ABBEY THEATRE

# KING LEAR

## WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Resource Pack 2013

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# INTRO-DUCTION

# FOREWORD

**Welcome to the Abbey Theatre resource pack for our production of *King Lear*. It's hard to believe that it has been eighty years since this epic play was last staged at the national theatre. We are proud that this production marks the start of a major exploration of the Bard's work through our Shakespeare Season.**

I'm delighted that Selina Cartmell makes her Abbey stage debut as director with her frequent collaborator Owen Roe. Selina has directed three plays on the Peacock stage including *Woman & Scarecrow* by Marina Carr. Selina previously directed *The Cordelia Dream* by Marina Carr for the Royal Shakespeare Company, a play inspired by King Lear. Owen Roe's last appearance at the Abbey Theatre was in *The Gigli Concert* by Tom Murphy in 2004. You will find interviews with both Selina and Owen in this resource pack.

The creative team for this production represents the best of international talent in their respective fields; Garance Marneur (Set Designer), Gaby Rooney (Costume Designer) and Chahine Yavroyan (Lighting Designer) each make their Abbey debut with *King Lear*. They are joined by the talents of Conor Linehan (Composer), Carl Kennedy (Sound Designer) and Liz Roche (Choreographer). We'll look deeper into the work of some of these in this resource pack. Our production also features a cast of twenty one actors, nine of whom are appearing on the Abbey stage for the first time.

The notes, discussion topics and questions provided herein will give you an insight into *King Lear* itself, and will also allow a peek behind the curtain at how the Abbey Theatre approaches such a famous piece of work.

Shakespeare's plays endure because they continue to speak to each new generation. We hope this pack helps you to hear that voice for yourself and to appreciate the beauty and wisdom of his plays.

—Fiach Mac Conghail, *Director of the Abbey Theatre*

# CAST & CREATIVE TEAM

| | |
|---|---|
| *King Lear* | Owen Roe |
| *Goneril* | Tina Kellegher |
| *Regan* | Caoilfhionn Dunne |
| *Cordelia* | Beth Cooke |
| *Fool* | Hugh O'Conor |
| *Earl of Kent / Dr. Caius* | Sean Campion |
| *Earl of Gloucester* | Lorcan Cranitch |
| *Edgar / Poor Tom* | Aaron Monaghan |
| *Edmund* | Ciarán McMenamin |
| *Duke of Albany* | John Kavanagh |
| *Duke of Cornwall* | Phelim Drew |
| *Oswald* | Dylan Tighe |
| *King of France (also Ensemble)* | Serge Bolze |
| *Duke of Burgundy (also Ensemble)* | Andrew Macklin |
| *Curan (also Old Man & Ensemble)* | Ronan Leahy |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Director* | Selina Cartmell |
| *Set Designer* | Garance Marneur |
| *Costume Design* | Gaby Rooney |
| *Lighting Design* | Chahine Yavroyan |
| *Sound Design* | Carl Kennedy |
| *Composer* | Conor Linehan |
| *Choreographer* | Liz Roche |
| *Assistant Choreographer* | Philip Connaughton |

# ABOUT THE PLAY

***King Lear* is considered one of the masterpieces of world literature and one of the most challenging roles an actor can play. It is a story of royalty and power and yet will be familiar to anyone who has had parents. It is set in a distant pre-Christian age and yet feels relevant today.**

*King Lear* deals seriously with some of the fundamental themes of human life such as family, ambition, justice and compassion. It has scenes of horrific cruelty and heartbreaking tenderness but also moments of black comedy which wouldn't be out of place in the plays of Beckett. It is a play about the meaning of life and a gripping story of one man's search for who he really is and what really matters.

William Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* sometime between 1605 and 1606. The first recorded performance of the play was on November 26th, 1606, for King James I at Whitehall Palace. It is among the last tragedies that he wrote. Shakespeare was in his early 40s when he wrote King Lear, at a time of extraordinary output – even for him. George Bernard Shaw, seldom prone to overstatement, claimed that "no man will ever write a better tragedy than King Lear".

# THE STORM

**At the very heart of King Lear is the storm. It is the central element of Lear's journey, and a critical part of the audience's experience of the play. Lear's raging, howling tirade against the storm is one of the play's most famous moments – a mad old man howling against nature.**

The storm is an example of a kind of pathetic fallacy – a literary device in which inanimate objects are presented as having feelings, or very often – as here – when events in the natural world are made to mirror human experience. So, as Lear's madness builds and develops, so does the storm, and both reach their worst intensity together. As the king slowly returns to sanity, the storm breaks.

*"What interests me is for the audience to somehow enter into Lear's head during the storm and to feel connected to his emotional state. Lear is summoning up the storm and the audiences are active witnesses as the scene unfolds. Therefore the audience cannot 'come out of the storm' for it is all around us as it is all around Lear and within him. What confronts us, the spectators in the theatre, is the inner agony of a man's soul played out as if it were some immense and tragic metaphor, writ large upon the landscape – so that we can see it and share it."*

– Selina Cartmell, Director of King Lear

# HISTORY

# KING LEAR TIMELINE

**1605**

King Lear is written and probably performed at the Globe Theatre with Richard Burbage as King Lear and Robert Armin as the Fool.

**26 Dec 1606**

The first recorded performance of King Lear was as part of the Christmas festivities at Whitehall Palace, on St. Stephen's Night, 26 December 1606. The King's Men performed the play for King James I, who – unlike Lear – was in the process of uniting his realm.

**1608**

King Lear is published in first quarto edition by Nathanial Butter.

1619 – King Lear published in second quarto form.

1623 – King Lear is published in the first folio edition of Shakespeare's Works.

**1665**

King Lear is revived by William Davenant who was Shakespeare's godson.

**1681**

King Lear reworked by the Irish poet laureate, Nahum Tate. who considered the play too bleak, and revised the plot substantially in his adaptation, which first appeared in 1681. He cut the Fool, added a romance between Cordelia and Edgar, and even gave the play a happy ending.

**1760 – 1820**

At times in its history the play was banned from performance in the United Kingdom – never more expressly than during the reign of King George III, who was himself famously subject to bouts of madness.

**1905**

The first film of King Lear was a five minute German version made around 1905 but this version has not survived. Since then there have been numerous major film and television adaptations of the play.
Read More...

**1928**

King Lear is first presented – for a run of seven performances – in the Abbey Theatre in Dublin.

# IN PRODUCTION

**Shakespeare's King Lear is a major landmark in the career of any Shakespearean actor. A production of the play is always a significant undertaking, both for the lead actor and the director.**

There have been several major film and television adaptations of the play, many of which are available online, in whole or in part.

Unlike several other Shakespeare plays, King Lear has been seldom performed at the Abbey. It was first presented – for a run of seven performances – in 1928, and the production was revived two years later, in 1930, for another seven shows.

## SEE MORE

**There are some archive shots of the set design in this short video, which gives details of the exciting new partnership between the Abbey Archives and NUI Galway, A Digital Journey through Irish Theatre History.**

*F.J. McCormick as King Lear*

# KING LEAR IN THE ABBEY

*Set and costume designs by Dorothy Travers Smith for the 1928 production of King Lear*
(Abbey Theatre Archive)

*Duke of Albany*

*Goneril*

*Earl of Kent*

# KEY PERFORMANCES

Ian McKellen as King Lear in the 2008 movie directed by Trevor Nunn
Read More...

Greg Hicks as King Lear in the 2010 movie directed by David Farr
View The Trailer...

Nigel Hawthorne as King Lear in the 1999 movie directed by Yukio Ninagawa
View A Scene...

Paul Schofield as King Lear in the 1971 movie directed by Peter Brook.

James Earl Jones as King Lear in the 1974 movie directed by Edwin Sherin
View The Full Movie...

Juri Jarvet as King Lear in the 1971 movie directed by Grigori Kozintsev
View The Trailer...

# ADAPTATIONS

Dealing with the ban of King Lear by King George III, playwright Alan Bennett reconciles the two mad kings in a beautiful scene in his play The Madness of George III, in which George and his companions read King Lear. It is during their impromptu performance of the reconciliation scene between Lear and Cordelia that George's madness breaks. The scene also appears in the film, which stars Nigel Hawthorne as Lear.
Watch This Scene...

Akira Kurosawa's epic Japanese film Ran, made in 1985 is a re-telling of King Lear set in feudal Japan.
View The Trailer...

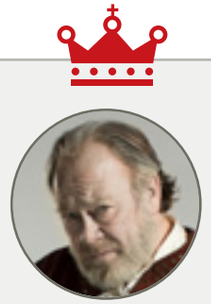
Less faithful but no less exciting film performances include Jean-Luc Godard's avant-garde film titled King Lear made in 1987.

My Kindgdom: A powerful dynasty, headed by Richard Harris as a charismatic, manipulative father, falls when he decides to hand over his criminal empire to his three corrupt, power-hungry daughters. This modern story inspired by King Lear is set in contemporary Liverpool.
View a Scene...

The play is also central to Ronald Harwood's 1980 play The Dresser, which went on to become a successful film of the same name.

# CHARAC-TERS

# WHO'S WHO?

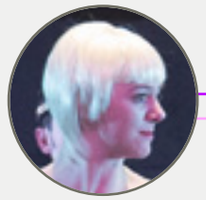


*KING LEAR*

## DAUGHTERS OF KING LEAR

*Goneril*
Lear's Daughter

*Regan*
Lear's Daughter



*Cordelia*
Lear's Daughter

## ROYAL COURT



*The Fool*
Loyal Member of Lear's Court



*Earl of Gloucester*
Lear's Senior Courtier



*Duke of Albany*
Goneril's Husband



*Duke of Cornwall*
Regan's Husband



*Earl of Kent / Dr. Caius*
Lear's Loyal Friend and Supporter

## SUITORS



*King of France*
Cordelia's Husband



*Duke of Burgundy*
Cordelia's Suitor

## SONS OF GLOUCESTER

*Edgar / Poor Tom*
Gloucester's Legitimate Son

*Edmund*
Gloucester's Illegitimate Son

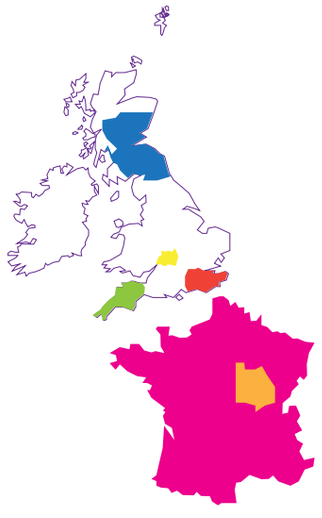
## SERVANTS

*Oswald*
Goneril's Steward

*Curan*
Gloucester's Servant

Key

- In Love With
- Married To
- Killed Directly
- Killed Indirectly
- Betrayed
- Banished



Territory Map

# CHARACTER LIST

### King Lear

King of Britain. The play mentions that Lear is over eighty years old. He is prone to anger and susceptible to flattery. The play is his journey to death and reconciliation.

### Goneril

Lear's eldest daughter. Despite professing her deep love for her father at the beginning of the play, she betrays him and plots his death.

### Regan

Lear's middle daughter. Regan joins forces with Goneril to destroy their father. Regan initially appears less actively cruel than her elder sister. But by the end of the play she has proven herself just as blood-thirsty as Goneril.

### Cordelia

Lear's youngest daughter. Cordelia genuinely loves her father, but her refusal to flatter him leads to her banishment in Act I, and eventually to her death in Act V.

### Fool

Loyal member of the king's court. The Fool assumes the role of protector to Lear when Cordelia is banished.

### Earl of Kent / Dr. Caius

Lear's loyal friend and supporter. In spite of Lear's proclamation of banishment, Kent disguises himself as Caius so that he can stay and keep watch over the king.

### Earl of Gloucester

One of Lear's most senior courtiers. Gloucester is an unwise old man who is completely deceived by his son Edmund, and turns on his loyal – and legitimate – son Edgar. His story mirrors that of Lear.

### Edgar / Poor Tom

Gloucester's older son. Edgar is Gloucester's only heir, since Edmund is illiegitimate, but he is forced to flee and disguise himself as Poor Tom when his brother betrays him.

### Edmund

Gloucester's younger, illegitimate, son. He is the villain of the piece, from his first soliloquy. He enlists and later betrays several of the play's principal characters.

### Duke of Albany

Goneril's husband. Albany grows in stature over the course of the play and eventually is strong enough to confront his wife for her mistreatment of Lear, and her plot to have him assassinated.

### Duke of Cornwall

Regan's husband. Cornwall is hungry for power, and stops at nothing as he attempts to eliminate Lear and Gloucester.

### Oswald

Goneril's steward. Oswald is a willing, opportunistic accomplice. He helps with Goneril's plotting and is a dramatic foil to Kent, who is as comparably loyal but morally opposite.

