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Shakespeare in 2 Houses, Bloody and Plain

By [CHARLES ISHERWOOD](#)

CHICAGO, Oct. 17 — Do you like your [Shakespeare](#) plain or garnished? Stripped to its essence and played in doublet and hose, so the master's genius can be consumed in its purest form? Or trimmed with machine guns and pop songs proclaiming in neon the relevance of his themes to our world today?



tumbling from the trunk.)

An absence of torture — psychological or otherwise — is decidedly not a problem in Mr. Falls's sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll-drenched "King Lear," featuring a terrific cast led by Stacy Keach in the title role. Cruelty of a skin-crawling kind pervades this staging, set in a crumbling autocracy inspired by the former Yugoslavia in the late 1990's, but equally suggestive of the oil-rich, violence-riddled Russia of today. (Regan and her gun-toting entourage tool around in a smoke-filled Mercedes, a pile of Louis Vuitton luggage

Mr. Falls announces his intention to *épater le bourgeois* before a word of Shakespeare is spoken. A row of urinals — none too clean ones at that — greets the audience as it enters the auditorium. Kent and Gloucester open the play trading gossip as they urinate. (The alternately grimy and gaudy sets by Walt Spangler are top-notch, as are the colorfully vulgar costumes by Ana Kuzmanic.)

Mr. Falls clearly wants the pearl-clutchers in the audience to have their props at the ready. Those urinals slide off to expose an even less salubrious sight: King Lear's courtiers partying like rich New Jersey teenagers whose parents have gone to Miami for the weekend. Was that [Paris Hilton](#)-lookalike Lear just drunkenly groped actually his daughter Regan? Did the noble Gloucester really just smash a vodka bottle on his own head?

I'm afraid so. But before you dismiss Mr. Falls's Boschian tableau as a cheap effect at odds with the tone of Shakespeare's text — there will be many more occasions to do that, if you really want to go there — absorb the shock and allow its meaning to register.

Mr. Falls's insight here is to suggest that Lear's intemperate decision to banish his loving daughter Cordelia and reward the corrupt Goneril and Regan probably was not the first rash act

of the old man's life. Might it not be part of a long pattern of corruption and amorality that has so poisoned the kingdom that even Lear and his loyalists, usually presented as a motley band of brothers fighting the good fight against sharp-fanged evildoers, have become tainted by vice? Mr. Falls's "Lear" is a disturbing parable about how hard it is to arrest or reverse the process of moral decay once it has taken root in a kingdom's (or a country's) centers of power.

So Gloucester is a bit of a drunk, perhaps not such a radical notion considering that the scheming Edmund is living proof of his hard-partying youth. His pure-hearted son Edgar appears to have a drug problem. Most distressing of all is the scene in which the admirable Kent, who has traded his military commander's uniform for a skinhead's garb, threatens to sexually assault Goneril's steward with a tire iron for disrespecting Lear.

Shock tactics, yes. But one of Mr. Falls's aims is to reawaken our revulsion at the violence in this relentlessly dark tragedy. You could argue that this isn't necessary in a play that famously features an onstage eyeball-gouging. Yet even in most modern dress productions that brutal act has an otherworldly horror; here it is underscored as part of the larger pattern of brutal violence pervading the play. Mr. Falls's attention to the gruesome specifics of violation rips the distancing trimmings off Shakespeare's bleak vision of humanity destroying itself; each shaft of a knife, each shot of a gun tells.

Language itself is violent in "Lear," after all, and Mr. Keach is most compelling when Lear is at his most savage, virulently cursing his daughters for depriving him of his attendants. (They are pointedly attired as intimidating riot policemen here, guys you definitely wouldn't want hanging around the house.) The performance is not always consistent. Intermittently Mr. Keach reverts to the heart-tugging stance of a traditional Lear, the old man more sinned against than sinning, which threatens to sand down the rough edges of Mr. Falls's vision.

And yet even in the poignant scene in which Lear is finally reunited with the blind Gloucester — a brief, almost Beckettian oasis of calm in the churning cycle of bloodshed, movingly played by Mr. Keach and Edward Gero — the violent instinct recurs, as Lear's philosophical ramblings end with a thirsty cry for vengeance: "And when I have stolen upon these son-in-laws, then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!" — that resonates with particular force here.

After three hours of ceaseless sex and bloodletting, the viciousness does eventually lose its impact. It is disappointing that Mr. Falls doesn't recognize that the endless pageant of brutality stops serving his larger vision and begins to undermine it. The meticulous relish with which every major and minor character is violently dispatched begins to recall the grisly elimination dances in horror movies like "Saw." (Far too much time is devoted to the brutal ends of the bad sisters, whose fates are beside the point in "Lear.")

Still, Mr. Falls's "Extreme Makeover" edition of "King Lear" leaves us with a harrowing awareness of the contagion of violence, even if it does not inspire floods of tears. It depicts in raw detail the chaos let loose upon the world when power is divorced from justice, and men and women are able to indulge their basest instincts in a moral and political vacuum.