

King Lear Notes 1-4-07

Why direct KING LEAR?

I have been fascinated with the play but only have seen it on stage twice. The first time was in Junior High School when our class took a trip to Stratford in Connecticut and saw a student matinee that starred Morris Carnofsky. My only memory of that was one of general boredom. I also recall that some of my fellow classmates were periodically throwing candy at the actors when the teacher wasn't looking. (Notice that I don't include myself in this group.) I am happy to tell you now; there will be no student matinees of our KING LEAR.

As I was thinking about this, I did remember something far more resonant. My mother had gone into the hospital for breast surgery a few days prior to this outing. My parents never gave me any warning of this event nor shared any of the details with me. What I recall most vividly is returning from the play and looking out the bus window to the line of waiting cars outside the school. There, I saw my mother in the car waiting. I remember that surge of elation in seeing her. I bound off the bus and made my way to the car and as I approached, I realized it wasn't my mother at all. It in no

way resembled my mother and it clearly was not our car. My mother was still in the hospital, but somehow, perhaps through the purest power of wishing, I saw her clear as day. Anyway, I am not sure why I am telling you this. Maybe it has something to do with the theme of sight and perception that runs through this play: What these characters choose to see and what they choose to ignore or deny. In any event, my mother ended up getting out of the hospital and making a full recovery. And I stayed away from KING LEAR until several years ago when I saw the Richard Eyre production in London. No one threw candy at the actors. I remember enjoying that production though I also seem to remember Ian Holm doing an awful lot of shouting. I went back and read the play again. It's like a Rorschach test. When I was younger and read it, I related to the daughters and sons; on recent readings it's definitely been the older characters I have identified with. I feel so privileged to be able to direct this play. Having just spent the time preparing for this production has given me endless rewards.

You don't do KING LEAR unless you have a King Lear. I have always wanted to work with Kevin and thank the gods that he is here today, tackling this role and this play; bringing his extraordinary gift for Shakespeare to this role; and for putting his trust in me. In fact, thanks to all of you for doing that.

For those of you who don't know, we did a two-week workshop of the play last spring. I thought we would be sitting around a table, exploring the text. I think by the second half of the second day, we were on our feet, and we never sat down. Kevin said, "Oh, let's just pretend we're at Williamstown and we're putting the play on in two weeks." It was a sobering experience; at once exhilarating and fascinating, and often totally daunting.

The Production

After having scratched the surface those two weeks there came the challenge of articulating a production. The play is set in pre-Christian times but doing the "animal skin" production didn't really interest me. The more I worked on the play the more contemporary it felt. To place it in some arbitrary place or period didn't feel right. I had a long chat with Bob Falls, who was also doing the play in Chicago. He explained his interest in the political overtones of the play. He chose to set the play in Eastern Europe in a world of chaos, from what I understand. What interested me the most about LEAR – and the play is about so many important themes which is one of the dangers when directing it – are the varying psychological battles being fought by these characters and how it relates to our own personal relationship to power and the struggles we have to control our lives and

those who are in it. And also our need for love from those around us in order to validate and define us.

I have been interested in the writings of Carl Jung for a long time. I wrote a play based on a case history of his, and also did a fair amount of reading on fairy tales and fables when working on INTO THE WOODS. I realized that I wanted to explore this play through Jungian thought. And for the record, I don't subscribe to everything Jung believed, but certainly find his writings stimulating and timeless.

In the shortest and most simplistic way, I'll name a few Jungian concepts that seem particularly apt to Lear, both the play and the character.

- Jung's thinking on the relationship of the conscious and the unconscious. Consciousness is roughly equivalent to "ego". That part of our personalities that we have in a sense constructed. How we behave, how we present ourselves to the world – the identity we work to project vs. the unconscious side of our being: the irrational urges; the feelings we block or sublimate in order to hold on to control.
- "Control" is a big word in LEAR. Jung believed that we share a "collective unconscious". That mythic part of ourselves that connects to all other humans both past and present. Our individual and unique truth. Our soul, in a sense.

- Jung talks about “individuation” – that path we take through life that helps us understand who we are. What is important in life. He believed that if you ignore this part of your life, your “ego” selves become arrogant and self-destructive and ultimately lead to an empty existence. Let’s just say the character of King Lear does not lead a self-examined life at the top of this play.

Jung talks about the “persona” – our conscious orientation; and our “shadow” – the more primitive side of our personality. The shadow is who we don’t want to be, but who we often are by virtue of the fact that we ignore or deny it. When the shadow knocks, self-destructive behavior often follows. Ego, persona and “king” are all the same thing. Regan says about Lear: “he hath ever but slenderly know himself.” There’s another saying: “man may ignore his unconscious, but it will not ignore him.” What are Lear’s and the other character’s values? From the beginning, Lear is measuring everything. His land, his daughter’s inheritance; his train of a hundred men; the number of days that Kent has before his banishment – this is how he (we) maintain order. How does he, does any of us, move into a world of nothingness? The place where there is no real measure, but a world

of feelings? You can't really quantify love and hate and fear and sadness. It's individual and personal.