### King of France

Cordelia's husband. France is honorable and willing to support Cordelia's efforts to rescue her father. He marries her for love, not for her dowry.

### Duke of Burgundy

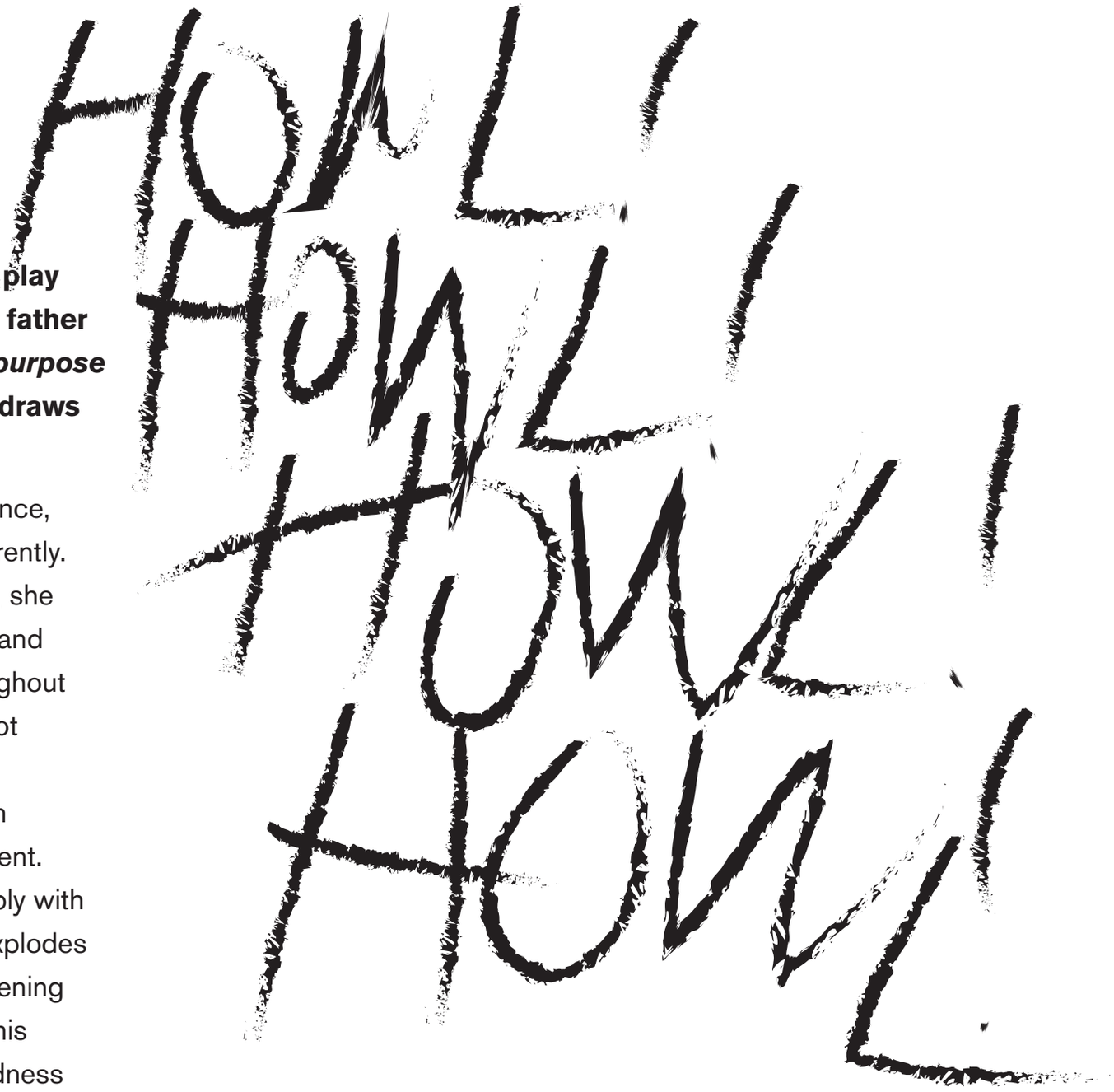
Cordelia's suitor. Burgundy rejects Cordelia when he learns that she has been disinherited.

### Curan

Gloucester's servant.

# LANG-
# UAGE

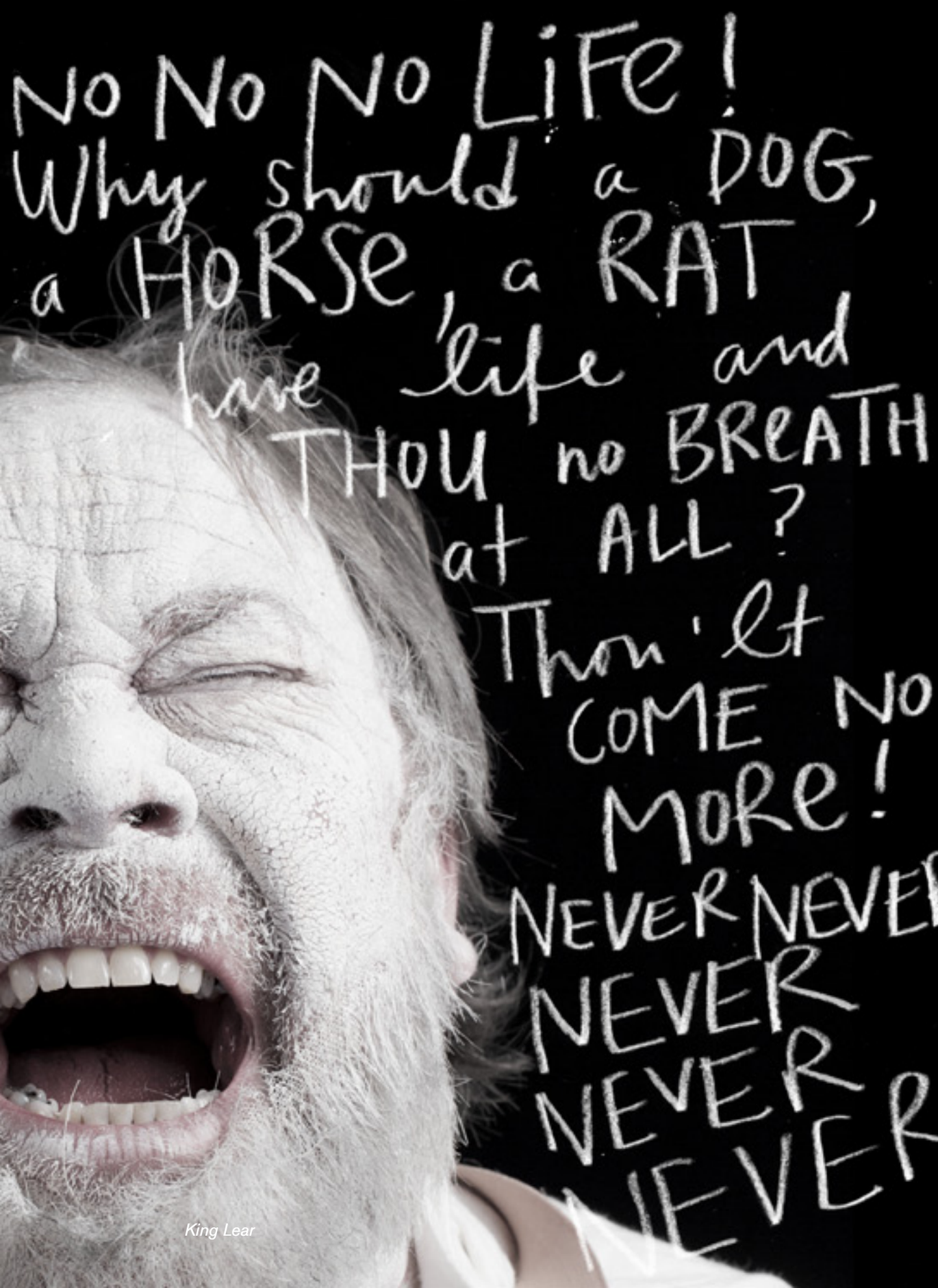
# THE LANGUAGE OF KING LEAR




**Language is a key tool for Shakespeare in *King Lear*. The play begins with Goneril and Regan's speeches flattering their father in an excessive display of *glib and oily art, to speak and purpose not*. From the extraordinary opening scene, Shakespeare draws attention to how the characters use language.**

After her two sisters' proclamations, and her asides to the audience, we are led to believe that Cordelia will express herself very differently. Shakespeare does not disappoint us – instead of speaking at all, she simply insists that she has nothing to say. Cordelia's eloquence and dignity are expressed in very clear and forthright language throughout the play – we are able to trust her precisely because she does not exaggerate or fawn like her calculating sisters.

King Lear's language shifts throughout the play – he begins in full, elegant control of his court, happily preparing for his retirement. His language is formal, but jovial, until Cordelia's refusal to comply with the flattering game he has invented. Immediately his language explodes into exaggerated metaphors as he grows angrier and angrier, likening himself to a dragon, and within moments he has banished both his daughter and his loyal friend the Earl of Kent. His rages and madness escalate in tandem with his language, until we reach a point in the storm where all he can muster is the wild cry *Howl! Howl! Howl! Howl!*




*King Lear*

In Shakespeare's plays, the standard way of speaking is blank verse – lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter. (This means a line with five beats and ten syllables.) Usually the rhythm is de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM, but Shakespeare is a genius at inverting these for dramatic effect.

For example, by the end of the play, Lear's whole world has been turned upside down, and though his madness has abated, he is reduced to abject misery. When news of Cordelia's death is brought, he exclaims *Never, never, never, never, never!*

The stresses in this line of pentameter are entirely reversed from the usual short-long de-DUM pattern, as Shakespeare weaves Lear's destruction even into the rhythm of his verse.

By contrast, Shakespeare's characters speak in prose (ie, not verse) for very specific reasons. There are four distinct kinds of prose in the play:

1. the prose formal documents and printed speech, like the various letters
2. the prose of low-status characters, like the Fool
3. the prose of colloquial, casual dialogue, like the bawdy conversation between Kent, Gloucester and Edmund at the beginning of the play
4. the prose of people in altered mental states. King Lear shifts between eloquent verse and prose as he alternates between sanity and madness. (Shakespeare often has characters revert to prose when they are losing their minds – instances include Lady Macbeth, Othello, and Ophelia, to name but a few.)

# LANGUAGE AS A WEAPON

**Language is also a weapon for the characters of the play – *King Lear* features some of Shakespeare's juiciest insults and curses.**

EDMUND: An admirable evasion of whore master man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star

KENT: You base football player!

EDMUND: I have seen drunkards do more than this in sport!

KENT: What a brazen faced varlet art thou!

KENT: You whoreson cullionly barbermonger!

KENT: Thou whoreson zed, thou unnecessary letter!

LEAR: But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;
Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,
Which I must needs call mine: thou art a boil,
A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle,
In my corrupted blood.

EDGAR: False of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand, hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey!

EDGAR: Thou art a traitor, false to thy gods, thy brother and thy father!

EDGAR: From the extremest upward of thy head to the descent and dust beneath thy foot, a most toad spotted traitor!

The most impressive insult is Kent's torrent of invective towards Oswald for not recognising him:

KENT: A knave; a rascal; an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave; a lily-livered, action-taking knave, a whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd, in way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pandar, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch: one whom I will beat into clamorous whining, if thou deniest the least syllable of thy addition.

*King Lear*

Curses play a key role in *King Lear* – and it is worth noting that for Shakespeare's audience, a King's curse would have had almost magical properties. (For more about the mythic power of Kings and their status as divine representatives on earth, see *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer.) Shakespeare's audience would have taken Lear's savage curse to Goneril very seriously – for him to wish miscarriages and sterility on his daughter was more than a cruel expression of contempt, it could have had actual consequences, as is suggested in this production.

LEAR: Hear, nature, hear; dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility!
Dry up in her the organs of increase;
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her! If she must teem,
Create her child of spleen; that it may live,
And be a thwart disnatured torment to her!
Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth;
With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks;
Turn all her mother's pains and benefits
To laughter and contempt; that she may feel
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child!

The depictions of women in the play's language are particularly colourful. Lear's two older daughters are referred to as wolfish, tigers, centaurs, pelicans – all in sharp contrast to the nobility and grace of Cordelia.

# SYNOP-
# SIS

# ACT ONE

## ACT I SCENE I

The first scene of *King Lear* is one of the most extraordinary Shakespeare ever wrote. Within thirty lines, we are introduced to almost every character in the play, before Lear enters to reveal his 'darker purpose'. His plan is to retire, dividing his kingdom between his three daughters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. He also plans to secure a husband for Cordelia, the youngest. The Duke of Burgundy and the King of France are present, both suitors for Cordelia. Lear begins by suggesting a competition – his daughters must tell him how much they love him, and she who convinces him most will have the greatest reward.

