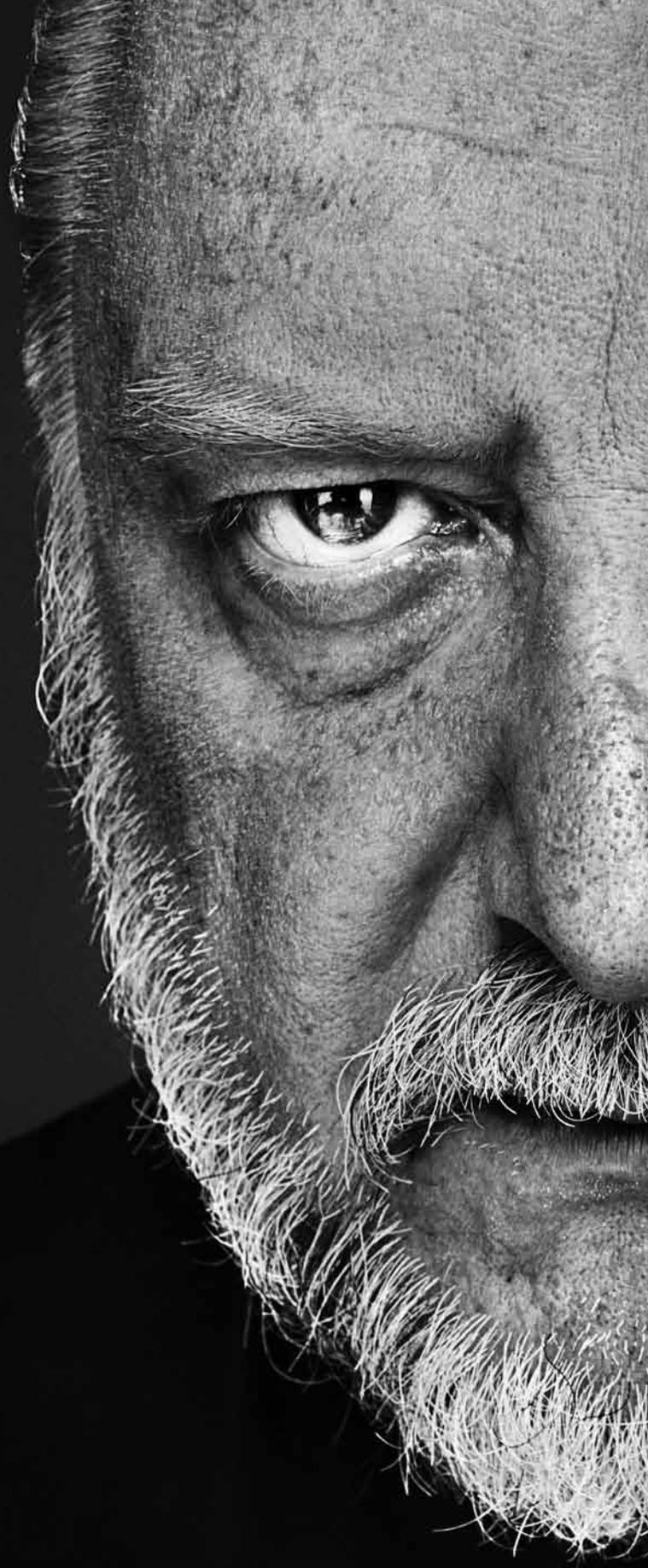


**National
Theatre
Learning**

King Lear

by William Shakespeare

**Background pack:
rehearsal diaries**



King Lear

Background pack: rehearsal diaries

The National's production

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Rehearsal diary

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Welcome to the rehearsal diaries for the National Theatre production of *King Lear*.

Tim Hoare, staff director on Sam Mendes' production in the Olivier Theatre, has documented the rehearsal process from the first day to the first performance.

Over the period of time that *King Lear* plays at the National Theatre, the content will expand into a background pack, including interviews with members of the creative team, glimpses at some of the production's technical challenges and solutions, short essays and, for teachers and schools, some specially-commissioned classroom resources.

Through imaginative and innovative in-school, on-site and online activities, NT Learning opens up the National's repertoire, artistry, skills, and the building itself, enabling participants of all ages to discover new skills and experience the excitement of theatre-making. If you've enjoyed this background pack or would like to talk to us about getting involved in NT Learning activities, please contact us on learning@nationaltheatre.org.uk or **020 7452 3388**.

Jane Ball
Programme Manager, NT Learning
January 2014

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The photographs used in this resource were taken by **Mark Douet**, except for the front cover photo by **Paul Stuart**

Further production details:
nationaltheatre.org.uk



Click on this arrow, if you see it, for more online resources.

