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THE PRESENTATION OF *KING LEAR* IN THREE
PRODUCTIONS BY THE RSC

In this study I would like to examine the part of *King Lear* in three productions of *King Lear* staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon: George Devine's production in 1953, Glen Byam Shaw's production in 1959, and Peter Brook's production in 1962. During that time there were also other performances of *King Lear* in England but not in Stratford and that is why I will not include them in my presentation. I carried out some research at The Shakespeare Centre Library in Stratford-upon-Avon. Since none of the above mentioned performances was recorded or filmed I could only rely on newspaper reviews of first nights, arranged and collected chronologically by the Library, as they appeared in various newspapers,¹ original Royal Shakespeare Company prompt-books, available at the library, and books and articles commenting on and analysing the three productions. I also analysed production photos and slides stored at The Shakespeare Centre Library.

King Lear entered the twentieth century mauled and misinterpreted. The text was regarded as one of the greatest of literary achievements, but the play had fallen victim to incompetence and misunderstanding which kept its potential powers hidden and waiting to be discovered.

The shape of the play after the Second World War, however, was greatly influenced by two critics: A. C. Bradley and H. Granville-Barker. Their interpretations of the play and its main protagonist discarded the old nineteenth century traditions of playing the part of Lear and opened ways for new modern interpretative possibilities.

In 1906 A. C. Bradley published his famous lectures *On Shakespearean Tragedy*. He dealt with Shakespeare's tragedies in a methodical way. He

¹ All newspaper cuts are arranged chronologically in books stored at the Shakespeare Centre in Stratford-on-Avon. The pages are not numbered.

defined characteristic elements of Shakespearean tragedy. The total reversal of fortune coming unaware upon an important person does not simply happen nor is it caused by the malicious gods. It stems from the actions of the hero. His catastrophe is brought about by the tragic flaw in his personality.² This approach, focusing its attention on the protagonist, was nothing new and it followed Aristotle's views on the tragic hero. But the new scholarly analysis prompted both directors and actors to analyse the text and the part of Lear anew, looking not only for great theatrical opportunities but also for a consistent interpretation. But, since Bradley was predominantly a scholar, and not a man of the theatre, he failed to recognise the play's real dramatic possibilities. To him, *King Lear* was "imperfectly dramatic" and "too huge for the stage" which is the test of strictly dramatic quality. It has scenes "immensely effective in the theatre", but, as he writes, there are so many inconsistencies in the dramatic plot that it is impossible to maintain the dramatic spell. "Shakespeare's greatest work of art, but not the best of his plays", he wrote.³

Bradley's analysis of Shakespeare's tragedy was a turning point in Shakespearean studies. Still, he missed many points which waited to be explained by a man of theatre. This man was Harley Granville-Barker, who in 1927 published his *Prefaces to Shakespeare*. Granville-Barker was a Shakespearean scholar and a director. Therefore he possessed the skills which Bradley essentially lacked. His study was supported by a thorough examination of all available data concerning the Elizabethan stage and its workings. To him Shakespeare was an Elizabethan playwright, but he was also something more. It follows that Shakespeare's art should never be confined to one fixed set of rules; his was a genius breaking bonds of conventions and orthodoxy and should not be thrust back there.⁴ Granville-Barker advocated approaching any Shakespearean text as a prompt-book: "a score waiting performance".⁵ Such an approach freed the actors playing Lear from following century long traditions of presenting that part according to fixed stereotypes.

Out of the three performances which I wish to examine, the first one seems to be the most faithful embodiment of Bradley's and Granville-Barker's theories, signalling the oncoming changes. The following two productions marked a more definite departure from that tradition.

² A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1965), p. 10.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 198-203.

⁴ H. Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare: Collected Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1970), p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

I

George Devine, the producer of the 1953 production, was approaching the text for the first time. His intention was to expose the text's main problems without resorting to any unusual concepts. He avoided excessive cuts and tried to clarify puzzling and ambiguous moments. Philip Hope-Wallace called it after its first night a "sure, steady and satisfying production".⁶

When the curtain went up the audience was presented with a setting in the monolithic tradition. Robert Colquhoun, a distinguished Scottish abstract painter, combined the swirl of steps in the middle of the stage with a central megalithic heap of rocks used as a throne. Robert Speaight wrote that the set was effectively stylised, leading "the mind back to the mystery of prehistoric man, to the primeval shapes of antiquity" and at the same time "fixing us on the universals of the play".⁷ Into such a world King Lear was introduced.