LEAR: Tell me, my daughters,—
Since now we will divest us both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state,—
Which of you shall we say doth love us most?

Goneril and Regan both flatter their father appropriately, but Cordelia refuses to play along.

CORDELIA: Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty
According to my bond; nor more nor less.

Lear flies into a rage, and banishes Cordelia, without a dowry. Kent, a close confidant of the king, tries to calm him down, but Lear will not listen to reason and instead banishes his friend too.

LEAR: Come not between the dragon and his wrath!



Gloucester enters with Cordelia's suitors, and Lear informs them of her banishment. The Duke of Burgundy loses interest when he hears that Cordelia has no dowry, but the King of France loves her and takes her as his bride. Lear storms off, and Cordelia bids farewell to her sisters.

CORDELIA: The jewels of our father, with wash'd eyes
Cordelia leaves you: I know you what you are;
And like a sister am most loath to call
Your faults as they are named. Use well our father:
To your professed bosoms I commit him
But yet, alas, stood I within his grace,
I would prefer him to a better place.
So, farewell to you both.

How does Shakespeare introduce Lear's Court in this scene?

How are the play's characters introduced in this scene?

Who might be considered the protagonists (the major characters with whom we sympathise) or the antagonists (the major characters we love to hate)?

Can you identify the moments at which the major conflicts in the play begin?

Why is the language used to discuss Edmund's conception so bawdy?

What is the glib and oily art that Cordelia lacks?

Does the scene ever break out of iambic pentameter?

Regan suggests that she and her sister must 'think', while Goneril says they 'must do' – does this difference between them expand through the play?

## ACT I SCENE II

We have already met Edmund at the very beginning of Scene One, but now he addresses the audience with a remarkable soliloquy that shows his true colours.

EDMUND: Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moon-shines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?
Who, in the lusty stealth of nature, take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,
Go to the creating a whole tribe of fops,
Got 'tween asleep and wake? Well, then,
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land:
Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
As to the legitimate: fine word,—legitimate!
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed,
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top the legitimate. I grow; I prosper:
Now, gods, stand up for bastards!

Gloucester enters, and Edmund convinces him that Edgar, his younger but legitimate brother, is plotting against him. Edgar enters, and is so good-natured that Edmund easily frames him. Edgar is quickly banished.

How does Shakespeare differentiate between the brothers?

What similarities are there between Lear and Gloucester?

Why does Shakespeare use so much language describing what is natural and unnatural in this scene?

## ACT I SCENE III

The action moves to Goneril's home, where Lear is in residence with his one hundred knights. Goneril complains to her servant Oswald about her father's behaviour, and that of his Fool.

GONERIL: Idle old man,
That still would manage those authorities
That he hath given away! Now, by my life,
Old fools are babes again; and must be used
With cheques as flatteries,—when they are seen abused.

*Is this a new vision of Goneril?*

*Is it wrong for Goneril to be upset at her father's behaviour?*

*Why does Goneril move from stilted verse (with several feminine endings) into prose here? What does this tell her about her?*

## ACT I SCENE IV

Kent appears, disguised as Dr. Caius, and offers himself as a servant to King Lear. There is an irony to the way in which they introduce themselves that foreshadows events that will come later in the play.

LEAR: Dost thou know me, fellow?

KENT: No, sir; but you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master.

Lear employs Kent, and in conversation with one of his many knights we see a glimpse of his regret at Cordelia's departure. He summons his Fool, the last major character to appear in the play, and fights with Goneril's servant Oswald. The Fool enters, and jokes quite pointedly about "nothing"—the key word in Lear's fight with Cordelia earlier.

KENT: This is nothing, fool.

FOOL: Then 'tis like the breath of an unfee'd lawyer; you gave me nothing for't. Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?

LEAR: Why, no, boy; nothing can be made out of nothing.

We hear echoes of that argument, and begin to see the extraordinary relationship between the Fool and the King, at once honest, irreverent and tender. Goneril enters to berate her father, and we begin to see how upset he is at his declining relationship with his family.

LEAR: Doth any here know me? This is not Lear:
Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?
Either his notion weakens, his discernings
Are lethargied—Ha! waking? 'tis not so.
Who is it that can tell me who I am?

FOOL: Lear's shadow.

LEAR: I would learn that; for, by the
marks of sovereignty, knowledge, and reason,
I should be false persuaded I had daughters.

FOOL: Which they will make an obedient father.

Goneril continues to berate her father, and is joined by her husband, Albany. Lear is increasingly angry, to the point of cursing her to sterility.

LEAR: Hear, nature, hear; dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility!

Lear is reduced to tears – and embarrassed that Goneril and Albany should see him crying. He exits, followed by Kent and the Fool. Goneril and Albany confer with Oswald, and plan to inform Regan of Lear's behaviour. Oswald leaves and Goneril berates her husband for his "milky gentleness".

*How seriously should we take Lear's curse?*

*Is Lear starting to feel guilty about his treatment of Cordelia?*

*Why is the Fool given so many jokes, riddles and rhymes, making his language so different from the other characters?*

*Can we hear Lear's madness developing as his language grows wilder in this scene?*

## ACT I SCENE V

Lear and the Fool prepare to depart and go stay with Regan. The Fool's jokes prod gently at Lear's treatment at the hands of his daughters, and we hear gentle but insistent hints of Lear's coming madness.

FOOL: I can tell why a snail has a house.

LEAR: Why?

FOOL: Why, to put his head in; not to give it away to his daughters, and leave his horns without a case.

LEAR: I will forget my nature.

*What is the Fool's function?*

*Is there method in his madness?*

*How does the Fool's language differ from Lear's?*

# ACT TWO

## ACT II SCENE I

Edmund wounds himself in order to implicate his brother, Edgar, and turn Gloucester against his legitimate son. The two parallel family stories begin to overlap when Regan and her husband Cornwall arrive at Gloucester's castle. Edmund manipulates everyone into thinking that Edgar is plotting to kill Gloucester to inherit his money, and that he is one of Lear's unruly knights, and that he should be hunted down and punished. Regan then asks for Gloucester's advice in how to communicate with her sister and her father.

REGAN: Our father he hath writ, so hath our sister,
Of differences, which I least thought it fit
To answer from our home; the several messengers
From hence attend dispatch. Our good old friend,
Lay comforts to your bosom; and bestow
Your needful counsel to our business,
Which craves the instant use.

What is brewing between Cornwall and Albany?

What does Edmund stand to gain from enlisting Regan's support?

What similarities are developing between Gloucester and Lear?

How does Edgar use language to manipulate people?

## ACT II SCENE II

Outside Gloucester's castle, Kent (still disguised as Caius) meets Oswald, Goneril's chief steward. Owald does not recognise Kent after their altercation in Act One Scene 4, and Kent insults him at length:

OSWALD: What dost thou know me for?

KENT: A knave; a rascal; an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave; a lily-livered, action-taking knave, a whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd, in way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pandar, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch: one whom I will beat into clamorous whining, if thou deniest the least syllable of thy addition.

They come to blows, and eventually Edmund, Regan, Cornwall and Gloucester appear. Kent continues to rant when asked to explain the fight, and he is put in the stocks, despite Gloucester's reservations. Left alone, he reads a letter he has received from Cordelia.

KENT: But misery: I know 'tis from Cordelia,
Who hath most fortunately been inform'd
Of my obscured course; and shall find time
From this enormous state, seeking to give
Losses their remedies.

Why is Kent so angry at Oswald?

Why is Gloucester so hesitant about putting Kent in the stocks?

Is Kent completely unrecognisable?

How does Kent use language (including insults, verse and prose) as a disguise in this scene?

## ACT II SCENE III

Edgar, now on the run, strips off his court clothes and covers himself in mud. He disguises himself as Poor Tom, a beggar who has escaped from an asylum.

EDGAR: The country gives me proof and precedent
Of Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices,
Strike in their numb'd and mortified bare arms
Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary;
And with this horrible object, from low farms,
Poor pelting villages, sheep-cotes, and mills,
Sometime with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers,
Enforce their charity.

He ends his soliloquy with an echo of Cordelia, stating

EDGAR: Edgar I nothing am.

Why does Edgar choose to disguise himself as an insane beggar?

How does Edgar's story mirror Cordelia's?

How does Edgar use language to disguise himself as a madman?

## ACT II SCENE IV

Lear and the Fool arrive at Gloucester's castle and find Kent asleep in the stocks. He is horrified that Regan and Cornwall should treat his messenger so badly.

LEAR: They could not, would not do 't; 'tis worse than murder,
To do upon respect such violent outrage.

He demands that Regan and Cornwall come and explain themselves. They cry off repeatedly, claiming that they are sick, and tired from travelling. Eventually Lear prevails, and he is again horrified that they seem to agree with the way that Goneril has treated him.

REGAN: I cannot think my sister in the least
Would fail her obligation: if, sir, perchance
She have restrain'd the riots of your followers,
'Tis on such ground, and to such wholesome end,
As clears her from all blame.

LEAR: My curses on her!

Lear starts cursing Goneril again, and then he is embarrassed when she arrives. Regan joins hands with her and the sisters join forces in scolding their father. The fight escalates between father and daughters, as they argue over how many of his knights he may keep. First he must reduce them to fifty, then twenty five, until eventually both sisters insist that he dismiss them all. Lear berates them before the gods for their poor treatment of him.

LEAR: You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age; wretched in both!
If it be you that stir these daughters' hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,
And let not women's weapons, water-drops,
Stain my man's cheeks! No, you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both,
That all the world shall—I will do such things,—
What they are, yet I know not: but they shall be
The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep
No, I'll not weep:
I have full cause of weeping; but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws,
Or ere I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad!

Lear exits into the coming storm, while Regan and Goneril are happy for him to "taste his folly". Despite Gloucester's concern, they insist that the castle be locked.

What do Lear's hundred knights represent?

What do Regan and Goneril hope to deprive their father of by forbidding him to have even one attendant?

Is King Lear aware that he is on the brink of madness?

Why does the Fool say so little in this scene?

How does Lear's language show the rage in his "rising heart"?

How do Regan and Goneril use language to belittle their father?

Why does Shakespeare juxtapose so many opposites in this scene? (Kings and beggars, wealth and poverty, man and beast...)

# ACT THREE

## ACT III SCENE I

Kent searches for Lear in the storm. He meets one of the King's knights, and they discuss the growing rift between Albany and Cornwall. Kent tells the Knight to go to Dover, where he will find French troops sympathetic to Lear. He gives the knight a ring to present to Cordelia.

KENT: For confirmation that I am much more
Than my out-wall, open this purse, and take
What it contains. If you shall see Cordelia,—
As fear not but you shall,—show her this ring;
And she will tell you who your fellow is
That yet you do not know.

What is the political importance of what we learn in this scene?

What is the state of Lear's kingdom now that Albany, Cornwall and France seem to be preparing for conflict?

What does Kent's speech tell us about him in this scene?

## ACT III SCENE II

The storm continues, and Lear appears, raging against it. He seems to be defying nature, but acknowledges that nothing in the storm is worse than his daughters' unkindness.

LEAR: Rive your concealing continents, and cry
These dreadful summoners grace. I am a man
More sinn'd against than sinning.

Kent appears, and urges the King and his Fool to seek shelter from the storm. In an extraordinary moment, Lear acknowledges that he is going mad, and for the first time in the play shows concern for someone else – his Fool.

LEAR: My wits begin to turn.
Come on, my boy: how dost, my boy? art cold?
I am cold myself. Where is this straw, my fellow?
The art of our necessities is strange,
That can make vile things precious.
Come, your hovel.
Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart
That's sorry yet for thee.

How does the storm mirror what is happening in Lear's head?

What is the Fool's prophecy about?

What do Lear's chaotic speeches tell us?

How does Shakespeare weave Lear's breakdown into the fabric of his language?

What is the dramatic effect of the Fool's prophecy?

## ACT III SCENE III

Gloucester is very concerned about having locked Lear out in the storm. He asks for Edmund's help in distracting Cornwall while he searches for the king. He also mentions the growing division between Albany and Cornwall, and confirms that the French army have already arrived in Britain. Gloucester exits, and Edmund delights in the opportunity that has presented itself for him to betray his father and inherit everything.

EDMUND: This seems a fair deserving, and must draw me
That which my father loses; no less than all:
The younger rises when the old doth fall.

Why didn't Gloucester stop Lear from going out into the storm in the first place?

With whom do we sympathise in this scene?

Who is telling the truth and who is lying in this scene?

How does the alternation between prose and verse aid the storytelling?

## ACT III SCENE IV

Kent insists that Lear should take shelter, but Lear claims that the storm does not worry him nearly as much as his daughters' ill-treatment.

