She loved them dearly but she was at the end of her rope of coping. In Lear, as well, both sides are finally at the end of their ropes. Hanna overlooks these aspects of dying. Many of us do indeed go gently into that good night. Most of us do not. That seems to be a truth beyond dispute. I don't think there are any new insights to be discovered about the subject.

In the production seven actors play selected roles from the play and double as real life Hampton Roads people. They fare far better in the contemporary portrayals than they do in their Shakespearean assignments. For the most part they seem overwhelmed by the Bard's language and are frequently unintelligible.

Troy Hourie's set provides a fluid, ethereal acting space that is enhanced by A. Nelson Ruggers IV dynamic lighting. Bill Clarke's costumes were quite simply confusing and I couldn't begin to tell you what his intentions are.

There is no doubt Chris Hanna has skill as a playwright. In this instance, though, it seems to me he gave himself an impossible task.

This is Edgar Loessin with *Loessin at Large* and I'll see you at the next opening.