The National Theatre production of *King Lear*

Characters, in order of speaking:

The Earl of Kent **STANLEY TOWNSEND**
The Earl of Gloucester **STEPHEN BOXER**
Edmund, *bastard son to Gloucester* **SAM TROUGHTON**
Lear, *King of Britain* **SIMON RUSSELL BEALE**
Goneril, *Lear's eldest daughter* **KATE FLEETWOOD**
Regan, *Lear's second daughter* **ANNA MAXWELL MARTIN**
Cordelia, *Lear's youngest daughter* **OLIVIA VINALL**
The Duke of Albany, *Goneril's husband* **RICHARD CLOTHIER**
The Duke of Cornwall, *Regan's husband* **MICHAEL NARDONE**
King of France **ROSS WAITON**
The Duke of Burgundy, *suitor to Cordelia* **PAAPA ESSIEDU**
Edgar, *son to Gloucester* **TOM BROOKE**
Oswald, *Goneril's steward* **SIMON MANYONDA**
The Fool **ADRIAN SCARBOROUGH**
An Officer **GARY POWELL**
Curan **DANIEL MILLAR**
Cornwall's Servant **JONATHAN DRYDEN TAYLOR**
Old Man **COLIN HAIGH**
Doctor **HANNAH STOKELY**
Nurse **CASSIE BRADLEY**
Captain **ROSS WAITON**

Additional Company

SAIF AL-WARITH, JON ALAGOA, WAJ ALI, NATHAN AMPOFO, PAUL ANTHONY, JAMES S BARNES, MAT BETTERIDGE, NAVINDER BHATTI, JONATHAN BLAKELEY, KARL BROWN, SEBASTIAN CANGIGLIA, MATTHEW DARCY, AMIT DHUT, NOOR DILLAN-KNIGHT, DEXTER JERMAINE FLANDERS, MATT GARDNER, CAMERON HARRIS, JOHN HASTINGS, JAMES INKSON, KOJO KAMARA, OWEN LINDSAY, REBECCA MEYER, SHANE NOONE, JOSEPH OGELEKA, GARY PHOENIX, JAVIER RASERO, ANTHONY STEELE, ANDREW THOMPSON, MAXWELL TYLER and GRACE WILLIS

Understudies

Cassie Bradley (Cordelia/Doctor)
Jonathan Dryden Taylor (Albany/Old Man/Nurse/Curan/Captain)
Paapa Essiedu (Edmund/Oswald/Officer)
Colin Haigh (Lear)
Simon Manyonda (Edgar)
Daniel Millar (France/Burgundy/Fool)
Gary Powell (Gloucester)
Hannah Stokely (Goneril/Regan)
Ross Waiton (Cornwall/Kent/Cornwall's Servant)

Director **SAM MENDES**
Designer **ANTHONY WARD**
Lighting Designer **PAUL PYANT**
Music **PADDY CUNNEEN**
Projection Designer **JON DRISCOLL**
Fight Director **TERRY KING**
Sound Designer **PAUL ARDITTI**
Company Voice Work **JEANNETTE NELSON**
Staff Director **TIM HOARE**

Production Photographer **MARK DOUET**



This production opened in the National's
Olivier Theatre on **23 January 2014**

Above: Simon Russell Beale in rehearsal for King Lear
PHOTOS: MARK DOUET

Rehearsal diary: week one

written by staff director, Tim Hoare

Rehearsals always begin with a chance for everyone involved in the production and the National Theatre to meet and greet one another, which involves literally scores of people introducing themselves! Even then, with the acting company, creative team and



permanent theatre staff, we will still be an even bigger company once we've cast the thirty extras who will make up the armies and crowds needed for the play. The NT's Director, Nicholas Hytner, and our director Sam Mendes make short speeches welcoming everyone. Among many reasons why this production is special is that it is the first time in fifteen years that Sam Mendes has directed at the National Theatre (his last play here was *Othello* in 1997), and his ninth collaboration with actor Simon Russell Beale.

As often happens on a first day, the first thing we do after we've been left to get started is sit down and read through the script, often with our creative team sitting in to listen. This team includes our set and costume designer (Anthony Ward), lighting designer (Paul Pyant), sound designer (Paul Arditti), composer (Paddy Cunneen), projection designer (Jon Driscoll), casting director (Wendy Spon) and voice coach (Jeannette Nelson).

The read-through gives Sam a chance to listen to the edit of the play that he has prepared before rehearsals, and it becomes clear by the end that we are off to a very good start. All of the actors have already put a lot of thought into their parts, and hearing the company all assembled for the first time allows me to see that Sam and Wendy's casting decisions have been spot-on. The casting of a play like *King Lear* needs careful thought. Decisions must be made about how similar half-brothers like Edgar and Edmund must seem, or about the differences between the three sisters and their husbands, and about the gender and age of the Fool.

Hearing the language out loud is an amazing experience, and in the hands of great actors often feels like a completely new one too, no matter how familiar you might be with the text. Critics of *King Lear* like Charles Lamb once argued that, although they thought it was a great piece of literature, they felt it was not a stage-worthy play. Feeling the effect of it even read aloud on that first day made me certain that these critics were wrong.