LEAR: …the tempest in my mind
Doth from my senses take all feeling else
Save what beats there. Filial ingratitude!

The Fool finds Edgar in the hovel, disguised as Poor Tom. Lear notices his rough-shod appearance, and wonders if perhaps he too has given everything away to his daughters. Edgar describes his former life, and Lear proclaims that they are both better off in the wild, before tearing his clothes off. Gloucester enters, and Edgar feigns extreme madness, calling him the names of several devils. Gloucester insists that Lear must come indoors, and Lear agrees, but only if he can bring Edgar with him.

*Why does Lear tear his clothes off?*

*What lies behind Edgar's madness in this scene? We have seen him put on the disguise earlier in the play, but here he seems genuinely insane when his father appears.*

*Why doesn't Gloucester recognise his son?*

*How does Shakespeare use language to differentiate between the feigned madness of Poor Tom (Edgar) and Lear's genuine insanity?*

*How does the alternation between prose and verse define the characters in this scene?*

## ACT III SCENE V

Edmund has convinced Cornwall of Gloucester's treachery, and Cornwall confers on him his father's title, Earl of Gloucester. Edmund hopes to catch his father in the act of helping Lear, to prove his father's guilt.

EDMUND: If I find him comforting the king, it will
stuff his suspicion more fully. — I will persevere in
my course of loyalty, though the conflict be sore
between that and my blood.

*What does it say about Cornwall as a leader, that he gives Gloucester's title to Edmund, his illegitimate son, before either Gloucester or the rightful (albeit disgraced) heir are even dead?*

*How does Edmund use his 'glib and oily art' in this scene?*

## ACT III SCENE VI

Gloucester, Lear, Kent and the Fool take shelter in an outhouse. Lear is increasingly mad, and hallucinates ever more wildly – to the point of holding a mock trial of his daughters, believing them to be present. Gloucester instructs Kent to lead Lear to Dover, having overheard a plan to murder the king. The French troops in Dover will support the old man. Meanwhile Edgar plays along with Lear's madness, and seems to hallucinate more and more devils. The two are well-matched in their madness – but the scene ends with Edgar alone onstage, directly addressing the audience and revealing his sympathy for Lear's plight.

EDGAR: Who alone suffers suffers most i' the mind,
Leaving free things and happy shows behind:
But then the mind much sufferance doth o'er skip,
When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship.
How light and portable my pain seems now,
When that which makes me bend makes the king bow,
He childed as I father'd! Tom, away!
Mark the high noises; and thyself bewray,
When false opinion, whose wrong thought defiles thee,
In thy just proof, repeals and reconciles thee.

Why has the Fool become so silent?

Is there any more place for the Fool in the play, now that his master is mad?

Why does Shakespeare use such extensive animal imagery in this scene?

What is the dramatic effect of the fractured conversation in this scene, between Lear's rambling's, the Fool's nonsense, Poor Tom (Edgar)'s interjections and the rational contributions of Gloucester and Kent?

## ACT III SCENE VII

Cornwall instructs Goneril to bring Gloucester's treasonous letter – with details of the French troops – to her husband, Albany. He tells Edmund to accompany her, so that he does not have to witness the torture of his father. In the most shocking scene of the play, Gloucester is caught and tortured by Regan and Cornwall. They tie him up, tightly, and pull his beard, all outrageous treatment of a nobleman, particularly in his own house – where they are guests. Since technically he cannot get away with executing him without a trial, Cornwall decides instead to tear out one of Gloucester's eyes and stamp on it. Although such violence was not uncommon in Shakespeare's England, what is startling is that it takes place onstage. Even Gloucester's servants are appalled, and rise up to challenge such cruelty against their master. Cornwall is fatally wounded, and Regan then kills the servant who stabbed her husband. Before he departs, however, Cornwall plucks out Gloucester's remaining eye. Gloucester calls for Edmund's help, but Regan explains

REGAN: Thou call'st on him that hates thee: it was he
That made the overture of thy treasons to us;
Who is too good to pity thee.

GLOUCESTER: O my follies! then Edgar was abused.
Kind gods, forgive me that, and prosper him!

Regan leads Cornwall off to die, and Gloucester's servants plan to tend his wounds and entrust him to Edgar's care.

Why does Shakespeare end the storm with such horrific violence?

Why is Gloucester treated so badly?

What is the dramatic significance of the servant attacking Cornwall?

How has Regan changed in her way of thinking (and therefore speaking) since Act One?

What is the effect of comparing the sisters to so many dangerous animals?

# ACT FOUR

## ACT IV SCENE I

Back on the heath, Edgar reflects on the cruelty of the world. He thinks he has seen the worst of things, and that perhaps things will now improve.

EDGAR: Yet better thus, and known to be contemn'd,
Than still contemn'd and flatter'd. To be worst,
The lowest and most dejected thing of fortune,
Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear:
The lamentable change is from the best;
The worst returns to laughter. Welcome, then,
Thou unsubstantial air that I embrace!
The wretch that thou hast blown unto the worst
Owes nothing to thy blasts.

Gloucester is led on, and father and son are reunited. Blind Gloucester, of course, does not recognise Edgar, and Edgar chooses not to reveal himself. Gloucester begs his new ally to lead him to just to the highest cliff at Dover.

GLOUCESTER: There is a cliff, whose high and bending head
Looks fearfully in the confined deep:
Bring me but to the very brim of it,
And I'll repair the misery thou dost bear
With something rich about me: from that place
I shall no leading need.

Why does Edgar choose not to tell his father who he is?

Why does Gloucester want to be brought to such a specific place?

How does Edgar express his optimism at the beginning of this scene?

How does Shakespeare create irony through the language of this scene?

## ACT IV SCENE II

Edmund and Goneril arrive at the latter's castle. When she expresses surprise that her husband has not come to meet them, Oswald explains that Albany is displeased with the treatment Lear has received. Goneril decides to exercise greater control over her husband, and sends Edmund back to rally Cornwall's troops. They kiss. Albany enters immediately afterwards, and is appalled to learn of Lear's madness, blaming Goneril's cruelty towards her father. A messenger brings news of Gloucester's blinding and Cornwall's death, and Albany is even more upset. Goneril seems less troubled by her brother-in-law's death – and expresses concern that now Regan will be free to pursue Edmund. When Albany hears that it was Edmund that denounced Gloucester, he resolves to take revenge.

*What lies behind Albany's change of heart?*

*Is Albany likely to restore order in Lear's ravished kingdom?*

*How is Cordelia described in his scene?*

*How does Albany's character (and language) change in this scene?*

*What are Goneril and Albany attacking in each other with their insults in this scene?*

*What is the dramatic effect of the Fool's prophecy?*

## ACT IV SCENE III

Kent meets with a Gentleman in Dover, near the French camp. We hear that Cordelia is now Queen of France, and in charge of the French forces. The Gentleman, a Doctor, explains her distress at hearing of her father's madness, and Kent explains that Lear is also in Dover, hovering between sanity and madness. He will not see Cordelia, however, because he is too ashamed:

KENT: A sovereign shame so elbows him: his own unkindness,
That stripp'd her from his benediction, turn'd her
To foreign casualties, gave her dear rights
To his dog-hearted daughters, these things sting
His mind so venomously, that burning shame
Detains him from Cordelia.

*What is the significance of Kent's parting lines about disguise in this scene?*

*What is Kent's "dear cause"?*

*How does the natural imagery change with Kent's description of Cordelia's return?*

*King Lear*

## ACT IV SCENE IV

In the French camp, Cordelia worries about her father, who is raving in the cornfields. She sends one hundred of her soldiers to bring him to her, and discusses with a doctor how best to take care of him, wondering if there might be a cure.

DOCTOR: There is means, madam:
Our foster-nurse of nature is repose,
The which he lacks; that to provoke in him,
Are many simples operative, whose power
Will close the eye of anguish.

A messenger brings the news that the armies of Albany and the late Cornwall are on the march against Cordelia's French troops in Dover. Cordelia is ready for them.

*Who are the French troops fighting for?*

*How has Cordelia changed since we last saw her in Act One?*

*Why are there so many references to eyes and tears in this scene?*

*What is the significant about the language of the Doctor's prescription for Lear?*

## ACT IV SCENE V

Regan and Oswald discuss preparations for the military expedition. Regan pumps Oswald for information about Edmund, and about Goneril's feelings for him. She feels that she is the better choice for Edmund, since she is a widow and Goneril is still married. She gives Oswald her own message for Edmund, and encourages him to kill Gloucester if he can.

*Why are both Regan and Goneril attracted to Edmund?*

*Which of the sisters is more eager to wage this war?*

*What does Regan mean when she says "I speak in understanding"?*

## ACT IV SCENE VI

Edgar pretends to Gloucester that they have reached the edge of the cliff. Gloucester prays for forgiveness, and attempts suicide, fainting as he does so. When he comes around, Edgar assumes a new persona and tells him that the gods must surely have blessed him, for he has survived his fall and escaped from the devil that was accompanying him up on the cliff.

EDGAR: As I stood here below, methought his eyes
Were two full moons; he had a thousand noses,
Horns whelk'd and waved like the enridged sea:
It was some fiend; therefore, thou happy father,
Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours
Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee.

Edgar does not tell his father who he really is, but manages to give him a new lease of life, now that he has escaped death and destruction. Lear appears, bedecked with flowers, and in his madness seems to recognise Gloucester. He veers between lucid comments and mad conjectures, as Edgar notices:

EDGAR: O, matter and impertinency mix'd! Reason in madness!

Cordelia's men enter, and attempt to bring Lear back to the camp. Lear runs away again, and they follow. Oswald enters and finds Edgar and Gloucester, and attempts to kill the blind earl in order to get the promised reward. However, Edgar overpowers him and kills him, burying him nearby. As he is dying, he begs Edgar to deliver his letter to Goneril. Edgar finds the various letters, and learns of Edmund's liaisons with Regan and Goneril, and then leads his father off to safety.

How has Edgar's appearance changed in this scene?

Does Edgar seem to have forgiven his father?

Why doesn't Edgar reveal himself to his father?

What does Lear mean by "Goneril with a white beard"?

What dramatic function does the Gentleman in this scene serve?

Why is Oswald so eager for his message to be delivered to Goneril?

How does Gloucester's prayer show us the change he has undergone?

How is Lear's language a mixture of 'matter and impertinency'?

## ACT IV SCENE VII

In her tent, Cordelia is reunited with Kent, who begs her not to reveal his disguise. Lear is brought in, and there is a very tender scene of forgiveness and reconciliation between father and daughter. News reaches the camp of Cornwall's death and Edmund's takeover of his forces.

Why does Kent beg Cordelia not to reveal his disguise?

How does Shakespeare show us that Lear has regained his sanity?

Who deserves more forgiveness in this scene?

How does Shakespeare set everything up in this act for the play's conclusion at Dover?

How does Lear's language change when he wakes up in this scene?

How does his language show his mental state?

# ACT FIVE

## ACT V SCENE I

Regan questions Edmund about his relationship with Goneril. She wishes to know if he loves her, and if he has slept with her. He answers no to both questions, and almost immediately Goneril and Albany arrive. Goneril is equally jealous of Edmund's relationship with Regan.

GONERIL: I had rather lose the battle than that sister
Should loosen him and me.

Despite his misgivings, Albany declares that he will fight against Lear and the French forces. Then Edgar appears in yet another disguise, and gives Albany the proof of Goneril's feelings for Edmund, as well as her instructions to her lover to kill Albany if given the chance. The scene ends with a soliloquy from Edmund, in which he explains the tangled web he has woven between the two sisters.

EDMUND: To both these sisters have I sworn my love;
Each jealous of the other, as the stung
Are of the adder. Which of them shall I take?
Both? one? or neither? Neither can be enjoy'd,
If both remain alive: to take the widow
Exasperates, makes mad her sister Goneril;
And hardly shall I carry out my side,
Her husband being alive. Now then we'll use
His countenance for the battle; which being done,
Let her who would be rid of him devise
His speedy taking off. As for the mercy
Which he intends to Lear and to Cordelia,
The battle done, and they within our power,
Shall never see his pardon; for my state
Stands on me to defend, not to debate

Why does Edgar assume so many disguises?

Is Edmund really in love with either Regan or Goneril?

Who of the play's villains has most at stake in this scene?

Why are there references to snakes in this scene?

Has Edmund's language changed over the course of the play?

## ACT V SCENE II

The battle begins. Edgar leads Gloucester to a safe place beneath a tree. Gloucester is content to rest there, but Edgar insists they keep moving when he hears that the French army has been defeated, and both Lear and Cordelia have been captured.

Why does Shakespeare relate the battle scene in such a condensed manner?

How does Shakespeare distil the battle into key moments?

What does Edgar mean when he says "ripeness is all"?

Why does Shakespeare use so little language in this scene?