The part of Lear was played by Michael Redgrave, an actor of great presence and voice. He was often praised for intelligent rather than emotional conceptions of his tragic characters, giving many times the impression of "feeling the part".⁸ He was a tall, impressive looking man with a commanding voice. When "shrill trumpets sounding discordant fanfares and insistent drums"⁹ announced the arrival of Lear, Kent, Gloucester and Edmund took their places on the left side of the stage and waited. First, came two attendants carrying Lear's regalia; the first brought his sword, the other his crown. After them came Lear. As reported by John Barber he was visibly aged with a long grey tousled beard and his tall back bowed. He shuffled a bit as he walked panting and gasping for breath. His jaw had a senile quaver and his voice cracked.¹⁰ As he sat down the courtiers took their places, attending the official ceremony. Lear looked lovingly at his daughters pausing his tired eyes on Cordelia. This Lear was an old man, fond and foolish. After his first words one could see that he wished to die and wanted to renounce his kingship to his daughters and put himself into their care. All this and the paternal tenderness and trust established his dotage. Redgrave, reviving the old-fashioned view of Lear as robbed of his virility by the years as well as his judgement, by stressing his corporal infirmities, showed the process by which disappointment, ill-invested trust and subsequent tribulations turn his shaky, senile

⁶ Ph. Hope-Wallace, *Manchester Guardian*, July 16 (1953).

⁷ R. Speaight, *The Tablet*, August 22 (1953).

⁸ Author unknown, *Birmingham Post*, July 11 (1953).

⁹ Author unknown, *Croydon News*, July 11 (1953).

¹⁰ J. Barber, *Birmingham Post*, July 11 (1953).

mind into madness. J. S. Bratton reports that the twist came when Cordelia refused to idolise him. His choleric nature became visible again. But the effects of his fury came as a total surprise. Ivonne Mitchel, playing to Redgrave's Lear, reacted to Lear's lines, in which he disowns and disinherits her, with appalled and shocked astonishment.¹¹ And when Kent opposed his Master and interceded for Cordelia, Lear reached for his sword. Redgrave, however, made him unable to match his fury with action so, he could only "fumble his great broadsword half out of its sheath".¹²

Redgrave's acting, carefully planned to the minutest detail, was considered old-fashioned. But critics praised Redgrave for the way he carried it off "giving off somehow in the way he sits and stands and listens the very feel and ... smell of old age."¹³ He also avoided charging into high rage which might be difficult to reconcile with his old age. His warning to Kent was flat and colourless. It looked as if Redgrave was reserving his strength for later scenes.

After the beginning, which was received with mixed feelings, came the real highlights of the production. The curse scene was one of them. Lear's fury built up gradually. At first Redgrave, playing the feebly aged Lear, marked his fury by lashing the stage with his whip.¹⁴ On "Saddle my horses", Devine had all the cast move away from Lear leaving him in the traditional isolation centre stage to deliver the curse on Goneril.¹⁵ When Lear cursed Goneril with his arms raised against the sky like "one of the old gods, to whom he called", his majestic sovereignty and the imperious eye of Lear became visible at last.¹⁶ The little climax came in Act II scene IV when Goneril and Regan revealed their true intentions and decided to strip their royal father of his former dignity. J. S. Bratton reports that Redgrave's Lear was driven into a state in which he was torn by "rage and impotency pulling against each other and forcing the crack wider until control is fatally loosened and finally gone". Lear's lines "No, you unnatural hags,/ I will have such revenges on you both/ That all the world shall – I will do such things", were spoken half mad, half sane and were a key moment.¹⁷

The tempest was generally subdued, the repertoire of technical storm-effects was reduced to a minimum. It was left to the actors accompanying

¹¹ J. S. Bratton, *Plays in Performance-King Lear* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press 1987), p. 97.

¹² Author unknown, *New Statesman*, July 5 (1953).

¹³ J. Morgan, *Coventry Evening Telegram*, July 19 (1953).

¹⁴ Original RSC 1953 production Prompt-book available at The Shakespeare Centre Library at Stratford-upon-Avon.

¹⁵ J. S. Bratton, *op. cit.*, p. 97 and the Prompt-book.

¹⁶ J. Morgan, *Coventry Evening Telegram*, July 19 (1953).

¹⁷ J. S. Bratton, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

Lear on the heath to convey the whole effect of the raging storm. According to the Prompt-book, they were to sway and shout against the imaginary wind. They tripped and darted for cover as imaginary gusts of wind shook their balance.

Great help came from the Fool, played by Marius Goring, who at last seemed to find his true place at Lear's side. In the early scenes Redgrave and Goring established an interesting and complex relationship based on a mixture of father-child and Master-servant relation. Robert Speaight wrote that at moments they looked like "two parts of a single personality".¹⁸ The Dover scene and the meeting with the eyeless Gloucester were real highlights of the production. Kenneth Tynan observed that Redgrave was "best when maddest".¹⁹ When he entered, he had a very thin straw crown which resembled a crown of thorns. His elaborately padded costume had by this scene become a mass of shreds full of odd flowers and straw.²⁰ His fantastic sorrow in insanity made everyone completely forget the impression of incongruity in the first half and, as Philip Hope-Wallace said, "... it was in the scene with the flowers that the study of a man seeking in wandering wits a refuge from intolerable reality came into the ground".²¹

The final peak of Redgrave's achievement came in the last scene when the stage was laid with the corpses of Goneril, Regan and Edgar. Lear came on the stage with Cordelia in his arms and uttered a "wonderful howl [which, according to Peter Fleming, had] sublime pathos of Gielgud and the barbaric power of Wolfitt".²² He looked as if he was using "a last access of dying strength", his lament over the dead Cordelia was described as "entirely human and greatly pathetic".²³ It seems as if Redgrave let his passions loose trying to cast a final, unforgettable spell upon the audience as he was dying.

