

# CURRENT REVIEWS

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by **TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER**

## Exit the King

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Reviewing a production at A Noise Within usually means bracing for high-caliber classical theatre with a modern edge and no one does this better than LA's most visionary director Michael Michetti. His innovative staging of Eugène Ionesco's *Exit the King* is no exception as it deftly balances traditional Theatre of the Absurd with a deeply and highly uncomfortable humanity. He approaches Ionesco's 1962 play not just as a dusty relic but as a vibrant, frantic, and ultimately moving meditation on mortality.

While the play centers on the outlandish behavior of one King Berenger and his stubborn refusal to accept his impending death, Michetti ensures the production never feels static. Whether intentional or coincidental, the storyline mimics Elisabeth Kubler Ross' five stages of grief, swinging in 100 intermissionless minutes from the manic energy of a circus to the quiet, chilling stillness of the inevitable end.

The success of any production of the seldom-revived *Exit the King* almost usually rests on the shoulders of the actor playing Berenger and, in this production, Henri Lubatti—who seems to have along the way studied clowning and acrobatics with stunning results—delivers a portrayal that truly is a tour de force as we watch a bizarrely familiar monarch overpowering our own lives and times. King Berenger bloviates at one point, "I am the state and the state is the state I'm in" as he does everything except hawk his own overpriced and unnecessary ballroom at the expense of his financially strapped subjects, have a graven gold statue made of himself for his worshippers to grovel to, and suggests maybe his face might be added to his unnamed kingdom's own version of Mt. Rushmore. "Let every living creature die," he bellows to the heavens, "so I can go on forever."

This King, who once possessed some now disappearing magical powers, is a leader who has equated his own heartbeat with the health of the universe itself and once commanded the sun to rise. As we watch, however, we see him get smaller and smaller, becoming a sad, delusional loser who crumples into a man who cannot control his own knees, let alone the weather, another plot point echoing our own struggles with environmental crises that no amount of political decree can stop. Berenger's persona is drowning in ego and Lubatti brings

slipping below the waves to glorious life. Watching him demand without success that the sun obey him while his kingdom (literally) collapses feels less like a fairy tale and more like a commentary on our own rapidly more delusional faux-leader who blatantly prioritizes legacy over reality.

As his stoic Queen Marguarite, the original and “senior” of his two wives who share their throne, Joy DeMichelle is magnificently subtle as the personification of the cautionary tale’s cold, hard reality. Although the King insists he’ll die when he wants and when he has the time, she corrects him: “No, you’re going to die at the end of this show.” She doesn’t say this with malice but with bureaucratic detachment, feeling her husband’s refusal to accept his fate is not just foolish; it’s undignified.

DeMichelle perfectly serves as the play’s stern angel of death and spiritual midwife until the eleventh hour when, as her authority grows and his declines, she seems to direct Tesshi Nakagawa’s incredibly lush red velvet-draped set to dismantle itself, representing everything Berenger has lost: order, time, and logic.

As his younger and more recently added second wife, the emotionally fraught Queen Marie (Erika Soto), and as his bellowing and fiercely loyal royal guard (Lynn Robert Berg), the pair represents the enablers, showing us the tragic and comedic ways in which we prop up failing systems and refuse to speak truth to power until it’s too late. While Marguerite serves as the grim conductor of his demise, Marie and the guard provide the desperate, heartbreaking hope that defines our own fear of letting go. To say this production is a modern mirror for all of us to look into and see ourselves is an understatement.

The hilarious KT Vogt and patiently subdued Ralph Cole Jr. as, respectively, the castle’s grumbling overworked chief handmaid and royal physician are both incredibly omnipresent as they observe the disintegration of everything around them, serving as a bridge between the King’s delusions and the harsh, decaying world outside the throne room. While the two Queens represent the philosophical tug between life and death, Juliette and the Doctor depict the practicality of the inevitable.

Vogt is a wonderful asset throughout as Juliette whines under her breath about her chores, highlighting the absurdity of maintaining appearances while the universe is literally ending, reminding her boss of the grueling nature of everyday existence. When she speaks of her cramped room in the palace’s attic or her mundane life, it only underscores the King’s selfishness. She even physically supports Lubatti, acting as a reluctant crutch for a monarchy she no longer respects.

Cole Jr.'s Doctor, who doubles as the court's executioner, is like Queen Marguarite a realist, his various titles suggesting that neither science or medicine—or even the stars—can stop the flow of time.

Michetti's creative team is a director's dream, from Nakagawa's massive throne room able to go poof by the end to Jared A. Sayeg's dramatically eerie lighting, Jeff Gardner's haunted sound design, and costumer Angela Balogh Calin's regal attire that feels oddly out of place and for Berenger cumbersome, highlighting the irony of it all as he slowly strips his vestments away along with his mortality.

Together they form a technical team spectacularly able to create a world that's dematerializing, honoring Michetti's fresh interpretation by using sound, light, and visual cues to create an atmosphere of encroaching chaos. The rumblings of the earth and the staging of characters suddenly dropping from sight serve as a jarring reminder that power is an illusion sustained only by the collective agreement of the governed. When that agreement ends, our everyman King is left with nothing but his longjohns and a crown that can't stay on his head.

Michetti leans into an on-the-nose political and social angle that morphs Ionesco's play from a surrealist fable into a sharp reflection of our current national and international dilemma. King Berenger's demise isn't just an abstract metaphor for death, it's a biting critique of the fragility of power and the absurdity of modern leadership, ultimately feeling startlingly grounded in our own reality.

From the moment the curtain rises on a kingdom where the borders are shrinking, the population is vanishing, and the country's leader refuses to acknowledge the literal cracks in the ceiling and on the floor, the parallels to contemporary leadership are impossible to ignore. A Noise Within's reinvented *Exit the King* emerges as a scathing 21<sup>st</sup>-century satire about the danger of the Great Man myth, amazing in its ability to shift from outrageous humor into being a sad story about a dying guy and then ultimately into a sharp warning about the dangers of an autocrat in denial and the dying system he's helping to kill off right before our very eyes.

**THROUGH MAY 31: A Noise Within, 3352 E. Foothill Blvd., Pasadena.  
626.356.3100 or [anoisewithin.org](http://anoisewithin.org)**