How does the juxtaposition of an offstage battle with this scene's rather banal onstage conversation create dramatic effect?

*King Lear*

## ACT V SCENE III

Edmund leads in his prisoners, Lear and Cordelia. Lear fantasises about living in a cage with Cordelia, and Edmund sends them away, giving ominous instructions to their guard. Albany, Goneril and Regan enter and demand that the King and Cordelia be brought forth. Edmund lies and says he has sent them far away for fear of their inciting a mob to rise up against them. Albany confronts Edmund, but Regan interrupts and announces that she will marry Edmund. Goneril argues that Edmund will not agree, and Regan appears to be sick. Albany arrests Edmund for treason, and permits that Edmund may defend himself against the charge in single combat. As arranged earlier before the battle, Albany sounds a trumpet, and Edgar appears in his final disguise, fully armed to fight his brother. Edgar defeats Edmund, but resists killing him so that he may be questioned. When Goneril moves to help Edmund, Albany reveals the letter that proves her intentions, and she runs off. Edgar reveals himself, and explains his actions throughout the play, and describes his reunion with his father and Gloucester's death.

EDMUND: The bloody proclamation to escape,
That follow'd me so near,—O, our lives' sweetness!
That we the pain of death would hourly die
Rather than die at once!—taught me to shift
Into a madman's rags; to assume a semblance
That very dogs disdain'd: and in this habit
Met I my father with his bleeding rings,
Their precious stones new lost: became his guide,
Led him, begg'd for him, saved him from despair;

> Never, — O fault! — reveal'd myself unto him,
> Until some half-hour past, when I was arm'd:
> Not sure, though hoping, of this good success,
> I ask'd his blessing, and from first to last
> Told him my pilgrimage: but his flaw'd heart,
> Alack, too weak the conflict to support!
> 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
> Burst smilingly.

As Edgar finishes his speech a messenger rushes on to announce that Goneril has killed herself, and that she had also murdered Regan with poison.

Moved by his brother's nobility, Edmund resolves to do the right thing, and explains where Lear and Cordelia are being held in the hope that they can be found before it is too late. Lear, however, enters bearing the body of Cordelia, who has been hanged according to Edmund's instructions.

LEAR: Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones:
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever!

Lear grieves over his beloved daughter, and a messenger brings the news that Edmund has died. Lear senses that perhaps Cordelia is stirring, and in that moment, he dies.

Albany steps up and offers to share rule with Kent and Edgar, but Kent declines.

KENT: I have a journey, sir, shortly to go;
My master calls me, I must not say no.

*Lear calls Cordelia his Fool. What is the significance of this?*

*Do we believe in Edmund's final good deed?*

*Why does Shakespeare give us a glimpse of the former, regal Lear just before he dies?*

*Will Albany and Edgar be better rulers than their predecessors?*

**How does Edgar's nobility reappear in his final speech?**

# THEMES

# REALITY VS. APPEARANCE

**Much of the play revolves around people's inability to distinguish between appearance and reality – and their journeys toward the wisdom necessary to do so.**

Perhaps Lear's greatest flaw is that he cannot see things clearly – from the very beginning of the play, we see him make poor choices based on a wrong-headed reading of the situation. His banishment of Cordelia and Kent, and his division of the kingdom between Goneril and Regan, bring about all the events that follow through the play. The play's tragedy stems from Lear's inability to distinguish between the appearance of love from Regan and Goneril, and the real heartfelt feeling expressed by Cordelia.

In the secondary plot featuring Gloucester and his sons, appearance and reality are likewise critical. Gloucester believes Edmund's lies and turns against his far nobler son Edgar.

Shakespeare has several characters adopt disguises over the course of the play. Kent re-appears as Caius, Edgar dons several guises until he reveals himself to fight his brother, and even Lear attemps to change his outward appearance, first stripping off his robes and then later covering himself with flowers.

As he emerges from his madness, Lear wonders if Cordelia is an angel – Shakespeare here blurs appearance and reality for heartbreaking dramatic effect.

# THE NATURAL ORDER

***King Lear* contains more references to Natural and natural (or unnatural) events than any other Shakespeare play. In this play, children turn on their parents, bastards usurp their legitimate siblings and parents watch their children die. The laws of nature are broken repeatedly throughout.**

Natural orders and hierarchies are inverted and abandoned throughout the play. At the very outset, Gloucester introduces his illegitimate son Edmund at court – immediately we are introduced to a world wherein old orders may not last. Gloucester himself has an eerily prescient feeling about the unrest that is in the natural world, foreshadowed by recent eclipses (always a sign of trouble in Shakespeare).

> *These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects.*

Edmund's speech in Act I Scene II proclaims "Thou, Nature, art my goddess" – he rejects all man-made systems in order to ignore and counter-act his status as a bastard. Edmund is twisting ideas for his own ends here – while he makes a case that it is man-made laws that prevent him from having a birth-right, it is of course against nature to betray one's brother and deceive one's father.

As the body count rises in the play, so does the number of violations of order – sister kills sister, brother kills brother, servant kills master, mistress kills servant, and so on. One of the play's most moving images is Lear's final entrance, bearing the corpse of Cordelia. The natural order is for children to bury their parents, but Lear only dies after seeing the corpses of all three of his daughters

# WANTON GODS

**Central to the bleak chain of events in *King Lear* is the theme of justice, and the question of whether we live in a benign or malevolent universe. Is there any divine concern for the affairs of mankind, or is Gloucester right when he claims that "as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods – they kill us for their sport."**

*King Lear* takes place in a pagan, pre-Christian Britain, where religion features only in the characters' personal prayers and outbursts. There are no priests or bishops in the play, and in fact the only mention of a priest in the play is the Fool's anachronistic prophecy during the storm. Is there any divine justice or consequence in the world of this play, or is man alone in this cruel universe?

# CRUELTY VS. COMPASSION

***King Lear* begins with the destruction of a family, a court and a kingdom. The cruelties visited upon almost everyone in the play escalate throughout, although mitigated by acts of quiet kindness.**

The play contains one of Shakespeare's highest body counts, and people die in a variety of shocking ways. But the cruelty is not limited to physical violence – the play also features psychological cruelty and some of Shakespeare's most virulent insults. Kent attacks Oswald with uncharacteristic venom, and later Regan and Cornwall treat Gloucester with extreme cruelty. The tearing out of Gloucester's eyes onstage is one of the grisliest in the history of the theatre.

In contrast, there are moments of great kindness. Kent returns despite his banishment to watch over Lear. During the storm, as his madness escalates, Lear sympathises with and expresses concern for the Fool, and then empathises with Edgar as Poor Tom. During their reunion, Cordelia forgives Lear absolutely – she insists that there is 'No cause, no cause,' in response to her father's admission that she has some cause to hate him.

# DIREC-TION

# DIRECTING KING LEAR

**Interview with Selina Cartmell**

*As a director, what draws you to a play like King Lear?*

*King Lear* speaks to us on a mythic primal level of despair and hope and examines redemption and transformation through suffering. I have always been interested by the idea of emotional, psychological and spiritual transformation on stage and *King Lear* explores these ideas through its universal and timeless themes. It is a savage story throbbing with a sense of the world turned upside down.

When Shakespeare wrote *King Lear*, England had gone through our equivalent of a 9/11 moment – the Gunpowder plot – the year before the play was first staged. There must have been a sense that terrible destruction had been averted, and yet it was a time of great social and political rupture, reflected in the issues in the play; rebellion, loyalty, fear of a foreign invasion, an attempt on a monarch's life. I feel Shakespeare really is our contemporary and the resonances of the themes and what the characters endure on both a personal and political level feels especially relevant to our world today.

Shakespeare's language is sublime and he vividly examines and meditates on our ideas about the abuse of power, family dysfunction and the acceptance of death. It is a tale of terror and triumph, in story / parable form and he challenges the reader and audience with image after striking image of ineffable despair and infant hope. The play has a power and a life force all of its own, expressing the inexpressible through an ancient energy that pulls you terrifyingly along and leaves you emotionally exhausted. Ultimately what fascinates me about the play is

*King Lear*

that it asks us all to embark on a journey of self-discovery. It is an epic human story of love, suffering and loss.

King Lear has always been on my wish list of plays to direct. While at university I read Jan Kott's essay in his inspiring book *Shakespeare our Contemporary* that skillfully makes connections between *Endgame* and *King Lear* and the absurdity of the moral universe. At the time the plays of Samuel Beckett and the theatre of the absurd heavily influenced my training as a director. In 2008 I directed a new play by Marina Carr for the RSC called *The Cordelia Dream*, a beautiful piece of writing that was inspired by the relationship of Lear and Cordelia and explored some of themes of *King Lear*. So it is a real honor to finally direct Shakespeare's play for the Abbey and see how these previous experiences subconsciously or consciously influence this production.

**Approaching a production as rich as King Lear, what are the first decisions you have to make?**

Firstly you have to have a very strong idea of who will play the King. Described alternately as Shakespeare's 'Mount Everest', the role of Lear is the deepest plunge into the human soul. Therefore you need an actor who is brilliant, intelligent and highly skilled and also someone who you creatively trust and who is an inspiring collaborator.

*King Lear* is a seasoned king, but frozen naive and over-proud from his many flatterers. He grows up in this play, he gains his heart but he learns too late. I have worked with Owen Roe who is playing *King Lear* in three previous productions. I first directed Owen as Titus in *Titus Andronicus*, one of Shakespeare's earliest tragedies in 2005 and he is

fearless in his exploration of difficult roles. This was our first time working together and I felt we had a very strong understanding of each other's creative process and I remember during Titus we had spoken about one day working on *King Lear* together. Casting the role of *King Lear* impacts on all aspects of production from casting (who will play the Fool, daughters etc) the design, editing and to how you will eventually stage the play.

### Are there particular aspects of the world of the play that you are eager to explore in this production?

In the opening panoramic scene of the play Shakespeare poses and introduces all the images and themes that are explored in the rest of the play. In Scene I Shakespeare presents a visceral examination of the themes of love, loss and the futility of ambition, the pains of parenthood and the rewards of patience. Themes such as justice, nature and the natural, madness, insight, love and self-discovery are applicable to all of mankind, despite culture, despite religion and despite the era in which it is performed. Shakespeare, through using such themes, ensured that anyone and everyone would find something within King Lear to hold onto.

On first reading the play it is clear this is not a civilized world. The play moves remorselessly from its first scene of 'everything' (accommodation, luxury, comfort and security) towards a clear-eyed and scarifying contemplation of 'nothing'. And the immediate cause is Lear's own lack of self-knowledge. It is through Lear's journey of loss of self that we encounter one of the main themes of the play – madness and feigned madness. Over and over we hear Lear cry against the onset of madness:

LEAR: O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven
Keep me in temper. I should not be mad.
I prithee daughter do not make me mad
O Fool, I shall go mad

Lear's madness becomes itself an emblem, a touchstone, for the madness that afflicts so many others in the play. Madness permits the maddened victim to speak the truth, like a licensed fool, and be disbelieved. A madman or madwoman is a sublime version of a fool. It is Lear's descent into madness that permeates the entire play and significantly effect's many of its central characters.

I will be staging the play in a timeless world that taps into the ancient Pagan past and yet hopefully will still feel contemporary and relevant. The vagueness of Shakespeare's setting I feel is part of his design for the piece. He wrote the play in 1606 and set it in a pagan world with a dynamic and dreadful urgency. I knew I wanted to avoid localizing the action of the play as any specific period felt too reductive.

Garance Marneur (designer) and myself spoke at great length about the abstract and real elements of the play, attempting to create an ancient space where the natural and unnatural can sit side by side. It is a space that needs to accommodate extreme physical cruelty and violence, curses, madness and yet also manage to soar with its poetic beauty and allow the audience to feel connected to the characters and story.

**The storm is the centerpiece of this enormous play. What does it represent for you?**

I have seen a few productions of Lear and I have always felt disappointed by the storm scene. I think this is because I have found it difficult to hear the text or fully understand the psychological impact of the storm on Lear due to all the spectacular rain, thunder and wind effects that are traditionally employed.

What interests me is for the audience to somehow enter into Lear's head during the storm and to feel connected to his emotional state. Therefore Lear is summoning up the storm and the audiences are active witnesses as the scene unfolds. Therefore the audience cannot 'come out of the storm' for it is all around us as it is all around Lear and within him. What confronts us, the spectators in the theatre, is the inner agony of a man's soul played out as if it were some immense and tragic metaphor writ large upon the landscape, so that we can see it and share it. The heath becomes a psychological landscape. The journey between Act 1 and Act 3 is a journey from civilization to a place of wilderness and apparent unreason. It is a place of transformation and change, a stripping away and reversal of the condition of 'civilization'. It is clear Lear is liberated by the storm into a new understanding and also into madness.