After the read-through we sit around the model-box for the unveiling of the design that Sam and Anthony have been working on. It is an exciting moment for the actors, who are often party to only some of the ideas for setting the play before the first day. While describing the design, Sam also gives us an insight of his vision for the play, or the roadmap for the themes and ideas that he wants to explore in rehearsal. We will look at the concept of parenthood and childhood, the theme of homelessness, the way in which humans become defined by their possessions, and the existence of glimmers of hope in periods of great darkness. Our production will seek to give the play a loosely 20th-century setting, without making it specifically about any one particular historical period or place. Sam wants to show that a 400-year-old play like *King Lear* is still vividly alive and relevant to a modern audience, by making it as immediate and accessible as possible.

King
Lear

Rehearsal Call

Monday 11th November 2013

Rehearsal Room 1

10.00am	<u>Meet and Greet</u>	Full Company	
	then <u>Read Through and Model Showing</u>		
1.00pm	LUNCH		
2.00pm	<u>Continue from the morning</u>	Full Company	
5.00pm	CALL ENDS		

Measurements in Costume (Level 4)
with Sarah Mercer and Barbara Fuchs

9.30am	Mr Millar
9.40am	Mr Waiton
9.45am	Mr Russell Beale
9.50am	Mr Townsend
9.55am	Mr Haigh
9.45am Miss Stokely	
9.50am	Miss Maxwell Martin
10.00am TO FINISH	
5.00pm Mr Boxer	
5.05pm	Mr Scarborough
5.10pm	Mr Brooke
5.15pm	Mr Troughton
5.20pm	Mr Clothier
5.30pm	Mr Essiedu
5.35pm	Mr Manyonda
5.40pm	Mr Powell
5.50pm	Mr Nardone
6.00pm	TO FINISH
5.20pm Miss Fleetwood	
5.25pm	Miss Bradley
5.35pm	TO FINISH

Rehearsal diary: week one

Lear's regime, for example, is clearly an authoritarian and dictatorial one, and there are many figures we can think about to help us imagine what it might be like to have lived under his command – from dictators like Ceauçescu and Tito to contemporary political strongmen like Gaddafi. Like Lear, these figures usually have a body of personal enforcers, a sort of small private army, so it is useful to start imagining Lear's disruptive Hundred Knights in comparison to groups like the Waffen SS, the Iraqi Republican Guard and the Blackshirts of Mussolini. Furthermore, the regimes of these powerful personalities often begin with a populist revolution or coup, and reach a crisis of succession after the leader's downfall – Mubarak and Gaddafi being recent examples – which is exactly where *King Lear* begins. All of these examples are useful parallels for a modern audience to appreciate that while *King Lear* is in part the journey of a tragic protagonist, it is also a much bigger political thriller, which unfolds over a fairly short period of time with powerful forward momentum.

Another important feature of the play is its domesticity. Anthony's beautiful drawings and model show an imaginative and flexible set that can create very different levels of enclosure. Sam points out that you cannot express the ferocity of a storm or the despair of homelessness without the comfort of a home against which to compare it, and Shakespeare continually creates domestic environments only to expose them to the elements. There is also a constant movement in the play between the personal and the political; Lear's desire to put his familial relationships to the test quickly becomes a matter of international strife. All of this suggests that a design that can move fluidly between the intimate and the epic stands the best chance of giving an audience the full picture.

Sam also wants to challenge any traditional assumptions about the play. Often we think of *King Lear* as a winter play – especially after Peter Brook's seminal production in the 1960s set it in a snowy wasteland – but might not the oppression of the play be equally that of a sweltering and stormy summer? It is worth investigating.

For the rest of the week the entire acting company sit together to read through each scene and investigate its time, place, meaning and dramatic necessity. There are many decisions to be made from the beginning: we ask ourselves what the kingdom has expected from Lear in terms of an announcement of succession, and how shocking it would have been when he abandoned the three-way division of the country and ordered the two most powerful men in the kingdom to divide the rest between themselves. Sam asked us to consider how publically the daughters were being forced to express their love to Lear, and how Cordelia's response is as much a political act of rebellion as a personal one.



Rehearsal diary: week one

Other questions and research that were considered over the week:

- Was anyone expecting Lear to actually abdicate at the beginning of the play? Was he simply supposed to read out his will and testament for future succession?
- How could Lear commit such a huge lapse in judgment at such a crucial late moment in his reign? Are there any parallels we can consider? The footballer Zinedine Zidane was one of the greatest players in the history of the game, and yet in his last ever match, a world cup final, he head-butted another player and was sent off, meaning he was unable to participate in the penalty shoot-out that his team subsequently lost. Like Lear, Zidane said he “would rather die” than apologise for his incredibly rash decision. Was some part of him determined to finish on a destructive note as he faced the end?
- What are the key differences between Goneril and Regan? As the eldest, Goneril seems to have to bear the brunt of their problems, both in the task of proving her love and later in being first to have to handle Lear and his private army. Regan gets to go second each time, and seems to be much better matched in a politically ruthless husband than Goneril.
- How much freedom of speech or expression have Goneril, Regan, Albany and Cornwall enjoyed under Lear? Is there a sudden release of energy, anger and power following his abdication?
- How well has Lear looked after his people? How has his regime changed as he grew older?
- Where has Edmund been on his “nine years” away? Has he seen more of the world than his trusting half-brother? What is Shakespeare telling us when he has Edgar first enter “reading”.
- What are the modern equivalent roles of Gloucester and Kent – one is perhaps a Chancellor, the other a Commander General of the armed forces. After Kent’s banishment, how important does that make Gloucester to whoever wants power?
- What was the reason for Lear wanting to wed his favourite daughter to a foreign power? Did he fear that her third of the kingdom would be preyed on by the others without international backing?
- Simon Russell Beale met with a geriatrician (doctor specializing in the elderly) and learned about types of dementia. One kind includes many striking parallels with Lear’s madness – hallucinations, wandering focus, lack of sexual inhibition and the repetition of parts of old jobs – like Lear’s presiding over law courts.

