



CAST-WRITTEN REFLECTIONS ON KING LEAR 2017

Kildare Youth Theatre staged King Lear in early May 2017. The cast was composed mostly of young people who were studying it in Senior Cycle English in secondary school. The reflections below speak about what kinds of learning they had, spending 7 months in the world of Shakespeare's old king. They talk about the challenges and the rewards of undertaking such an adventure.

Doug (17) – Lessons from Gloucester

Performing *King Lear* with Kildare Youth Theatre was a wonderfully intriguing experience and lots of fun. Especially in the performances themselves, interacting with the other characters and playing out each scene was enjoyable, challenging and ultimately quite emotional. Some of the moments during the play I found myself lost in a sense of bliss and satisfaction which to me sums up both my appeal for the play *King Lear* and my appeal for acting in general.

Challenges

For me, unlike many of the other lead actors in *King Lear*, this was pretty much my first time appearing in a major play for more than a couple scenes, so obviously there were some challenges in the performance. I'm usually good with dealing with nerves so that wasn't much of a problem. However I did find performing in front of the schools (day-time shows) a lot more daunting than performing for the general public (evening shows). One challenge I did find was mustering up the adequate energy for my character in each scene. Perhaps it was the nerves or maybe the focus on getting the lines right that made my acting less energetic than it should be, but I'd like to think that by the third show my energy levels were constant and suitable for the part. Other than that just general naturalisation and volume were certain challenges I tried my best to overcome for the performance.

Life lessons

I think from a philosophical view, being a part of *King Lear* was extremely insightful and educational. I remember one rehearsal for my final scene, instead of acting it out, Peter (the director), Elliot (playing Edgar) and I spent over an hour discussing the imagery used in that specific scene i.e. 'Ripeness is all'. I thought about the pieces of information I took from this afterward, about evolution and its impact on the human psyche through the years, about the similarities in society between Shakespeare's time and modern day and these, combined with other thoughts, led to the scene we made which I felt showed the human condition at its weakest and most vulnerable.

Making a new image for Gloucester

The hesitation my character showed at the start of his last scene (Act 5, Scene 2) was due to a final fight against the lurking depression that ultimately got the better of him. You can watch part of it here: <https://vimeo.com/221750951>

The pacing around the circle of the spotlight indicated to me the heavily defensive personality of Gloucester, of how he saw his place as a protector and watchman, who always searched the darkness but could never truly step out of the light.

During the play we see some of Gloucester's finest moments, how he stayed true to his beliefs and disobeyed the duke to save his King. This marked a change in the personality of Gloucester, which combined with his blinding created the crazed but fulfilled character we saw at the end. As clothes and material objects were removed during the final scene, we see the breakdown of Gloucester and his final submission to the depression and bleakness that had terrorized him as the play progressed. The wrapping of the cloth around the head and the retreat to foetal position also showed me, along with the audience I hope, how tragic and plagued Gloucester's thoughts had become.

Life lessons

What I learned most from *King Lear* was how fragile and precious the mental wellbeing of a person is. From the scene I just described, along with Gloucester's interactions with the mad King and Poor Tom, I guessed that mental health was a topic spoken about in Shakespeare's time and I believe it should be at the forefront of medical attention today.

Obviously society in Shakespeare's time is very different when compared with present day. However there were some aspects that have remained through the years. The ladder of power is still evident around the modern world - maybe not so much in Ireland as a result of a sustained democratic government – but certainly elsewhere. Lear's scene regarding 'is man no more than this' symbolises the realisation that we, as members of society, are no more special than any other member and that when the luxuries and false perceptions are removed, it comes down to the fact that our actions are what make us.

A gift

I feel *King Lear* as a play captures the essence of what life is really about (as cliché as it sounds). Lear's fall from ultimate power to a morally blind and mentally insane old man shows how delicate our body, mind and soul are and how easy it is for us to lose track of our values. Poor Tom is the epitome of a 'good guy'. After being declared an outlaw by his own father he strives to make the best out of his misfortunes, even helping his father through his phase of depression.

Outside of the actual play, performing on stage with the rest of the cast made me as an actor realise that art, creativity and imagination is what drives me and that whatever I do in the future, it will be based around this area. Ultimately, Shakespeare was a genius and it is a pleasure recreating his art.

Charlie (17) - Fooling Around (Playing the Fool)

The most challenging aspect for me in this process was playing the character of the Fool: adapting his mannerisms, understanding his thought, learning his strange metre, trying to follow his wildly sprawling change of thoughts, figuring out how to sing on stage, whilst all the while trying not to overdo it, and play the idea of "eccentric jester" or overly exuberant joker. Shakespeare in general is difficult, yet the Fool manages to achieve a whole other plane of difficulty.

I must admit, I didn't truly enjoy the play until the last day, the last two shows, where I felt like I truly slipped into character. When I finally entered the mind of the Fool and was able to perform him, *sans* self-consciousness, I discovered that he is a truly spectacular character and really does become great fun. His dark, humorous lines and his unique opinions make him exactly that - a unique character to act, and one I (eventually) really enjoyed.