**How did you approach casting the play? Have you made any surprising decisions?**

The most 'blank canvas' of roles in the play is that of the Fool. I had two very clear ideas for casting this part. Firstly I was thinking of doubling the role of Fool and Cordelia and then I became more interested in the idea of the Fool as an 'innocent' young boy or an outcast who was telling this 80 year old man real truths and guiding the monarch in a very transparent way.

Even though the play is called *King Lear* it has often be thought of as the most ensemble of all of Shakespeare's plays and I strongly believed this should be central to the casting process. In collaboration with Kelly Phelan (casting director at the Abbey) we set out to build a company of actors who we felt would connect with the play and offer the rehearsal process unexpected insights into the characters and the world. The process of casting was long and detailed and at times it felt like a giant jigsaw puzzle, trying to balance energies and the dynamic of the company

**There is a lot of disguise and doubling built into the structure of the play – as though everyone is always playing a part. Do you think this is a very theatrical play?**

Yes the idea of disguise and characters taking on different identities is key to unlocking the power of the play and the question that Lear asks throughout is 'who is that can tell me who I am'? There is a great scene in Act III Scene VI when Lear is surrounded by Kent and Edgar who are both in disguise as Caius and Poor Tom respectively and Lear at this stage does not know them and yet they are trying to help and guide him. The idea of masks of characters being stripped back to reveal the truth is key to understanding the journey of Lear.

The use of clothing in the play can be contrasted with nakedness as much as pretense and appearances can be contrasted with truth and reality. For example, most of the courtly characters are richly arrayed

yet they lie and are deceitful. In the storm, Lear strips off his clothes as a way of metaphorically stripping off all the deception of courtly life as he attempts to identify with the 'poor naked wretches', it is his way of trying to live truly. One of my favorite lines in the play is when Lear says: '*Through tattered clothes great vices do appear; Robes and furred gowns hide all.*'

**You directed a very successful production of Titus Andronicus in 2005, also starring Owen Roe. Have you found any similarities between these two mad old patriarchs?**

There are key speeches from both Titus and Lear that sound very familiar by Shakespeare's use of image and rhythm of the language. In both these plays Shakespeare uses and explores madness to devastating effect. I think there are many parallels between Lear and Titus, especially visible in their relationships with their daughters Cordelia and Lavinia. Both Titus and Lear also choose retirement over the duty of leadership. However at the core of both these plays are deeply flawed fathers who re-connect with their daughters, and although tragically all too late these old men are changed and transformed by the end of the play. In both plays I feel Shakespeare essentially affirms life saying that it is an extraordinary journey and full of the most damaging and tragic events and catastrophic decisions and yet life still needs to be celebrated.

**Are there any particular books that have inspired you in your preparation to direct the play?**

Over the last few months I have been reading a lot of research material and articles as well as plays, films and other source material related to the play and its themes (dementia, extreme violence, depression etc). Most recently I have been reading a couple of diaries by actors (Brian Cox and Oliver Ford Davies) who have played Lear and have chronicled their journey through the rehearsal process and into the production run. I find it comforting to hear other actor's experiences and the difficulties they have encountered (with the play, actors and their director!) when they have taken on *King Lear* and the overwhelming illness and exhaustion experienced. Both these actors' accounts have confirmed that playing Lear is a challenging journey for all involved.

**What are you hoping that the audience will experience?**

This is the first time *King Lear* has been staged at the Abbey since the 1930's and I hope to make the story feel fresh and direct and create a production that is compelling and visceral. It is an epic journey for the audience and I hope they leave with a sense of the plays great power as well as the transformative nature of the play. The great thing about *King Lear* is that you can find what you want to find in it.

# CAST VIEWS

# PLAYING KING LEAR

**Interview with Owen Roe**

*For a role like King Lear, where do you start your preparations?*

I guess you start with an open mind. When it comes to something like King Lear, any Shakespeare, any well-known play, Titus Andronicus, or Faith Healer, or Da, you always approach it as though it's the first time it's ever been done. You have to forget everything you've ever seen or heard about it – that's probably the best way to approach it. In this play, you have so many hooks to hang your character from – you can take it on the political level, the power struggle, the international conflict, if you like, or social exclusion, a godless society, any of those things, or you can go purely for the domestic situations. Whether he's suffering from dementia, or whether he has had an incestuous relationship with Cordelia… you could go down that route. Is it about dividing the estate? Is it about sibling rivalry? You've all those things to have in your mind. Or you can take it step by step, and say this is where he is, at this particular moment. I think the only way this production will survive, or work, is the generally held belief that it's the marrying of the vast with the tiny, the epic with the intimate, if we can get that.

Because it could be quite shouty if you're not careful. You need to start off with somewhere to go – you don't want to start off at the ceiling in this one. If you start off with lots of shouting, lots of energy expelled, by the time you get to the end of the play the audience is exhausted, probably with a headache – and we're exhausted! So actually it's finding that gradient, and that marriage of both the epic with the intimate. If we can achieve that, the production has a better chance of being successful. It's a matter of gauging the night ahead – my preparations will start with that.

*King Lear*

Also, a lot will be worked out on the floor in the rehearsal room – I think we can intellectualise about it as much as we want, but it's actually about reacting. It's about the chemistry of all of us together. I think Selina has a wonderful cast – an exceptional cast – and that coming together will dictate the gradient of the show as well. A lot of that will be worked out on the day, so I can only speculate about how it might go, but my feeling is what I just said – make sure that gradient is there, make sure that it doesn't start off too high-octane.

**You of all people have a long night ahead of you!**

That's just it – if we get it right, it won't feel like that! I remember going to see a production of *Diary of a Madman*, one of my favourite short stories, by Nikolai Gogol, and I went in, and it was a two-hour one-man show, and the guy came out with eyes wide, mouth wide open, barking mad – and I thought yikes, another two hours of this! So instead of growing and becoming mad, going to insanity, as it is in the story, the guy came running at it. And it didn't sustain itself for two hours.

**You're no stranger to playing commanding patriarchs – do you think that your experiences with Titus Andronicus, Festen and even Endgame might have an influence on how you approach Lear?**

Well, there are parallels, certainly. *Titus Andronicus*, first of all, was never one of Shakespeare's more popular plays, because it was seen as too violent, and too extreme. By today's standards – when we did it – the audiences didn't feel that, they're so used to seeing extreme violence that it was probably something of a cake walk! But there are similarities between it and Lear, in the sense that Titus and Lear are driven to

madness by grief. They each set off on a journey – Titus sets off on a journey of revenge for Lavinia, whereas Lear sets off on a journey of discovery. So they do set off, and that's a parallel, but there are even a couple of interesting things in the dialogue of the two plays. In *Titus*, when he is reunited with Lavinia, after her hands have been cut off and her tongue has been cut out, he's on the verge of madness, and there's a famous scene where a fly is killed, and he laments the death of the fly. The irony is that after all the violence that he has experienced, and witnessed, that he has now become more sensitive to the simplest of things, like the death of this fly. But it's through his madness. And then he says something to Lavinia that is very similar what Lear says to Cordelia when they reunite towards the end, which I thought was extraordinary – they both decide to seek pleasure in simple things, like just being together, and telling stories. Lear says:

> No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison:
> We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
> When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
> And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
> And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
> At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
> Talk of court news…

So that's Lear. Titus says:

> Come, take away. Lavinia, go with me:
> I'll to thy closet; and go read with thee
> Sad stories chanced in the times of old.
> Come, boy, and go with me: thy sight is young,
> And thou shalt read when mine begin to dazzle.

Both of these fathers have decided to take solace in something simple, like reading stories to his daughter, a simpler life is what they want. I noticed that while I was reading Lear, and I thought it sounded vaguely familiar! So I went back and found it, that same kind of thing. The point is that they both set off on these journeys, and they both come to the realisation that what they really want are the simple things in life. Or, indeed, that what was precious were the simpler things in life. There's a kind of a crossover between Lear and Titus.

As for *Festen*, well, he's perverse – you could say he's a monster, but I think he's a man who does monstrous things. Again, it's a dysfunctional family, but a perverted one. As for *Endgame*, of course, there's the famous essay by Jan Kott, *King Lear* or *Endgame*, where he compares the two plays. I must say, when I was doing Endgame I didn't see any great parallels between the two characters, other than the fact they both have this dynamic, the Fool / King Lear, Clov / Hamm relationship. Kott talks about absurd theatre as the beginning of a new form of tragedy, emerging in the grotesque. There are certain elements of the grotesque in *King Lear*, and in *Endgame*, but while I was playing Hamm I didn't feel any great connection with Lear. But I can see what Kott is talking about in the relationships between the Fool and Lear, and Clov and Hamm.

**Well, maybe more might emerge as you go along?**

Well, he came from a very academic point of view, and that's the trouble. I'm not a great man for planning out what they had for breakfast every day, or that kind of thing, because I work on instincts. For me, I find that

that's better, because I find that it opens things up to the audience. I find that if I'm going into research, detail, it's all internalised, and the audience aren't going to see that. Maybe we'll put it in the programme notes! It's worth looking at, but I personally feel that it's too academic for me. It belongs in a different place, and that's fine, but as a performer I just didn't feel it. I could talk all night about *Endgame*, and what I thought that was, but for now, for Lear, it didn't connect with me.

**As we mention Titus Andronicus and Festen – can you talk to us about your working relationship with Selina Cartmell, director of King Lear?**

I think we hit it off rather well because the same kind of things excite us. There's a shorthand. When we feel something isn't working, we just don't push it. I love working with her, because she enjoys invention, she enjoys creativity. And so do I. It's this effort to give something an edge, which maybe you haven't seen before, or maybe an audience hasn't quite seen this particular take on it. For the storm, we're hoping to do something surprising with it, where it won't be tricksy, or gimmicky, but it will definitely have a bit of an edge. And all these things in the play, like for example the gouging of Gloucester's eyeballs on stage. How do you do that? Without having people thinking that yes, there's some blood, and yes, they're just two plums coming out. I appreciate Selina's sense of invention.

When we get together and talk through a play, we enjoy the process, and have great sessions of going through the piece. We work through the whole play, the script, looking at scenes, breaking them down, and looking for different meanings. This is not just for the sake of being different, but excavating and unpacking things that might be a little bit dense… So it's very exciting – we're not digging holes in the same place that other productions might have done. I'm sure that everybody feels that they want to create something new, but I find there's a really good connection there. Especially after we did *Titus Andronicus*, where we had some very nice ideas, and some we didn't use. There was one point where I was crooning a soliloquy, like a singer. We thought it was a very interesting thing to do, and I was very interested to do it, but it seemed a bit tricksy, so we discarded it. Anything we do come up with, anything that is in some way different, or has this edge, if it doesn't fit comfortably, within the context of the play, we don't push it. So, there's that kind of connection. It's a very enjoyable, very rewarding experience. We did *Festen*, we did *Titus*, and we did Beckett's *Catastrophe*, and each time I think we brought something different – that's what I'm hoping for, for *King Lear*, that we're taking the same tack very early on. I'm really looking forward to it.

**Can you talk a bit about how you go about building a character?**

Because I work off my instincts, I've a certain almost abstract sense of what the character is about. I like to keep it that way – he's very sketchy in my mind right now. I'm not going to say he's this or he's that, because then that becomes boring for me and for everybody around me. If I'm saying oh, my character, he abuses children, that means I'll have to say it one way, or if my character has dementia, oh ok, then he has to walk around in odd socks… It'll become very boring very quickly. It's a much more organic process. As I go on, I'll put on some things, and then

maybe later discard them. For now, I only have a general idea. I certainly don't want it to be elements of others, some kind of patchwork blanket of old Lears. So I'll just keep going with it, scene by scene, and we will map out the journey, and see where I end up. It's almost like writing a novel – maybe plan out the structure, but you're not immediately sure where the actual textures and colour come from – it comes over your left shoulder somewhat. So that's why I like to keep things open, and then I come home and think "I have no clue where that idea came from, but wasn't it fantastic?! That'll really work, that's exciting, that's interesting to pursue." So I'm not very good at the research end of things, pinning down the journey in advance. I prefer to find my way through it, rather than map it out from Day One. That way you can surprise yourself, and then hopefully surprise the audience.

### Are there particular aspects of Lear that you are eager to explore or emphasise?

I'm not sure what Lear's motivation is right now. When I played Iago, in *Othello*, people would always ask about why he turned on *Othello*, wondering about his motivation – whether it was sexually driven, that he was attracted to him, or if he was mad – but the point is, no, he just didn't get the job. And that's it. People do those things. We all do certain things, and we're not sure why we did them – so I think it's more interesting to keep it organic, and let those themes come through. I haven't any plans right now.

