

PROSCENIUM

King Lear

By William Shakespeare

King Lear

Wednesday 20th October to Saturday 23rd October 2010
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

King Lear

William Shakespeare

Cast:

Lear, King of Britain	Colin Hickman
Gonerill }	Shirley Wootton
Regan } His daughters	Izzie Cartwright
Cordelia }	Christina You
Duke of Albany, husband to Gonerill.....	Alan Glover
Duke of Cornwall, husband to Regan.....	Paul Davis
King of France	Vince Eavis
Duke of Burgundy.....	Howard Lush
Earl of Kent.....	Mark Sutherland
Earl of Gloucester	Keith Bayross
Edgar, son of Gloucester	Robert Ewen
Edmund, bastard son of Gloucester.....	Charles Anthony
Oswald, Gonerill's steward.....	Michael Wells
Lear's Fool	Vince Eavis
Knight	Alan Bobroff
Gentleman	Michael Gerrard
Servant to Duke of Cornwall	Alan Bailey
Old man, tenant to Gloucester	Alan Bobroff
Doctor, attendant on Cordelia.....	Michael Gerrard
A Captain, follower of Edmund.....	Alan Bailey

Soldiers and messengers played by members of the cast.

Directed by.....	Crystal Anthony
Stage Manager	Anne Gerrard
Assisted by	Linda Hampson
Set designed by	Colin Tufnell
Properties.....	Margaret Rudolph
Costumes	Evelyn Moutrie
Sound compiled by	Charles Anthony
Lighting and Sound operated by	Compass Technicians

The Play

King Lear decides to abdicate and divide his kingdom between his three daughters. When Cordelia refuses to make a public declaration of her love for her father, she is disinherited and married to the King of France without a dowry. The Earl of Kent defends her and is banished by Lear. The two elder daughters, Gonerill and Regan, and their husbands, inherit the kingdom.

Gloucester, deceived by his bastard son Edmund, disinherits his legitimate son, Edgar, who is forced to go into hiding to save his life. Lear, now stripped of his power, quarrels with Gonerill and Regan about the conditions of his lodging in their households. In a rage he goes out into the stormy night, accompanied by his Fool and Kent, now disguised as a servant. They encounter Edgar, disguised as a mad beggar, Poor Tom. Gloucester goes to help Lear but is betrayed by Edmund and captured by Regan and Cornwall who, as a punishment, put out his eyes. Lear is taken secretly to Dover, where Cordelia has landed with a French army. The blind Gloucester meets, but doesn't recognise Edgar, who also leads him to Dover. Lear and Cordelia are reconciled but in the ensuing battle are captured by the sisters' forces.

The Sources

The story of King Lear and his daughters is referred to in a number of sources which were known to Shakespeare, including Holinshed's *Chronicles* and Spencer's *The Faerie Queene*, but the main source was an anonymous play registered for publication in 1594, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his Daughters, Gonerill, Regan and Cordelia*. Shakespeare tightens and intensifies the dramatic structure, omitting episodes of comic relief, adding the characters of the Fool and Oswald and creating the storm. However the story which Shakespeare adapted was a moral one where the good triumphed and the wicked were

punished: in Holinshed, Lear, Cordelia and the King of France win the battle and Lear reigns for two more years to be succeeded by Cordelia; and *The True History* ends with reconciliation:

Ah, my Cordelia, now I call to mind,
The modest answer, which I took unkind:
But now I see, I am no whit beguiled,
Thou lovedst me dearly, and as ought a child.

In none of the other texts does Lear go mad or Cordelia die. The uncompromising bleakness of Shakespeare's tragedy was too much for Restoration audiences and Nahum Tate changed the ending of the play in a version of 1681: Cordelia marries Edgar and they ascend the throne while Lear, Gloucester and Kent retire cheerfully to a life of 'calm reflection on our fortune's past'. Tate's version was performed regularly until 1823.

Date

Certainly after March 1603 when Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* was published, from which Shakespeare draws for Edgar's speeches when disguised as Poor Tom: and the play was performed on Boxing Day 1606, 'played before the King's majesty at Whitechapel' with Burbage as Lear and Armin the Fool. The most probable date is late 1605, when there was a lunar eclipse on 27 September and a lunar eclipse on 12 October, perhaps giving rise to Gloucester's 'these late eclipses of the sun and moon'.