In some sad ways I can understand the unfortunate, yet not-often-revealed, plight of the Fool. Playing him showed me how sad his undisclosed fate truly is. For us we chose to suggest that the Fool abandoned England or killed himself after being 'replaced' in Lear's company by Edgar, or Poor Tom.

Despite being unbreakably loyal to him, the Fool was abandoned by the insane Lear. He was there when Lear needed him, but all of a sudden, he was replaced instantaneously with a similar minded man. The Fool was then nothing without Lear, and after he was replaced in Act 3, he never shows again.

Thinking about the play as a whole I find it ironic how all the feuding families are like a more violent, brutal metaphor for modern-day politics. Instead of swords and poison, those in power fight with each other using legislation nowadays. Instead of feuding families, we have feuding countries and political parties.

Despite the play's age, I still think Lear's decline still holds relevance to today. In Act 1, in what is quite an undervalued line, the Fool says directly to Lear "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise". This sums up King Lear, and anyone in his position. Being wise is above having power, respect or money. Having a sense of consciousness and morality, as well as being able to see the world and it's people around you is extremely important, and sadly not commonplace.

Lee (19) – What I learned performing Albany

For a lot of people performing a Shakespeare play, the main difficulty is of course the comprehension of the lines. For me on the other hand I found the vocal delivery of the lines to be one of the more difficult aspects.

I had already studied *King Lear* for my Leaving Cert which was less than a year before I was cast as Albany so I had knowledge of the layout of the plot, the characters, the motivations and so forth, so I had an advantage over some of my co-actors. But when it came to actually reading the lines and performing them, that's when the difficulties started to arise.

When performing a contemporary play with a colloquial use of vocabulary, movements come often naturally as chances are the actor knows the type of mood or scenario the character is in but when one is performing a character in Shakespeare, questions suddenly begin to pop up. I knew what my lines meant but how would I say them? Even with a director by my side, I kept asking myself ; "Okay so how would someone like a lord get into a bitter argument with his cheating wife while calling forward the heavens to "send down their visible spirits" without coming off as over the top?

The character of Albany was difficult. Despite being only in five scenes, he is one of three main characters who change the most (the others being Lear and Gloucester). Unlike Lear and Gloucester whose character development is shown progressively on-stage, Albany's is not. He's nowhere to be seen in Act 2 and 3, the acts where a majority of the impacting events go down. When he returns in Act 4, he's almost a completely different character, and performing a character who has just had a dump of information on him and has a completely different personality due to events he was not around for proved to be quite a challenge.

Still, I enjoyed performing in a time period that for a change wasn't my own. It was interesting delving into a part of history that I had little prior knowledge of. Performing with friends where we all play characters who are in actuality nothing like ourselves allowed for some compelling and comedic outcomes - for example, seeing one of the most down-to-earth people I know suddenly strip off his shirt and become a rambling lunatic like Poor Tom was strange. I myself enjoyed playing a character with a commanding presence, especially Act 5 scene 1 where I practically preached a war cry to an entire audience.

I noticed that particularly with Albany, the majority of his decisions are in fact based on what the heavens decree. Albany seems to be afraid of being left by himself on certain important occasions (which is ironically what exactly happens at the conclusion of the play) On numerous occasions he prays to those above which tends to blind him for the matters at hand. A good example is Act 4 scene 2 where upon learning of Gloucester's torture and disfigurement, he prays to the heavens instead of acting hastily.

No character is flawless in this play just like real people and a majority of characters featured are rather unlikable. An aspect I noticed however is that throughout the play, those who are brought down to the earth (Lear, Kent and Edgar) are the ones who see the true side of life. Even Lear himself in his crazed state, sees the truth, while others higher up are blinded. Those portrayed as rich and high class are seen as antagonistic and ironically caveman-like. It's in these sections where a majority of the atrocities are committed, the most famous being the blinding of Gloucester.

Characters such as Regan and Goneril riff off others: on the outside they are threatening figures with power and authority, but on the inside they may just be the weakest characters in the entire play. When Goneril is exposed by her husband she takes her own life before taking her sister's whom she sees as a true threat. Both seem to depend of the power of others, Goneril on Edmund and Regan on whoever she can find after the death of Cornwall.

We are to each our own, we have our own agendas and desires. In King Lear, characters seem to reflect this statement to an extent. It amazed me to understand how far some people will go to claim their prize. The main prize in King Lear is of course power. At the start however, unlike other stories where characters have no power and rise to the top, here the majority of the main characters already have tremendous power. The fact that they desire more than they already have and the horrendous deeds they commit to claim the golden prize is absolutely shocking to me.

I learned that our lives are never really known completely, we are constantly finding out new aspects about our personalities. Take for example Lear himself: despite the fact that he's reaching his final years, it's in this time that he learns the most about who he exactly is.

Colin (16) – Oswald Dreams of Betterment

I extremely enjoyed the atmosphere and the buzz on stage, as all actors do, but I also enjoyed the drama and tension created through the piece. Playing off of other people's emotions played a large part in the formation of my character through rehearsal and during performance. What I enjoyed most of all was the atmosphere between the cast and I think that is what really made this performance such a success.