- I headed to the British Library to find a book Shakespeare read that inspired the devils Edgar pretends to see as Poor Tom. Tom Brooke [who plays Edgar] was interested to read about the types of “possession” that people would have recognized in Shakespeare’s time and what the attitudes towards them were.
- Sam pointed out that Shakespeare was one of the first dramatists to realise the dramatic potential of weather and to stage a storm. What does a storm do to us psychologically? Rain is an amazing phenomenon that suddenly dislocates people and enwraps individuals – you can see how it is used to do this during the last 45 minutes of the movie *Unforgiven* and in Sam’s own film *Road to Perdition*.

A Thought on Text – Can You Mess With a Masterpiece?

As well as interrogating the sense and dramatic purpose of each of scene (we get as far as Act 4) we are constantly making sure that the edit of the text we are using is what we want it to be. Sam and some of the actors spent a week reading the play before rehearsals, trimming and cutting any lines that seemed to slow down the action, lose the sense of the story, or that were felt to be inaccessible or obscure to a modern audience. Sometimes whole scene sequences are re-ordered if it helps tell the story more immediately and effectively. Are we right to edit Shakespeare? The answer is...we have to! *King Lear* actually exists in two equally valid versions (the Quarto version and the Folio), which differ from each other in everything from their very titles to Lear’s dying words – so there is no such thing as a definitive edition of the play. Throughout the process we examine both versions and cut, re-instate and alter lines and words to keep the story clear, sharp, and powerful. It is up to each actor to challenge a cut or a kept line, but ultimately it is Sam’s responsibility to lead the process of reaching the best possible version of text – and mine to keep track of it all!

Rehearsal diary: week two

Someone looking into our rehearsal room this week would be presented with a very different setup – gone are the tables, books, scripts and pencils, and in their place is a huge circle of carpets, around which are various chairs, beds, sofas and tables. The full company now sit on the outside of the circle watching actors try things out in the middle, and at any point they might get called upon to join the scene – from playing a practical mob to a human representation of “Nature” or “The Plague of Custom”. It’s essentially an experimental stage of rehearsal where anything can be tried out – Sam wrote up two helpful rules for such a process on the board:

There Is No Right or Wrong,
Only Interesting and Less Interesting

“By Indirections Find Directions Out”
[Polonius in *Hamlet*]

By not having to think about presenting to an audience, the actors can focus on the most fundamental options open to them for each scene, and experiment boldly with ways to make the reality of the story as clear and immediate as possible. Some exciting questions were quickly thrown up, such as whether anyone was in on Lear’s plan to make his daughters compete for land with their affection, or whether Goneril and Regan are in fact polar opposites in terms of their relationship with their father. In fact, this process asks many questions in addition to those we faced in week one, because the first half of *King Lear* moves on with a huge amount of information or action missing from onstage:

Questions of Lear’s family:

Who was the sisters’ mother, and was it one mother? There is only one reference to her in the play when Lear mentions her tomb. There are further questions of the relationship between Lear and each daughter – has Goneril born the brunt of her father’s vices as the eldest?

Questions of marriage:

are all the marriages arranged? What made Lear choose Regan and Goneril’s husbands? Who of Burgundy and

France stood the best chance of being chosen for Cordelia before the first scene? Has she a say in the matter?

Political questions:

have the daughters enjoyed any freedom of speech or sway before this? Have the sons-in-law? What was expected in terms of succession? Is the three-way split of the kingdom a new idea?

Gloucester’s family:

where has Edmund been for nine years and where is he being sent next? What does Gloucester intend for Edgar?

Lear’s Knights:

how many are left after Act 1? Are they at all loyal to Lear or simply paid to accompany him?

While it may seem this is rather a lot of missing information, these areas are in fact great places to start experimenting. What happens if you play the entire first scene around a table of men, with the sisters forced to stand at one side, even for their speeches? What happens if the second scene is played with Edgar as the wayward son and Edmund as the dutiful? If Kent is a top-ranking army officer, would he and the Fool get along at all, even as Lear’s last loyal subjects? Somehow, tackling the less explicit parts of the story in this way can unlock the most creative possibilities and make for the most compelling scenes. A lot of what happens at this stage is not about rehearsing the play in any fixed sense, but rather about imagining dramatic possibilities and pushing them to their limit to see where they might lead – sometimes it is almost improvisatory, and it is always exciting because you don’t quite know what’s going to happen next!