In our American culture, right now, the gods are the guys with the money. They are the Wall Street and techno guys. Their money rules. They have their conglomerates – their holdings. They pick and influence the rulers. And in my opinion, not to generalize, but to generalize: these guys are soulless. Completely removed from the greater world in which they live. Free of meaningful values. Surrounded by people who tell them what they want to hear.

Likewise, I don't mean to ignore the political overtones of the play, not that I could. It's interesting at the beginning of the play. There really is no body politic. Lear is the kingdom. Lear holds this kingdom together. He is the celestial center around whom everyone orbits. He maintains the order of not only his universe, but everyone else's. Once he renounces that power, chaos ensues. Power and responsibility are important themes and can't help but have political resonance. You can't help but think of this play in terms of Iraq. Or the ego of Bush – a leader with absolutely no self-introspection who all but claims a divine calling to his actions. It's all there.

The LEAR story was not invented by Shakespeare. It was a well known myth of sorts, I believe. Maybe a play or two had already been

written on the subject. But by choosing to keep it pre-Christian, Shakespeare raises many interesting questions about good and evil, and free-will vs. determinism; the power of the gods vs. the power of the “self”.

I spoke with Jess and Heidi and Kevin about this idea of doing contemporary clothes and like the progression of the play, like Lear’s passage through “inviduation”, the clothes would lose their contemporary feeling. In fact, like a kind of “collective unconscious” we would have the feeling of moving back in time. As Lear and Edgar become more primitive, the clothing becomes more timeless for everyone. And layers begin to peel away as knowledge and experience grow.

Likewise the set: beginning with a feeling of supreme order; wealth; an environment that has tamed nature and as the story progresses, as nature begins to take its toll on man, the world is replaced by disorder. Straight lines become blurred. And again, we begin peeling away the layers.

And light will become an important element. When there is sun and when there is darkness: the world of shadows and the dark of night where characters retreat.

And music. There is such a wonderful moment at the end of the play where Lear is ill and the doctor calls for music. Music was believed to be a strong healing force. Music can touch the soul in an ineffable way that even

the most beautiful of poetry cannot. I imagine we will have both very lyrical threads along with dissident and almost primal rhythms at times.

And there are three actors who are not with us today and will be joining us later in the process. One thing I knew very early on is that I wanted to see Goneril, Regan and Cordelia as children. Because this play is often reduced to very obvious archetypes', I am going to push us to find the good in the bad characters and the bad in the good ones. To take the absolutes out of the equation. Were Goneril and Regan born evil? I don't think so. In another era, Goneril would be Queen. What does power do to these three? How did Lear treat them when they were small? Clearly he never saw their potential for evil. I want these three little girls to be manifestations of Lear's memory and imagination. Pure and perfect and always beautiful.

The play will begin with the three girls creating the map of the kingdom out of sand. The world they will inherit. I am also going to create a prologue that will run into Kent and Gloucester's first scene. Something strictly visual and musical that will set up all of the characters of the play. Their hierarchy. Their relationship to one another and to Lear. Most likely a very stylized kind of processional.

Ideas abound. You could do nothing but discuss this play for the next five weeks. There is an endless body of research written about LEAR. We can run the risk of being swallowed up by that. Most importantly, we have to tell a story. We have to tell it clearly. We can't get in the way of the words. We have to personalize what we do and make it important to us.

I think if we succeed we will take people to a place where they are totally connected emotionally to these characters and their story: That the experience is not abstract, but immediate and personal. The Anspacher is the perfect space. It is already immediate. The audience is already part of the play. I know that we will do an intelligent and clear version of the play. I also want to create a deeply felt, emotionally intense experience that the audience carries into their dreams.

Process

We will begin around the table, reading the play slowly and discussing it. Please, do not be shy about asking questions. We have an extraordinary dramaturge in John Dias. You have to understand what is being said. We have to understand the very complicated plot. Don't be shy. It's a dense piece of writing and it is first and foremost our job to make it simple and clear to ourselves and our audience.

We are in this room for the rest of the week, and then we move to another space. When we are ready we will get on our feet. I work quickly. I will have a blocking plan for every scene. It will obviously change, but it will give us a place to start. Once you are clear with the text, it will be helpful to get off book. We don't have an endless amount of time.

I am begging for time on the set. Even for just an hour or two, so we can orient ourselves. I would also like to incorporate the stage combat as soon as possible and costume items. We have to work quickly on this schedule.

This play seems to speak to the highest and lowest forms of human behavior, the gentlest and the most violent behavior we are capable of; the greatest passions man can exhibit. The play shows us degrees of unimaginable suffering and asks the question: can there be redemption? The ending is unforgiving. And yet there is a truth to this story that if we tell it well, will speak to everyone that watches it.