In playing Oswald, I realised once and for all that single mindedness will get you nowhere in life. Oswald cared only for one person, Goneril, and this ultimately resulted in his death. I realised that if you cannot see past what is directly in front of you and have your own opinions, then no good can come.

I was also reminded of uprising, and of the fall of a dictatorship during this play. It quite reminded me of the French revolution, with someone hoping to tear down the hierarchy (Goneril and Regan) who ultimately appear to be evil themselves. It was clear too that family isn't always perfect. This is only one correlation that can be drawn from this society to our own, but it was a clear one to me.

I was struck by the diverse characters in the play and it made me see the real diversity of the population of the world today, how one mishap can destroy so many lives.

Elliot (17) – Playing Edgar's Many Roles

One challenge for me as an actor, was trying to grasp the several different personas of Edgar, be it the physicality or the accents. He (Edgar) is quite dull at the beginning of the play and it is difficult to get a grasp of the character from the first 2 acts. There are only slight indications as to what kind of person he is, and these are what people say about him or how they react to him (mainly Edmund and Gloucester). He only becomes interesting when he transforms into Poor Tom. Then do we see the cleverness of Edgar, how he can trick everyone and be in close proximity to people he once knew without getting caught.

I did find on watching other performances of Edgar that he is an incredibly difficult character to get right. People tend to remember Edmund or Lear or The Fool, yet Edgar does do an incredible amount which is forgotten. That for me was the biggest challenge, to make my interpretation of Edgar be memorable, to plant a thought into the viewers minds like "Actually, Edgar is quite a good character, you know." The final challenge for me as a young actor: To show to people I could act as a profession in my adult years. Whether I succeeded? Who knows, it's a nice thought.

Looking back on the process I loved the sheer energy of it all. When you get with a group of actors who are as energetic and who love their craft, nothing beats it. Being in such a tight ensemble bumps up my performance energy too, and the play or scene leaps off the stage. Particularly on the last night, everyone completely upped their game, I felt the energy, and so did the audience. That is another enjoyment. My job as an actor is to entertain, so when the audience laugh or cry or are completely hooked by a particular moment, it means my job has been done. There's nothing more gratifying.

Having lived with the play for 7 months I can say that I'm now a raging existentialist. I'm starting to read up on it too. We encountered this idea in King Lear's lines "Unaccommodated man" and Edgar's lines "Men must endure their going hence...". It makes so much more sense to me. The aesthetic of the play also enhanced that ideology. How through tattered clothes, corruption, betrayal, there can still be beauty. That even death (Gloucester's death) is beautiful, *when* the time is right to depart of course. It showed me that all mysteries of life are mysteries purposefully and that's what's so beautiful and intriguing about life.

I learned that simply, trust should not be played with. Anyone could screw you over at any minute, but you are the fool (no pun intended) as you gave away your trust easily. Some people (Edgar, The Fool) tried to help the people who were foolish (Gloucester, Lear). One line I loved touching on this was The Fool's to Lear. Something along the lines of "...because you became old before you were wise". Powerful stuff that. The corruption in this came from the young making innocent yet foolish mistakes (Cordelia) and the old thinking that because they're old, respect and wisdom is a cert. It is not.

But ultimately I learned that existentialism is everything. That is all.

Graham (20) – Changing into Lear

There were certain things I had to change about my body to fit the role of King Lear, the most notable being the beard ('art not ashamed to look upon this beard?' became a joke in the first rehearsals). I changed my diet to allow for more protein to encourage hair growth. I also paid particular attention to

my feet and posture, and learned to control both. This was a challenge in the beginning as I have always played fast paced characters who leap and bound across the stage. King Lear pushed for me to tone this down and be an eighty-year-old man. Learning lines was also a challenge, but I stick by with my decision to learn them from the beginning.

I enjoyed all elements of the play from rehearsing to staging it. The cast were a joy to work with and made coming to rehearsals worth it. Even if we only got half of what we intended to get done in the rehearsal, what we did was good. The role of King Lear was fun to play too, challenging as it was. There was a general love from all cast members for their parts.

Performing Lear taught me many things. It taught me not to look back in anger at some things that may have happened in my life as being bitter about it won't get me any further away from it. You can resent a person for the rest of your life, shun them, berate them, but that doesn't benefit you in any regard. It may feel good at the time to indulge in the anger and let loose, but ultimately you end up scarring yourself more.

I understood that Capitalism is a plague and no longer has a place in society. The rich get richer but the poor remain poor – greed corrupts but power is key. Those with power and wealth command the nest, those with wealth and no power follow blindly. Those who have power but have no wealth have no word and those with no power and no wealth are subject to all.

And finally I came to realise that if all else fails and you are left stranded, you are your own best friend. Even in madness, King Lear found himself and became his own friend. In madness lies wisdom: everything a madman says to you may appear crazy and absurd but to the madman makes perfect sense. The world is quick to shout that a person is mad for seeing in an alternative light just as they see autistic children to be slow. You can't test the intelligence of a fish by its ability to climb a tree.