Another thing completed this week was our Letter Board – Sam kept a tally of every letter or message in the play, keeping our interpretation to the essential minimum – which is still more than most plays! See how many you can spot in the script.

It is interesting how the conversations and ideas of the first week have opened my eyes to parallels to different



Rehearsal diary: week two

aspects of the play going on all over the world – the story has an incredibly wide resonance. Politically, in Chile there is a presidential run-off between two women who were childhood playmates: one of them is the daughter of a Pinochet-era General, the other's father was an officer who died as a result of that regime's torture. In that extraordinary reality are numerous echoes: the battle between Regan and Goneril, and between both of them and Cordelia; the mutilation and death of Gloucester, and perhaps most evocatively the sense of a new generation (Edgar and Cordelia) whose parents were bound up in an oppressive world order. In Libya there has been fresh fighting between the new government and rebel militias; two years after the overthrow of Gaddafi, Libya still has no constitution and divisions between secular and Islamist forces have paralysed parliament – exactly the same in-fighting that breaks out in the wake of Lear's abdication.

Last but not least, the impact of the famous storm in this play, which is described by Kent as a once-in-a-lifetime event at a time when Gloucester is concerned about the fragility of the natural order, was made even more vivid by the power and aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan. There has been no need to refer to it in rehearsals since the parallel is so clear, but the questions the world asks itself in the wake of its devastation are those of the play: "How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides, Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you From seasons such as these?" We ask ourselves if we have "taken too little care of this", and wonder if the worst storm to make landfall on record is part of a greater, man-made change in the natural order.

King Lear Monday 18th November 2013

Rehearsal Call

Rehearsal Room 1

9.45am	<u>Storm Ramp</u> Discussion with Production Manager – Jim Leaver	Mr Russell Beale Mr Scarborough
10.00am	<u>Text Work</u>	Full Company
1.00pm	LUNCH	
2.00pm	<u>Continue Work</u>	Full Company
5.00pm	CALL ENDS	
5.45pm	<u>Supernumerary Auditions</u>	
7.15pm	ENDS	

Thank you

David Marsland
Stage Manager

Medical Centre
Dressing Room 008

Flu Jabs

Anybody who wishes, we will take you along for Flu Jabs at a convenient time.

Rehearsal diary: week three

We carry on exploring the play by working as a full company on experimental versions of each scene. As before, the process has been a wonderfully free one, full of invention, risk and humour, with no pressure to create a definitive staging but rather a search for all the possibilities and complexities available to us. And by the end of Friday we'd made it to the last line!

A lot of the time we are searching for different contexts in which to play a scene, a speech or a moment. Even if we don't use them literally, creating a clear situation can unlock the words and action in amazingly exciting ways. When we look at Edgar's speech at the beginning of Act IV, Sam asks Tom to try it again but after four company members had ignored him while he tried to beg from them, one even pretending to spit on him, until he erupted with frustration. The subsequent speech was completely different, and far more active, as he tried to reason himself back into sticking to his course of disguise. Similarly, Kent's speech to Lear in Act II, Scene 4 is hugely opened up by giving him an audience of knights to address and enlist, and likewise playing Regan and Goneril's speeches to their father as alternatively public and private makes for very different scenes. Sometimes a scene can be opened up with a staging that would otherwise be totally incongruous with the final setting. Sam got the actors to play Act II, Sc4 with three sizes of cushion – one vast, one a pillow, and the other tiny – each representing 100, 50 and 25 knights respectively. Seeing Lear cling to these diminishing objects as Regan and Goneril steal, hide or throw them from him not only made concrete Lear's stripping of knights but also brought out the sheer childishness of his attempt to retain "the name and addition of king" after his abdication. At the other extreme, we try staging the start of Act V, Sc3 as a line of war prisoners (among them Lear and Cordelia) being processed for transportation or extermination, as seen in films like *The Pianist* and *Schindler's List*. Even if we find a context constricts or hampers a scene, we feel better for having discovered that than having never tried, and "by indirections find directions out."