Moreover, the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot three weeks later suggesting a country on the brink of civil strife, perhaps reflected in Gloucester's 'we have seen the best of our times' and Lear's more apocalyptic picture of universal chaos, 'all germans spill at once that make ingrateful man'. Gloucester blames the stars and is ridiculed by his more rational son, Edmund, but Lear sees that 'I have taken too little care' of the disintegration of his kingdom.

The 'Wicked' Daughters

Michael Ignatieff, in a 1997 article, seeks to look more sympathetically at Gonerill and Regan:

From his daughters' point of view he really is an impossible old man: violent, abusive, imperious by turns and then querulous, confused and pathetic. They are among literature's most deep-dyed villains and yet if we want to see the play anew, as if for the first time, we need to forget, as we watch the family quarrel rising to its full pitch of recrimination, that later they are going to bolt the doors on their father and conspire to blind his friend and defender. We need to recover the logic of their grievances. For they do have justification. They know they are unloved. Their father made the most elementary of parental mistakes: he played favourites and then compounded favouritism with arbitrariness, disowning the one he loved most and settling the estate on the daughters he loved least, in the expectation that their gratitude would allow him infinite license to abuse their hospitality.

Jane Smiley, in her novel *A Thousand Acres*, takes this idea a stage further; she transposes the Lear story to Mid-West America and tells the story from the point of view of the eldest daughter, Ginny. Her father, Larry, shares with Lear all his unreasonableness, selfishness, desire to retire but still keep the reins, fits of temper – but adds to this a slowly revealed incestuous relationship with his two eldest daughters when teenagers (a theme for which Jane Smiley hints at some not entirely convincing textual evidence).

Revisiting Lear

On the 22 January 1818 at the threshold of his greatest period as a poet, John Keats decided to revisit *King Lear*. In the sonnet he wrote before turning to Shakespeare's play Keats presents himself as a pilgrim about to undertake a testing and uncertain journey through a dark wood. *Lear* was a text he expected not so much to read as 'burn through'. To experience it again was to court a kind of personal annihilation, from which might spring a renewed and more powerfully creative life.

Chief poet, and ye clouds of Albion,
Begetter of our deep eternal theme:
When through the old oak forest I am gone,
Let me not wander in a barren dream.
But when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire.

Age

'I was determined to be heard in Trafalgar Square and I am sure that the effect was electric for I stood in jet blackness shot through with lightning. It was only later, when I came to play the part again, that I realised that such excess wasn't necessary. Age teaches you that. Age gives you the authority. Something well worth remembering when tackling the part: you do not quake and quaver and nod like a toy dog in the back of a car with age. Age is something else.'

Laurence Olivier

Alexander Goehr has written an opera, *Promised End*, based on *Lear*, with libretto by the distinguished Shakespearean scholar Frank Kermode. He writes:

'It's about old men who get it wrong when they have

power and influence – and then get into a mess. That's the reason I'm doing this opera. Being politically radical I have great scorn for who they are in the early part of the play. Frank and I were influenced by Foucault's idea of insanity, the notion that through madness you obtain a kind of wisdom. The whole trajectory of *Promised Land* leads to the scene between Lear and Gloucester, when one is mad and the other has no eyes. Through their misfortunes they learn something about humanity, about modesty. With his own death Lear is transfigured. And I love one of his last lines: 'undo this button'. Marvellous. I shall say that when it comes to my time. Schoenberg said 'Harmony', and I shall say 'Undo this button'.

Peter Hall is also much taken by the potency of this line, which he feels, spoken at the end of a tragedy, could have been written only by an English writer – possibly only by Shakespeare.

'Much Madness is divinest Sense'

Much Madness is divinest Sense –
To a discerning Eye –
Much Sense – the starkest Madness –
'Tis the Majority
In this, as All, prevail –
Assent – and you are sane –
Demur – you're straightaway dangerous –
And handled with a Chain –

Emily Dickinson

About Proscenium

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week, at the Harrow Arts Centre for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

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Chair : Crystal Anthony

Artistic Director : Michael Gerrard

Secretary : Izzie Cartwright

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