Burden of state

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| WILLIAM Shakespeare`s tragedy King Lear is not to be watched on an empty stomach. It is a gut-wrenching story of betrayal, inhuman blinding, unnatural patricide, and grey-haired hubris that ends with broken-hearted remorse. It is an indictment of those who all too often declare their `f ast intent to shake all cares and business` of governance, and then refuse to relinquish authority.  Adaptation of Shakespeare`s plays, whether in a modern setting or in a foreign language, is no longer a heresy.  Shakespeare`s archaic language may sound unfamiliar to our ears, yet his plots are timeless, relevant to every age, which is why they can withstand translation and transposition. Af ter all, didn`t Shakespeare himself borrow his ideas from others` works? He took Romeo and Juliet and also Much Ado About Nothing from the mind of the Italian Giovanni Boccaccio, his plays about Rome came from the pen of Plutarch, and his sagas of English history from the chroniclers Edward Hall and Holinshed. To each he added his own genius, leaving pearls long after their oysters have been forgotten.  Zia Mohyeddin`s latest production King Lear was performed in Lahore by the National Academy of Performing Arts, af ter an earlier run in Karachi. Zia is the last of an endangered species a genus of Shakespearean actors who understands the playwright, who has declaimed his words on the London stage, and who still possesses the skill to present Shakespeare to an audience of Pakistanis who may never visit the Globe theatre or Stratford-upon-Avon. Zia dared to use an Urdu translation. It was a risk. For any translation to succeed, the translator must understand the original: its syntax, its subtleties, its inbuilt nuances, and then transmute thatinto a sibling of the original but with its own features, its own idioms, its own personality.  Mr Mohyeddin the producer could not have found a more perfect translator than the seasoned actor Khalid Ahmad. Mr Ahmad had applied his alchemy earlier on A Midsummer Night`s Dream. His translation was f aultless, at times lyrically independent of Shakespeare`s original. Khalid Ahmad not only translated King Lear, he acted and became King Lear.  Mr Mohyeddin used bare props a throne, a table as a catafalque, and a small mound as a hilltop. He melded his performers with their disparate experience into one seamless team. Memorable were Fawad Khan (Kent) well-known as a dastangoh; Paras Masroor (Gloucester`s illegitimate son Edmund) and Mira Sethi (Goneril) who have a television background; and Raheel Siddiqui as Dr Buddhu/the wise Fool. Everyplay is as strong as its weakest actor. King Lear may have been let down by his daughters; Zia`s audience had no reason to be disappointed by his choice of cast.  Who hasn`t studied Shakespeare at school? His plays were as an inescapable as chicken pox, a rite of passage. If one`s diction was good enough, one performed in them; if lucky, one saw it performed by the best. I studied King Lear for my `A` levels in an English public school. Our class was taken to the Old Vic, where King Lear was played by the veteran actor Paul Rogers, his ungrateful daughters by Coral Browne and Barbara Jefford (soon to become famous).  The following morning, our English teacher Mr Miller asked us what our reaction had been during the closing scene when Lear cradles the lifeless body of his youngest, faithful daughter Cordelia. Heartbroken, he shrieks: `Howl! Howl! Howl! O, you are men of stones!/ H ad I your tongues and eyes, I`d use them so/That heaven`s vault should crack. She`s gone forever.  Mr Miller asked whether any of us hadcried. Sheepishly, I alone put up my hand. `You are the only one who had the right reaction.` E.M.  Forster`s description fitted my A nglo S a xon classmates, with their `well-devel-oped bodies, fairly developed minds and underdeveloped hearts`.  In the play, King Lear divides his kingdom between his two obsequious daughters, on the understanding that he and 100 of his knights would be supported by each daughter in turn. The sisters, however, annoyed at the misbehaviour of his raucous entourage, demand a reduction in his knights f rom 100 to 50. Regan, the younger, goes further: `I`ll receive him gladly, / But not one follower.  Angered by their unconscionable in-hospitality, Lear curses them and leaves.  Some might see a parable between King Lear`s predicament and that of the governments of India and Pakistan. The Times of India recently carried a report that read: `For the first time ever, the [Indian] defence budget allocates more money for army pensions (Rs1.13 lakh crore) than for army salaries (Rs1.1 lakh crore). Both the salary and pension bills are bigger than Pakistan`s total defence budget (Rs1 lakh crore).  Shakespeare`s Lear and his knights still abound.  The writer is an author and historian.  www.fsaijazuddin.pk |