We continue to explore the rich political cut and thrust of the play, and Sam keeps pushing actors to consider how premeditated or improvised their political moves are: the most interesting answer seems to be more often the latter than the former. What Lear does at the start of the play is create both an unanticipated power vacuum and a makeshift idea of nominal kingship, and from that point on the speed of events make it hard to see how anyone can be acting on anything other than sheer survival instinct. In such political environments, like those of a coup or revolution, a kind of social Darwinism takes over that makes for engrossing live theatre. Cornwall and Regan seem repeatedly to have the crucial extra seconds to respond in the first two acts compared to Goneril and Albany, and it does them well, while Lear's reckless banishment of his closest allies is so quick it causes his accelerated downfall, at a pace that drives him into homelessness and madness. Edmund acts at similar breakneck speed, too fast for Gloucester to really keep up, and so Edgar faces a no less rapid descent

into abject poverty than Lear – in fact that their meeting in the storm becomes that of a pair of lost souls. The King of France, when he marries Cordelia, and Cordelia herself when she launches an almost instant rescue mission, complete the picture of a political world moving at 100 miles per hour. There are moments in history when years of change seem to happen in a week, a day or an hour, and at those times people have to act quickly or get out of the way. It is not surprising that Simon Manyonda, the actor playing the razor-sharp politician Oswald, is reading Machiavelli's *The Prince*!

During all of this, Sam has an eye on the verse, which always has clues about how Shakespeare is trying to direct his own play. When a character is speaking verse, but speaks in only a half-line (that is, anything less than the five beats of iambic pentameter), it is a good bet that Will is telling you to take a little pause for the rest of line (you observe the missing beats silently – unless someone's next words seem to perfectly complete an iambic line). Look at the end of Act II, Sc4: everyone seems to be speaking in half lines after Lear leaves. If you try using them to create some Harold Pinter-esque pauses between the speeches, you realise that everyone is uncomfortable talking about the way they have just treated the King, and are making excuses to themselves about the need to do so.

A big part of the process this week has been and will continue to be the depiction of fooling, faking and madness. At one point the stage is occupied by a nobleman playing a commoner, a fool, a mad king and a man playing madman, all of them in a storm. What happens to you if you play a madman for a sustained period to keep yourself safe? What is madness if mad people's behaviour often has a clear logic or focus? Is there a power in speaking unpalatable truths in riddles or jokes? Why is it that through the most intense extremities of emotional and mental turmoil the play arrives at its moments of most breathtaking clarity?

Other work this week has focused on structure – Sam continues to instigate or reverse cuts, edits, word clarifications and the re-ordering of scenes, particularly in Acts IV and V, which seem to demand taking in hand dramaturgically. We have also cast a company of thirty supernumeraries this week – a veritable army of new actors to help us create the epic scale of social upheaval and war on such a big stage.

Research Topic – Torture and Mutilation

When looking at the famous torture and blinding scene (Act 3, Sc7) we considered other depictions of political brutality and interrogation. Torture continues to happen all over the world, and not just in rogue states. The US has recently used waterboarding as an approved method of interrogation.

Films: *Marathon Man*, *Reservoir Dogs*.

Paintings: Francis Bacon's Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X

Articles: Christopher Hitchens' "Believe Me, It's Torture" in *Vanity Fair* August 2008.

Rehearsal diary: week four

From Monday of this week, work has been centred around the staging of the play; the way in which the situations and relationships of the characters are to be best represented in the physical world we have designed. It is sometimes a more technical process than what we were doing before, creating precise stage images and timed movements, but that is not to say we have abandoned the experimental and creative spirit of the earlier work. It is really about translating those purer discoveries into the language of the particular theatre we are performing in; of breathing the soul of the story into the body of our set.

We began at the beginning – but after finding a shape for the first scene Sam decided to move on to stage the finale! Starting at the end might seem strange, but the last scene of the play is so fraught with compressed action and death that orchestrating it in advance of the rest of the play gives you an idea of where you are headed, a dramatic point on the horizon. Moreover, almost all of the characters present in the opening of the play are only ever reunited fully at its close, and Sam is interested to discover what kinds of echoes can be created between the two scenes – see if you can spot any. Something which has struck me is how uniquely powerful both entrances and exits can be to a Shakespeare scene; we have been quite thorough in examining each and altering or reinventing them wherever it helps us, and by the end of the play two exits, if we keep them, are deeply affecting.



We then return to the first half of the play, moving through it chronologically and finding that some of the work we did in the circle can be transferred entirely into the Olivier, and that other areas need to be given a new shape. Sometimes improvised ways of playing scenes suggest entirely new stagings, such that the design is actually changed by rehearsal. Luckily for us, Anthony Ward and Sam have collaborated with each other enough to know that flexible designs with lots of possibilities make this easy to absorb at this stage.



In a theatre as well resourced as the National, it is possible at this stage to introduce various technical and artistic elements to the rehearsal. Notably this week, we have started to have conversations with our fight director Terry King (I was used as a practice dummy for the eye gouging, I can assure you it is very safe!); input from our composer Paddy Cunneen, who has been working with

Adrian [Scarborough] on various musical options for the Fool's Songs; meetings with lighting designer Paul Pyant and projection designer Jon Driscoll; and large stage furniture provided by production manager Jim Leaver, including a three-metre high ramp for the storm scene and the base of a vast statue of Lear. Incredibly, we have also been able to rehearse scenes on the revolve, because the rehearsal room is equipped with a practice version of the Olivier's vast rotating stage. The effects of this extra dimension, at different speeds in different scenes, can be amazingly powerful and dynamic.