### What are you excited about in this production?

Well, what a cast! We have a fantastic cast, just people to die for, the chance to work with them. Every single one of them. Working with Selina again is exciting, and the sense of spectacle, and of invention, that we hope to bring to it. I think there should be a great sense of spectacle about this, the whole landscape that Selina has planned for it. Personally, I am hoping to bring a Lear to the stage that people will say "I never thought of it like that before", or "that was different" or "that moved me" – or even "I thought you were crap!" – as long as it's an extreme reaction. Just so that people aren't saying "well done, you've done it again." The whole idea of this production, and the people on board, and the people we're going to be working with over this period, that's the most exciting thing for me.

### What should the audience look out for?

Deliberate mistakes?! No – just sit back, and see what the show offers you. Be prepared for the unexpected. I hope that that is what we can bring to this. Come assuming that you've never seen Lear before, and hopefully we won't disappoint you.

# PLAYING OSWALD

**Interview with Dylan Tighe**

*Shakespeare's plays are full of interesting character parts– how has it been, developing the role of Oswald?*

Its been great trying to get to the heart of Oswald and his motivations. Even small roles have an important significance and role in Shakespeare's plays and Oswald is no exception. In many ways he accepts a new order, a new way of behaving, a portent of new values which are on the rise with the fall of Lear. Even his clothes and attitude, as outlined by Kent, tell us alot about his audacity and manners. Oswald is a good actor, yet beneath his performance and bravado he is really a coward. This duality has been fun to explore, finding ways to show his different identities in different ways.

*Oswald is a particularly good player in the game of court politics– unlike Cordelia, he definitely doesn't lack that "glib and oily art". Is that fun to play?*

Oswald is a shrewd operator and knows how to act in different situations, like any clever politician… This is great fun to play with.

*In Oswald's defence, he can be considered a loyal servant – he refuses to betray Goneril. Is he more sinned against than sinning? What do you think are Oswald's politics?*

I think like most politicians he is a mercenary. He is enthusiastic about whatever regime offers him his best chance of favour and power. He sees his alliance with Goneril as his best ticket to a place in the new order, but as we see from his performance with Regan and his flattery

*King Lear*

of Edmund he is hedging his bets. I get the sense that Oswald could quickly turn his allegiance to whoever comes out on top and he is careful to publicise his virtues whenever he can. But as we see from his encounter with Kent, he has legs of jelly in the face of any real threat. In our own political climate I think Oswald is a very familiar kind of chancer.

**As a theatre maker, you've worked with language in many different ways – as a writer, translator, singer and of course as an actor. Does it have an impact on how you approach Shakespeare's language, which has challenges all of its own?**

All these areas help in achieving a clarity of expression which requires firstly a thorough understanding of the meaning of words and phrases and nuances of usage … often I'd improvise translations of the lines to myself into modern day english to help with getting to the bottom of what Shakespeare is saying – this helped me with clarity… I'm very interested in the way Shakespeare uses language, and especially how innovative his language is, the way he coins words and phrases. Shakespeare's language is extremely musical, and so it helps to have a musical air.

**Have there been any surprises for you, working on King Lear?**

I have been surprised by the philosophical depth of Shakespeare's insights and how relevant he is to our contemporary understanding of humanity. Also how much his work seems familiar from all kinds of contemporary … sometimes his plotting and pacing bears an uncanny resemblance to some of the most popular films and TV, like *The Wire* or *The Sopranos*. In many ways Shakespeare is like an Elizabethan *Sopranos*.

### What do you hope an audience will experience?

I hope the audience will experience the relevance of Shakespeare's ideas and insights to all our lives. I also hope they will experience a clarity of the language which will allow them to experience the beauty and freshness of Shakespeare's words.

*King Lear*

# PLAYING THE FOOL

**Interview with Hugh O'Conor**

*Can you tell us a little about how you came to be cast in the show?*

Well, it was a few months ago now. I auditioned for Selina – I had auditioned for her before, so I knew her a little bit, but I had never worked with her. I met her twice, and the second time I worked with Owen as well, and we rehearsed together. Then I got the gig, and we did about a week of development workshops, and I was in for about three days of that. We did a read-through, and then some workshops, looking at the set, and some rehearsals playing with different themes, talking things through with the designer, and the like. We've all gone off and worked on other things in the meantime, so now I'm excited to get started! In the meantime I've been doing a little bit of reading and research, but I'm eager for the momentum to start to build.

*It's quite interesting that Selina has cast you as a younger Fool. There's an interesting dynamic there, having a young man speak out against such a powerful king.*

Well, Lear is obviously failing in some way, in his mind, so… I think it's even a kind of father/son relationship that we are going to go for. I was working on a short film a while ago about autism, and I was working for a couple of months with kids with Aspergers syndrome, particularly. I was interested in that when I went to meet with Selina, and we talked about that. The idea that maybe the Fool is somehow gifted… someone with slight signs of autism, but that he can speak the truth no matter what.

*King Lear*

In the way that autistic kids can sometimes say whatever they're thinking, and not really think of the consequences. I thought that this could be an interesting way to go with the Fool, because he does speak these truths that nobody else is able to speak in public, and Lear respects him for that.

**He definitely does speak in a different language, he has his little songs and verses, in a play that is not nearly as musical as others... he gets this beautiful different register in which he speaks.**

Yes, that's very true. I know that there will be a little bit of singing, although certainly it will not be anything like a traditional jokey kind of fool. I really liked the recent Pan Pan production based loosely on the play, called *Everyone Is King Lear In His Own Home*. I thought that Judith Roddy was great in it. She did some lovely things in it that I thought "oh, I'd love to do that!" – and I'm wondering if maybe there is some little magic that I might be able to do. Something that might show that he has these little gifts. Judith played the Fool in that show, in a way, to Andrew Bennett's Lear. He's in the film I've been working on recently so I have been discussing it a lot with him. He gave me a copy of a book called *A Thousand Acres*, by Jane Smiley, which is a novel, an updated version of *King Lear*. I also love the old Kozintsev film of *King Lear*, which I'm going to watch again, and there are now various things online that you can find, interpretations of the Fool by people like John Hurt, and many others. It's not bad to watch them, so long as you don't steal too blatantly, of course!

**Are there any particular things that you want to explore, or that the audience should look out for in the way that you're starting to think about approaching this?**

Well, I know that Selina wants me to shave my head. I don't know whether that's all the way, or whether she'll let me keep some! But I'll shave it if I have to. It will look good, and Selina is such a visual director, it will be worth it. I'm really interested in developing this character. And maybe some kind of little thing with my hands, some little magic trick that I will have practiced, something that the audience can see.

**How do you go about creating a character?**

Well, it of course depends on the play, and on the director – some things don't require too much, and other things do. I imagine this will require a lot of development. I suppose just immersing yourself in the period, in the world that the story is taking place in. I love reading so I'll probably read up a lot anyway, just so that I can have all of that in my head, Once we get into rehearsals I think it will be clearer. We will probably inhabit it before we even have to ask the questions!

**Obviously we are speaking well in advance of that wonderful time when anything can happen, within the rehearsal room, when things start to emerge even by default.**

Exactly.

**Can you talk a little bit about working on Shakespeare? Is this your first Shakespearean role?**

I've never done Shakespeare before, which is another reason that I'm a bit scared but also really excited to work on this play. I'm a big fan of the plays, and I love watching them on film too, and I suppose the challenge is not to make it too impenetrable, because once we on the stage can understand it, we can make the audience understand it. I think it's more about the mood, and there's a lot of beautiful poetry in this play.

**You've mentioned that you're working on a number of film projects at the moment. Do you see a difference between working on screen or on stage? Are there particular challenges that you find as you go from one to the other?**

Well, it's probably not good to think of them as completely different things, because they are sort of the same thing at the end of the day- obviously in the theatre you have to speak a bit louder! But otherwise, you're working at very different scales. The Abbey isn't a massive room – it's big, but it's not huge, so it's not a terrifying place to play, but at the same time you obviously have to be heard and seen.

**Sure, it's a different scale, a different way of storytelling.**

Yes, indeed. And what makes it different every night is the audience. You get a different group every night, and so you get a different reaction every night. The vibe in the audience itself changes things, so that makes every show different. Otherwise it might feel crazy to be doing the same thing over and over.

### That way madness lies!

But then obviously in film, while you have the great thing of just having to do something great once, and then it's there forever, you don't really have an audience for that other than the director and the other actors. So you don't have the satisfaction of sharing the story and the performance in the same way. But I grew up doing films, and I'm very interested in photography, image and so on, so I love working on film. But I thought this production would be a really good opportunity to work in theatre – I love going to the theatre, but I don't always love doing it! But I think someone like Selina will make it very interesting and fun to do.

# PROD-
# UCTION

# DRESSING THE PLAY

Gaby Rooney designed each of the costumes that the characters wear on stage in play. Here you can see how every garment starts out – an idea in the mind of the costume designer, set on paper as a sketch.

King Lear as King

Lear dressed informally

Lear in the storm

The Fool

# DESIGNING THE SET

**Assistant director Maeve Stone in conversation with set designer Garance Marneur.**

The set design is a composite of a number of ideas. The cliffs of Dover are the most instantly recognisable element. Selina was interested in the white chalk of the cliffs, the rough, sharp, stark and crumbling aesthetic they allow in the overall set design, and the brittle, bone-like qualities of the material itself. There was a major collapse of part of the cliffs of Dover in March of last year and this added to the initial interest in using the cliffs as a major design element.

The chalk is used and finds its own 'language' within the play. For example, in Act I Scene I the map that Lear is dividing among his daughters is to be a large chunk of chalk, possibly something that could have been gouged out of the walls of the set. Also in this scene Lear uses the chalk to 'brand' or 'mark' Cordelia after she disappoints him in the love test. Beyond its aesthetic qualities, the chalk illustrates an interest in creating a production which is steeped in natural, primal power, paganistic ritual and ancient gods. There was a very early suggestion of using the chalk as currency but this idea was dropped for clarity's sake.

The second major idea at work in the set design is the pier and crown, both of which extend in dramatic way, out into the audience. The pier will protrude into the first two rows of audience and the crown – which is a large angular bar, suspended from the ceiling, which mirrors the shape of the front of Lear's crown and extends eight rows out above the audience. The concept behind these 'intrusions' into the audience space is linked

to Selina's experience of other productions of *King Lear* that kept the audience at arms length. Within this design is a desire to include the audience in the space of Lear's world by removing any distance. For this reason, several key moments of the play have been blocked on the pier; for example, the daughters make their speeches in the love test out to the audience from the pier, Kent in put in the stock on the pier, Lear's madness occurs on the pier surrounded by multiple fools and Lear's 'Howl' speech in the final scene also happens here. The pier is being built onto a lift and will move up and down during the play. This movement offers a good height to mirror certain aspects of the play such as Gloucester's scene at the Cliffs of Dover.

The extension of these set pieces into the audience and – in particular – the shape of the crown bar serves a second purpose. With truth, interpretation and madness playing such key roles in the play Selina is interested in how best she might suggest the space becoming a reflection of Lear's inner world. For example, the storm sequence includes the use of multiple fools, where his own madness is manifest and visible on stage. The stage, which is surrounded by a giant crown, might be seen as a physical landscape for Lear's own mind.

In the final scene of the play the two 'supporting' poles which connect the upper and lower levels fly up, representing the release of Lear, his transcendence to something higher and his escape from the weights and tragedy of earthly woes.

It's an incredibly ambitious design – one that matches the scale and ambition of the play itself. It is symbolic enough to allow for the myriad places represented throughout the play and specific enough to help create the aesthetic integrity of a non-realistic production. This version of Lear is deigned to occupy its own world and not a specific era from history.

Working with the split level allows for very quick scene changes and – in some instances – simultaneous scenes. It also mirrors the plot structure of the play; the main space being the main Lear plot and the upper level being the Edmund, Gloucester plot. I think in a play with such duplicitousness and betrayal, the upper level allows for clandestine listening and watching. It is also a very adaptable design that – in combination with the use of black gauzes – separates the space from castle to castle to heath to field.

It has been tricky to appreciate how this relationship between the upper and lower levels works so far in rehearsal as we have yet to move to Capel St. Rehearsal area that allows for it. We move there at the end of this week.

