

Recently the Wyoming Shakespeare Festival Company graced our town with a one-time performance at the Cheyenne Botanic Gardens. The evening, billed as “Shakespeare in the Park” and underwritten by the Wyoming Arts Council, Cheyenne Light, Fuel and Power, and additional sponsors, featured a production of “King Lear” — somewhat abridged, alas. However, considering it was raining hard as the play neared its tragic ending, no doubt actors as well as audience were grateful for an early conclusion.

The Company had transported the original Shakespearian setting into the early 20th century, which made for an odd juxtaposition of modern garb with bow-and-arrow warfare and duel by sword. The simplified costumes, however, were congenial to the rudimentary stage within the open spaces of the Gardens.

Shakespeare liked to write about royalty. Male royalty, that is. Women functioned as subordinate support characters. In this play, the roles he assigned females cast them either as unrealistically saintly or else as exaggeratedly evil. Cordelia, Lear’s youngest, embodies the former while her two elder sisters represent the latter. Shakespeare is justly revered for his breathtaking command of and inspired innovations to the English language. His plays are also potboilers, carried aloft by sword- and fist fights, insult-trading public brawls, and cloak-and-dagger intrigue. Still, “King Lear” has much to teach us about life as it winds down.

If we transport the characters from English to American soil, we might envision Lear a homeboy-made-good: a Mike Tyson, say, or a Frank Sinatra. This American Lear has amassed a good bit of wealth. This Lear is vile-tempered but thrives on flattery. He has surrounded himself with sycophants who endure his abuses in exchange for a free lunch. He knows love only as a commodity.

This American Lear realizes he can no longer manage his day-to-day affairs; his mental acuity is not what it used to be. The insight frightens him. What will become of him in his state of old age? He remembers that he has three daughters. What if he bribed them to take care of him? He decides to divide up his wealth and give it all to his daughters. His friends warn him that this is a foolish idea but Lear never listened to advice before; why would he do so now, falling apart?

Lear determines, however: before bestowing his benevolence, he’ll put his daughters to the test. Needing to be reassured but ignorant of how to seek affirmation, he demands that his daughters enumerate their devotion to him. His oldest, Goneril, readily obliges, spinning a tale of lavish praise. Not to be outdone, Regan follows suit. Both smooth-talk their father shamelessly. To get their hands on his money, they’ll not hesitate to pander to his narcissism. Lear is pleased.

But Cordelia, his favorite, refuses to play the game. Lear flies into a rage, disowns her, and orders her out of his sight. He divides his estate between his two elder daughters and their husbands, with the loquacious Goneril getting the lion’s share.

Now it’s payback time. Lear makes himself at home in Goneril’s house, along with his retinue of carousers: in his mind, he has “earned” his residence there. Goneril loudly demurs. Before long, she throws them out. All of them, including Big Daddy.

I have another daughter who's gotten rich on my account, Lear tells his hangers-on; let's move in with Regan. Same song, second verse. Lear storms out into the night, enraged. His cronies, realizing he is penniless, vanish; all except one individual, who endeavors to find shelter for the raving old man.

Lear does gain insight into himself, but by then all three of his daughters have met ignoble ends. He doesn't mourn any but Cordelia, over whose dead body he repents of his folly before dying himself.

"Lear learned things about himself even on his deathbed," a Shakespeare professor once informed me.

True, true. Then again, I have known bipolar individuals to express astounding momentary insight. Victims of Alzheimer's do catch glimpses of their pathetic impasse. Their last wanderings exist with no grandeur whatsoever. Some people throw off their illusions in time, shoulder life as they find it, make a go of it as best they can. This, too, transpires without fanfare.

It's another century, a wholly different enchilada. We take comfort in "remembering" a bygone grandeur to life—in the royal lane, anyhow.

The Wyoming Shakespeare Festival Company's Program Notes included several arresting tidbits of old-world moments, 1565 to 1616, Shakespeare's 51 years on earth. We learn that, as young Will left Stratford to make a name for himself in London, Mary Queen of Scots was executed for plotting against her sister, Queen Elizabeth; while London treated itself to "Richard III," Galileo invented the thermometer; as "Hamlet" came into lethargic life, Rome watched Giordano Bruno burn at the stake for following Copernican astronomy; when "King Lear" saw the light of stage, Galileo invented the telescope; at "The Winter's Tale," the official King James version of the Bible appeared in English.

Here in Cheyenne, Botanic Gardens' Shane Smith strives valiantly onward, making up for a deteriorating greenhouse with a lovely outdoors and an immensely popular—and charge-free—Children's Village. He tells me that renovations can begin, the premises readied for the next generation, provided the Botanic Gardens 6th penny proposal is passed on the August 21, 2012, ballot.

Let's lend a hand, folks. You've strolled in the Gardens, now visit the website to learn of its needs. With our without Shakespeare in the Park, Botanic Gardens is a credit to Cheyenne. Take note of the August ballot.