Of course, we are still learning more and more about the play and each character's journey through it. It seems this week the Fool has become a clearer incarnation, and it is suddenly clear why Sam described him in week 2 as "the outspoken alter-ego of Lear himself": he is able to say what must be said but which no one else, least of all his master, dare say or acknowledge. In the first scene it became clear that Lear, whilst in power, is a source of extraordinary fear to all he rules, and that both Cordelia and Kent's challenge to him are acts of great courage. Looking at the early Gloucester and Edmund scenes, it is interesting to see how far we can indicate to an audience that Gloucester, like Lear, is not guiltless as a father for the rebellion of his children.

Rehearsal diary: week four

The relationship between Regan and Cornwall seems wildly different to that of Goneril and Albany, and our discussions of their thrill-seeking sex life has made for some almost erotically charged violence at points in the play. The textual work hasn't stopped either – we are still cutting and re-adding lines every day if they help us tell the story more immediately and meaningfully.

At the end of week I listen to Sam and Simon discuss their ideas about the play for the programme note – it is a fascinating conversation and one I recommend reading.* A fact inspiring the story which I hadn't known was offered by Simon – that after WW2 there were 50 million refugees, or homeless people, in Europe. The image of the 20th-century displaced, with their suitcases and hats and coats, is an important one in our telling of this itinerant King who “abjures all roofs”.

Research, References and Events this week:

Films:

Conspiracy [for its long table meeting, an image which occurred to Sam after he had staged the first scene]
The Godfather [the importance of the patriarch's chair and the son's eventually sitting in it]

Events:

The protests in Ukraine. The news has been full of the Ukraine Government's attempts to suppress democratic protests in Kiev. Once again the relevance to this vision of Lear (or vice versa) is born out on the world stage: only this week we were discussing the disfiguring of the statue of the once heroic Lear, in Kiev they have torn down the monument of Lenin; we have again heard the terrible lines about the “wretches who bide the pelting of this pitiless storm” – in Ukraine the people are protesting in sub-zero temperatures and thick snow.

* A 40-page **programme** for *King Lear* is on sale from ushers, bookshops and bars at £3 at performance times; and from the National Theatre Bookshop

In 'The history of a whole evil time', acclaimed Shakespeare scholar **Jonathan Bate** reflects on tyranny; and, half-way through rehearsals, **Sam Mendes** and **Simon Russell Beale** talk about their work on the play and some of their influences. **Illustrations** show some of the other productions these two have worked on together, and the *King Lear* company in rehearsal, photographed by **Mark Douet**.

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Rehearsal diary: week five

We continue the process, giving each scene shape, starting with the final scene in Act II and continuing right the way through to the end of Act IV (only one act to go!). Watching as the actors and Sam work on detailed movements for every moment of the story, I am struck by how dependent their decisions are upon the architecture of both the theatre (which we cannot change) and the set (which, to various degrees, we can). Anthony Ward's design allows for varying levels of enclosure, and the difference it makes when the most forward wall is lowered, or when the stage is at its most open and spacious, is truly extraordinary, switching between intimate claustrophobia and great free expanse.

Acts III and IV take us through the tempestuous changes at the heart of the story, from sanity to madness, from vision to blindness, from storm to calm, alliance to opposition and estrangement to reconciliation. More than any other great Shakespeare tragedy like *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* or *Othello*, this play is really two parallel plays that beautifully interlink, mirror and diverge – and nowhere more so than in these two acts. Sam said at the end of last week that Gloucester and Edgar's story is a masterpiece in itself, and it is amazing to think that Shakespeare managed to draw on two totally separate sources and fuse them together so powerfully, as though they had always been combined. Their crossings are tantalizing – at different points in these acts the characters of Edgar, Lear and Gloucester meet, often not recognizing one another but at the same time having deeply poignant conversations or experiences, Edgar even calling the blind Gloucester "father". The passage of time in the play is amazingly compressed – the period of the storm and after is no more than two days at most, and yet to Edgar, Lear and Gloucester, a lifetime of change has occurred. As Sam put it, the play is fundamentally a rite of passage for these three.

Rehearsing these scenes has been fascinating – does Edgar hide from Gloucester in the storm or challenge him with his disguise? How does Edgar manage to make poor Tom such appealing company for Lear? At any point does Gloucester almost sense his son's presence – especially when he is telling Kent or the Old Man of Edgar's innocence?

Sam is still daring to experiment with ambitious and varied stagings – the hovel scene (III.4) where Lear and Poor Tom meet was rehearsed with the floor very slowly revolving, creating an amazingly theatrical sense of the characters' disorientation in the storm. There is something very Shakespearean about the revolve – although he had no such machinery in his day, he still worked in theatres that he called "a wooden O" (*Henry V*), and each time we use it I hear lines in the play I hadn't connected before: "Fortune good night, smile once more, turn thy wheel" (II.2), "I am bound upon a wheel of fire" (IV.7), "The wheel is come full circle. I am here" (V.3), "My wits begin to turn" (III.2).

