

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***King Lear*, presented by Shakespeare's Globe at the Folger Elizabethan Theatre,
Washington, D.C., September 5 - 21, 2014.**

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Directed by Bill Buckhurst. Design by Jonathan Fensom. Choreography by Georgina Lamb. Musical Composition by Alex Silverman. With Gwendolen Chatfield (Goneril/Curan), Bethan Cullinane (Cordelia/Fool), Joseph Marcell (King Lear), Alex Mugnaioni (Edgar/Duke of Cornwall/Duke of Burgundy), Bill Nash (Earl of Kent), Daniel Pirrie (Edmund/Oswald/King of France), Shanaya Rafaat (Regan), and John Stahl (Earl of Gloucester/Duke of Albany/Doctor).

Originally mounted at Shakespeare's Globe in London before playing across the United Kingdom and in Malta, this production of *King Lear* launched a three-month American tour. The performances were finely tuned, tightly blocked and well synched, and the pace was brisk even though the script was left more or less intact so that the evening lasted more than three-and-a-half hours. Buckhurst relied heavily upon what have become recognizable mainstays of the Globe style: pre-show banter between actors and the audience; houselights that remained up from start to finish; multiple song and dance routines; and extensive doubling. The results of this approach in realizing what might be Shakespeare's most ambitious tragedy were mixed, accentuating certain themes from the play without fully conveying its scale or pathos.

It was easy to imagine the ensemble raising the curtain at another venue the very next night since they brought little with them onto the boards. There was almost nothing to speak of in the way of scenery. Besides a few seats, only costumes and a handful of props adorned the stage, hanging on racks, plainly visible to the audience. Easy-to-reach accoutrements enabled the performers to change roles quickly, a necessity since every actor except for Joseph Marcell took on multiple parts, several of which were not listed in the credits. Such extensive doubling (and in some cases tripling and quadrupling)

kept with original theatrical practices, though only eight actors appeared here, fewer than the King's Men likely deployed when premiering *King Lear*. The changes between characters were, with a few exceptions, fluid and subtly executed. In some instances, the appearance of the same performer in several parts complemented the script's elaborate subplot: the households of Lear and Gloucester seemed remarkably close as actors glided back and forth between them. A standout in this display of dynamic range was the protean Daniel Pirrie. In addition to showing great versatility, he embodied Edmund with enough charisma, energy, and intelligence to make credible the bastard's threat to the throne. Pirrie's Edmund was a driven man, attempting to change not only his fortunes but also a world he felt unjust. But when Pirrie shifted into the character of Oswald—another individual hoping to adjust his position—the audience was asked to contemplate the perils of unchecked social mobility. Also engaging in jumps between roles was Bethan Cullinane, who, as both Cordelia and the Fool, visually linked the two truth tellers most beloved of Lear.

The constant shuffling of actors between characters drew attention to the interest in disguise evident throughout *King Lear*. Indeed, problems associated with concealment bookend the tragedy, from the early court scene in which Cordelia refuses to hide what she thinks, to the close, when Edgar (who has mastered the craft of deception out of necessity) urges everybody to 'Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say' (5.3.330).¹ In this light, the difficulty Bill Nash had in making Kent's transformation plausible was jarring. When Kent concealed his identity to remain close to Lear, Nash did almost nothing to modify his voice (or to 'other accents borrow') or to alter his bearing, and reference to a 'razed [...] likeness' made little sense when his beard actually persisted (1.4.1; 1.4.4). The facial hair was once again distracting when Oswald commented on Nash's grey beard, despite the fact that it was brown. Also disappointing was how little Gwendolen Chatfield and Shanaya Rafaat did to differentiate Goneril and Regan. They seemed stamped from the same mould, two Disney villainesses, both of them tall, dark, and cold. They were draped in comparable flowing gowns and sported elaborately coifed hairdos that suggested ostentation. At least the contrast between the pair and their younger sister was plain: the diminutive Cullinane wore a plain dress and kept her hair down as Cordelia.

As Lear, Joseph Marcell had dignity but little fire. This was a muted monarch, not touched with madness but merely failing as he slipped into what Jaques in *As You Like It* calls 'second childishness' (2.7.164). One wonders how this Lear held onto his throne for so long. When he threatened Kent, he brandished neither sword nor bow—as other

¹ Act, scene and line references refer to *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. by David Bevington (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

stage Lears have done—but instead waved about his crown. The gesture showed that he was accustomed to having his authority go unquestioned. After the storm, Lear's second crown was fashioned of brambles and thorns—not verdant wild flowers—signalling that we were to see the unseated patriarch as a martyr but at the same time undercutting the resonance of his earlier insights into his mortal limitations. Nevertheless, Marcell's portrayal of Lear as a victimized senior citizen did support the king's complaint that he was 'a man more sinned against than sinning' (3.2.59).

More than once the players endeavoured to energize the production with music. An opening song, accompanied by accordion, had a surprisingly upbeat tempo in view of its conclusion that 'Be you merry, be you gay [...] the wind will blow your soul away.' Later numbers included not only an ensemble interpretation of the Fool's 'the rain it raineth every day' but also a loud rendition of the seventeenth-century folk ballad 'Bedlam Boys' (3.2.77). The latter number felt forced, building to a false climax not in accord with the script, perhaps intended to sustain the engagement of the audience through intermission. At the end of the night, there was more awkward singing and dancing. The finale of *King Lear* has long been recognized as difficult to take: Johnson famously complained that he could not bear it. And Buckhurst did deliver an 'end' other than 'the promised' one, having Chatfield and Rafaat (still costumed as the recently-departed Goneril and Regan) trace chalk lines around the fallen Lear and Cordelia (5.3.268). It was not entirely clear who was to be cuffed at this crime scene—but the audience was not given time to reflect on the moment. Marcell and Cullinane rose up slowly, and then suddenly burst into song and dance. The rest of the troupe joined them, clamouring with accordion and cowbell, inviting the audience to clap along and become part of the revels. This afterward might have worked if the production had been playful in treating tragic material, like Mark Rylance's recent *Richard III* (also imported from the Globe). But here the music was tonally dissonant. Perhaps Buckhurst worried the audience would leave the theatre feeling down. However, if one is not at least a little melancholy following a presentation of *King Lear*, then something of this powerful drama has been lost in delivery.