# THE DEER MASKS

**The masks were created by Eimear Murphy and David Flynn of the Abbey's Props Department.**

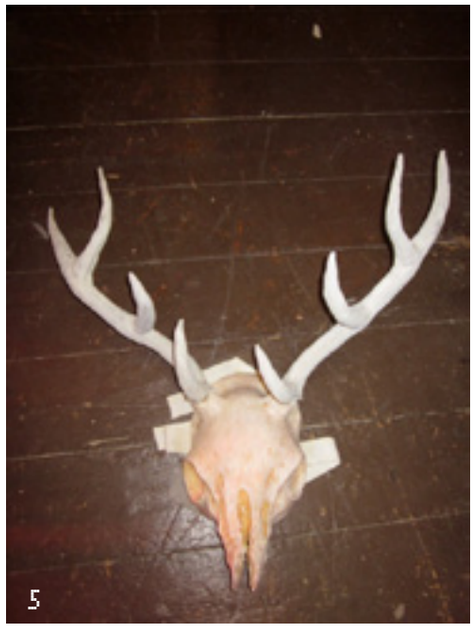
The deer masks are used in a number of scenes as part of the 'Knight' costume. The idea behind them is to create a paganistic, tribal 'pack' of knights, away from the 'Camelot' style of armour and chain mail that most audiences have come to expect. The bone connects back with the chalk of the set and the fact of them being masks allows them to act as disguises for certain characters. From an aesthetic point of view they are very striking within scenes and act as a constant reminder of the brutality and starkness of the world being created.


1


2


3


4


5


6

**1** Mould is filled with Latex
**2** David emptying the moulds
**3** A dry mask ready for work
**4** Wire and foam is added
**5** Foam is shaped into antlers
**6** The finished mask

# LEAR IN THE WORLD

**As part of any production at the Abbey the theatre's Community and Education Department explores how the plays themes resonate with the wider community. For *King Lear* director Selina Cartmell commented that she wanted to explore whether Lear's madness was partly to do with the onset of dementia and asked if we could supply an expert to talk to the cast about the topic. As part of our research we contacted Matthew Gibb Acting Director of Dementia Services Information and Development Centre at St James's Hospital, Dublin who came to the rehearsal room and outlined both some of the realities of living with dementia as well as dispelling the stigma that surrounds it.**

We also attended a conference on the Azure Project (Exploring the potential for greater participation of people with dementia in cultural settings in Ireland) and saw how an innovative program at the Museum of Modern Art in New York had pioneered the involvement of both dementia sufferers and their carers in engagement with the arts. Two of the biggest findings were firstly the importance of appealing to the imagination of those with dementia rather than relying on memory and secondly how enriching it was to involve carers as it meant the relationship was no longer based purely on routines and dependence.

The challenge for a theatre though is that unlike a picture that stays in front of you, our art form exists in time. After discussions with the Alzheimer's Society of Ireland we are now planning to take a scene from King Lear to six of their social clubs around Dublin and then encourage the participants to respond however they want. One challenge for the facilitators will be the need to dip back in and out of the scene to keep its impact fresh in the room. We are also staying in touch with the National Concert Hall whose Health & Harmony outreach music programme has been specially developed to meet the needs of those patients and their families living with dementia.

This is pioneering work for us and we hope it will result in a nationwide programme later in the year.

# DISCU-
# SSION

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### The Storm

- How did the staging of the storm make you feel?
- How did the storm draw you into Lear's world and his experience?
- How did the staging differ from how you imagined the storm?

### Characters

- Is King Lear a sympathetic character?
- Is Gloucester a sympathetic character?
- How do Lear's and Gloucester's experiences mirror each other?
- How do Lear's three daughters differ?
- What should we feel about Edmund? Should we love to hate him?
- Why does the Fool disappear so early in the play?
- Why does Kent refuse to assume any power at the end of the play?
- How should we feel about Cordelia's death at the play's conclusion?

### Themes

- Why is the theme of appearance vs. reality such an interesting idea to explore in the theatre?
- How does Shakespeare compromise the natural order in the play? How was this presented in the production?
- Director Selina Cartmell expressed a strong interest in the ancient, pagan energies of this play, and its religious world very different to that of Shakespeare's England. Are there similarities with today's world?
- Why do you think cruelty is such a strong theme in this play? Is it balanced with enough compassion?
- What do you consider the most significant theme in the play?

### Motifs & Ideas

- How does the idea of madness work in the play?
- How are madness and blindness compared and contrasted in the play?
- What is the role of women in this play?
- Discuss the impact of suffering on the characters in the play. How does it change them?
- Discuss the ideas of heredity and legitimacy in the play.

### Language

- How does Shakespeare use verse and prose to signify madness in the play?
- Characters refer to speech as a "glib and oily art" – what does this mean?
- What is the tone of this play?
- Never and Nothing are key words in this play. Is it a nihilist play, or is there any hope in it?

## The Production

- **How was seeing the production on the Abbey stage?**
- **How was it different to your expectations?**
- **How did the experience of seeing the play in the theatre differ from reading the play on the page?**
- **How did the design and visual world of the production affect your experience?**
- **What surprised you in the production?**

## Suggested Further Reading

*King Lear* (Arden, Third Edition) edited by R. A. Foakes

*King Lear* (RSC Edition) edited by Jonathan Bate & Eric Rasmussen

*Playing King Lear* by Oliver Ford Davies

*The Lear Diaries* by Brian Cox

*Shakespeare's King Lear: A Sourcebook* by Grace Ioppolo

*Shakespeare On Toast* by Ben Crystal

*The Golden Bough* by James Frazer

*A Thousand Suns* by Jane Smiley

# APPEN-DIX

# MOTIFS

**The motifs of the play are the systems of imagery and repeated elements that focus our attention and support the play's themes. They are presented here with a selection of key quotations from throughout the play.**

Madness
Parents and Children
Disguise
Sight, Eyes and Seeing
Betrayal and Treason

## MADNESS

### ACT I SCENE I

KENT

... be Kent unmannerly
When Lear is mad.
…To plainness honor's bound,
When majesty falls to folly.

### ACT I SCENE IV

LEAR

O Lear, Lear, Lear!
Beat at this gate, that let thy folly in
Striking his head.
And thy dear judgment out!

FOOL

Fools had never less grace in a year,
For wise men are grown foppish,
And know not how their wits to wear,
Their manners are so apish.

### ACT I SCENE V

LEAR

O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!
Keep me in temper, I would not be mad!

### ACT II SCENE II

CORNWALL

What, art thou mad, old fellow?

### ACT II SCENE IV

LEAR

I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad.

LEAR

Infirmity doth still neglect all office
Whereto our health is bound;
we are not ourselves
When nature, being oppressed,
commands the mind
To suffer with the body.

LEAR

I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
Storm and tempest.
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
Or ere I'll weep. O Fool, I shall go mad!

GONERIL

'Tis his own blame hath put himself from rest,
And must needs taste his folly.

### ACT III SCENE IV

LEAR

When the mind's free,
The body's delicate; this tempest in my mind
Doth from my senses take all feeling else,
Save what beats there—filial ingratitude!

GLOUCESTER

Thou sayest the King grows mad,
I'll tell thee, friend,
I am almost mad myself.

### ACT III SCENE II

LEAR

My wits begin to turn.

FOOL

Prithee, nuncle, tell me whether a madman be a gentleman or a yeoman?

LEAR

A king, a king!

FOOL

No, he's a yeoman that has a gentleman to his son; for he's a mad yeoman that sees his son a gentleman before him.

EDGAR

Who alone suffers, suffers most i' th' mind,
Leaving free things and happy shows behind,
But then the mind much sufferance doth o'erskip,
When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship.
How light and portable my pain seems now,
When that which makes me bend makes the King bow…

### ACT IV SCENE VI

EDGAR

I'll look no more,
Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight
Topple down headlong.

EDGAR

O, matter and impertinency mixed,
Reason in madness!

GLOUCESTER

The King is mad; how stiff is my vile sense
That I stand up, and have ingenious feeling
Of my huge sorrows! Better I were distract,
So should my thoughts be severed from my griefs,
And woes by wrong imaginations lose
The knowledge of themselves.

## PARENTS AND CHILDREN

### ACT I SCENE I

GONERIL

Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter,
Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty,
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor;
As much as child ever loved, or father found;
A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable:
Beyond all manner of so much I love you.

### ACT I SCENE II

EDMUND

But I have heard him oft maintain it to be fit that, sons at perfect age and fathers declined, the father should be as ward to the son, and the son manage his revenue.

### ACT I SCENE II

EDMUND

I promise you, the effects he writes of succeed unhappily, as of unnaturalness between the child and the parent, death, dearth, dissolutions of ancient amities, divisions in state, menaces and maledictions against king and nobles, needless diffidences, banishment of friends, dissipation of cohorts, nuptial breaches, and I know not what.

GLOUCESTER

Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction; there's son against father: the King falls from bias of nature; there's father against child.

## ACT I SCENE IV

LEAR

Ingratitude! thou marble-hearted fiend,
More hideous when thou show'st thee in a child
Than the sea-monster.

LEAR

Who is it that can tell me who I am?

FOOL

Lear's shadow.

LEAR

I would learn that, for by the marks of sovereignty,
Knowledge, and reason, I should be false persuaded
I had daughters.

FOOL

Which they will make an obedient father.

LEAR

How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child!

## ACT II SCENE IV

FOOL

Fathers that wear rags
Do make their children blind
But fathers that bear bags
Shall see their children kind.

LEAR

You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age, wretched in both.
If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,
And let not women's weapons, water-drops,
Stain my man's cheeks! No, you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both
That all the world shall—I will do such things—
What they are yet I know not, but they shall be
The terrors of the earth!

## ACT III SCENE II

LEAR

Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters.
I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;
I never gave you kingdom, called you children;
You owe me no subscription. Then let fall
Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man;
But yet I call you servile ministers,
That will with two pernicious daughters join
Your high-engendered battles 'gainst a head
So old and white as this. O, ho! 'tis foul.

## ACT III SCENE III

EDMUND

This seems a fair deserving, and must draw me
That which my father loses: no less than all.
The younger rises when the old doth fall.

## ACT III SCENE IV

LEAR

Death, traitor! nothing could have subdued nature
To such a lowness but his unkind daughters.
Is it the fashion, that discarded fathers
Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?

## ACT III SCENE VI

EDGAR

How light and portable my pain seems now,
When that which makes me bend makes the King bow:
He childed as I fathered! Tom, away!

## ACT IV SCENE II

ALBANY

What have you done?
Tigers, not daughters, what have you performed?
A father, and a gracious aged man,
Whose reverence even the head-lugged bear would lick,
Most barbarous, most degenerate, have you madded
Could my good brother suffer you to do it?
A man, a prince, by him so benefited!
If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
Send quickly down to tame these vild offenses,

It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep.

### ACT IV SCENE IV

CORDELIA

O dear father,
It is thy business that I go about;
Therefore great France
My mourning and importuned tears hath pitied.
No blown ambition doth our arms incite,
But love, dear love, and our aged father's right.

### ACT IV SCENE VI

LEAR

Let copulation thrive; for Gloucester's bastard son
Was kinder to his father than my daughters
Got 'tween the lawful sheets.

### ACT IV SCENE VII

CORDELIA

O you kind gods!
Cure this great breach in his abused nature,
Th' untuned and jarring senses, O, wind up
Of this child-changed father!

## DISGUISE

### ACT I SCENE I

CORDELIA

Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides,
Who covers faults, at last with shame derides.

### ACT III SCENE IV

LEAR

Thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha? here's three on 's are sophisticated. Thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here.

### ACT IV SCENE VI

LEAR

Thorough tattered clothes small vices do appear;
Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.

## SIGHT, EYES AND SEEING

### ACT I SCENE I

LEAR

Out of my sight!

KENT

See better, Lear, and let me still remain
The true blank of thine eye.

### ACT I SCENE IV

LEAR

Does any here know me? This is not Lear.
Does Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?

LEAR

Old fond eyes,
Beweep this cause again, I'll pluck ye out,
And cast you, with the waters that you loose,
To temper clay. Yea, is't come to this?

### ACT II SCENE IV

FOOL

Fathers that wear rags
Do make their children blind,

### ACT III SCENE I

GENTLEMAN

Contending with the fretful elements;
Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea,
Or swell the curled waters 'bove the main,
That things might change or cease, tears his white hair,
Which the impetuous blasts with eyeless rage
Catch in their fury, and make nothing of,
Strives in his little world of man to outscorn
The to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain

### ACT II SCENE IV

FOOL

All that follow their noses are led by their eyes but blind men

### ACT IV SCENE I

GLOUCESTER

I have no way, and therefore want no eyes;
I stumbled when I saw

### ACT IV SCENE VI

LEAR

What, art mad? A man may see how the world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears.

LEAR

Get thee glass eyes
And, like a scurvy politician, seem
To see things thou dost not…

## BETRAYAL AND TREASON

### ACT I SCENE II

GLOUCESTER

In palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twist son and father

GLOUCESTER

Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves

### ACT II SCENE IV

LEAR

If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely

### ACT IV SCENE II

OSWALD

Of Gloucester's treachery
And of the loyal service of his son

### ACT V SCENE III

ALBANY

Edmund, I arrest thee
On capital treason; and, in thine attaint
This gilded serpent

ALBANY

If none appear to prove upon thy person
Thy heinous, manifest and many treasons

***King Lear***
**Resource Pack 2013**

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