As you can imagine, creating a consistent and repeatable set of movements for five people on a rotating stage is about as technical a challenge as a director can set themselves! No less challenging to any production of this play is the interpreting of what becomes of the Fool, whose disappearance is unexplained – wait and see what we have come up with!

Just as Gloucester and Lear's stories seem to mirror each other, so do the elder sisters' in this act, both becoming estranged or cut off from their husbands and manipulating Edmund or Oswald to serve their interests. Giving these scenes a specific sense of time and place is crucial; Sam has long planned scene IV.5 to reveal Regan talking to Oswald immediately after her husband's funeral, and during rehearsals has decided to try IV.2 as an interior in Goneril's house.



Rehearsal diary: week five

Throughout, all of the company are working in more and more detail on the emotional journey of each scene. This is crucial to the clear telling of the story, but is made a particular challenge in this play by the extremity of trauma, anger and madness experienced in these central acts. Edgar, as Poor Tom, is playing a madman, who sees fiends and horses, so making those imagined hallucinations as real as possible requires careful work. Lear likewise seems to have “real” hallucinations of a courtroom where his daughters are being tried, in III.6, which again needs to be almost literally imagined in rehearsal to make sense for the audience, as though there were invisible characters on stage. The feverish state of Cornwall and Regan, on learning of Gloucester’s defection to the invading French, leads them to unimaginable acts of violence, so working out the paranoia they experience on the way to that moment is as crucial at this point as the more technical process of staging the violence.

There is an important shift for Sam from Act IV onwards, which introduces a kind of mercy to the play, starting with the character of the Old Man, and running through Edgar’s attempts to cure his father’s suicidal despair and the doctor’s treatment of Lear, to Cordelia’s return and reconciliation with her father. The timing of the interval is important, and this shift suggests that the end of Act III is the best place for it. Other markers for this shift are being built into the design and action – see if you can spot the changes in the set and tone. The costume is important here too – unlike the militant nature of the Knights or British forces, the French army is accompanied by medics, a sight which reminds Sam of a Larkin poem:

Where can we live but days?
Ah, solving that question
Brings the priest and the doctor
In their long coats
Running over the fields.

Consulting the Army:

This week Stanley Townsend and I sit down with retired Major General Jonathan Shaw to talk about Kent’s role as the head of Lear’s army, and his transformation into a disguised squaddie once he is banished. Jonathan had some wonderful insights to offer into the way in which hired men like the Knights would grow restless and disappear, and the way in which a seemingly non-aggressive intervention like Cordelia’s mirrors documented “neutral” military endeavours that ended no less disastrously. He has offered to send a Sergeant he knows to give Stanley some more information on different types of salute and posture.

Rehearsal diary: week six

We begin this week by finishing the work we've been doing to stage the play, having come back around to the final scene. This is, of course, the second time we've done this scene because Sam jumped ahead to look at staging possibilities for it early on. It felt that having a foundation to work from has paid huge dividends.

Sam encouraged the actors to attack the scene with intensity (rather than simply pace), and we discovered in rehearsal that one of the challenges Shakespeare sets you in this final Act is to juxtapose the immediate prelude and aftermath of a war. I am struck by how useful the design is proving in solving staging problems in the Olivier: the gantry or extension to the front of the stage creates an amazing position for an actor to occupy while allowing all the others to address the audience almost directly through them. The seeming chaos of deaths in the final scene is, in many ways, terribly true to life; after so many seeming victories in war, the fallout between the "victors" is historically brutal – the state of Iraq now and the Cold War after WW2 are but two examples.

By Tuesday we have begun the next generation of scenes, journeying again through the play to consolidate the work so far but also to continue to experiment and evolve. The first scene is tried with microphones for the first time, which is even more publically exposing for the daughters. It is a pleasure to watch the actors return to each scene having had time to digest and prepare for it anew: scenes which seemed mechanical at the last outing, as we give shape and movement to them can suddenly catch fire. The final scene of Act II seems entirely new to me as the actors pursue new discoveries about their characters and relationships. Sam concludes by the end of it that the first two acts are far more humiliating for Lear, and therefore far more moving, if Goneril and Regan are right, rather than simply cruel.

As we progress through the play, the company is able to add depth and detail to their work alongside increasing technical support. Edgar's first soliloquy is done with a background of the entire company giving choric voices to the beggars he plans to join to amazing effect; Sam adds a nuanced moment of Curan waiting for a bribe before giving Edmund any information when we first meet him; and Paul [Arditti, Sound Designer] has given Sam a whole keyboard of sound effects to begin experimenting with the timing and mix of sounds that accompany the play – nowhere is this more useful than in punctuating Simon's great storm speeches with rumbles and cracks of thunder.

Adrian continues to reappear from sessions with Paddy Cunneen with new and wonderful songs they've set the Fool's lyrics to, and Terry King has been in a lot to develop the various fight scenes in the play. It is telling of the honesty with which Sam wants to imbue his production that rarely does the fight choreography become too elaborate, more often they are short, sharp and vicious.