The reactions to the production were very varied; they ranged from "excellent", "revolutionary", to "a complete failure". The greatest accusations were made against Redgrave. He relied too much on studied effects and too little on direct emotions.²⁴ He used too many vocal tricks; his eccentricities included strange chuckles, hissing intakes of breath, sudden flights into a different pitch, and a terrible baying voice.²⁵

¹⁸ R. Speaight, *The Tablet*, August 22 (1953).

¹⁹ K. Tynan, *Evening Standard*, July 17 (1953).

²⁰ J. S. Bratton, *op. cit.*, p. 179. Also slides and production photos stored at The Shakespeare Centre Library.

²¹ Ph. Hope-Wallace, *Manchester Guardian*, July 16 (1953).

²² P. Fleming, *Spectator*, July 24 (1953).

²³ Author unknown, *New Statesman*, July 5 (1953).

²⁴ Author unknown, *Punch*, July 29 (1953).

²⁵ P. Fleming, *Spectator*, July 24 (1953).

But, all in all, Redgrave was more praised than criticised. There was "less sentiment in his Lear, a much deeper, quieter Lear than usual".²⁶ Alan Dent wrote that his Lear attained "fantastic sorrow in his insanity".²⁷

II

Charles Laughton's performance of King Lear in Glen Byam Shaw's production was received on its first night with "something less than a rapturous ovation".²⁸ The performance caused general confusion and was widely criticised. The source of that criticism and confusion was Charles Laughton's "Prosaic Lear" which, as David Wainwright felt was "too much the foolish, fond, old man, and never had what Kent attributes to him: authority".²⁹ Laughton's Lear was a benevolent "Father Christmas",³⁰ "a childishly, petulantly, pathetically old man" lacking power and grandeur.³¹ It was an unexpected Lear, defying the traditional description of that Titanic character.

J. C. Trevin was one of the first who touched the true essence of that performance in his review entitled: *Lear as Representative of the Common Man*. According to him it was a different Lear because through a "gentle process of falsification" Lear as a "wielder of absolute power" was played down, and instead we had an old man who "has grown insufferably willful with age in a very dream of benevolence".³² It was partly achieved by Laughton's looks. Laughton wore a long, white beard, his body was enveloped in a loose robe.³³ His round fleshy face and ample body helped to create a Lear who did not rage, did not terrify. Laughton's Lear was not a ruler of unrestrained temper, his Lear was "the representative of the common man"³⁴ who has happened to bring on himself his own catastrophe.

Lear's first entry was regally escorted, but he wore no crown.³⁵ His remote figure on the throne was described by one of the critics as an

²⁶ R. Ellis, *Stratford-On-Avon Herald*, July 17 (1953).

²⁷ A. Dent, *News Chronicle*, July 21 (1953).

²⁸ R. Mavor, *The Stratford Season*, date unknown.

²⁹ D. Wainwright, *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, August 19 (1959).

³⁰ Author unknown, *Oxford Mail*, August 19 (1959).

³¹ Author unknown, *Birmingham Mail*, August 19 (1959).

³² J. C. Trewin, *The Times*, August 19 (1959).

³³ Production photos and slides.

³⁴ J. C. Trewin, *The Times*, August 19 (1959).

³⁵ M. St. Clare-Byrne, "King Lear at Stratford-on-Avon, 1959", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 11(1969), p. 190.

imposing figure by Michaelangelo or Blake.³⁶ That effect was strengthened by the throne which was placed on the high steps made of huge blocks of stone and placed in the centre of the stage on a pyramid beneath a replica of Stonehenge.³⁷ There was a difference between this scenery and the scenery designed by Robert Colquhoun for the 1953 production. Colquhoun's 'Stonehenge' was crude in its structure, it was a prehistoric heap of roughly cut stones arranged in the form of a throne. In the background, one could see almost an exact replica of the real Stonehenge. The dominant note was that of barbarity. In Glen Byam Shaw's production the throne was placed on a stone structure which resembled more a Greek temple than the real Stonehenge and was in sharp contrast with the previous production's set. Laughton sat on his throne high above his court.³⁸ I believe that this look of high sophistication, organisation and clearly defined hierarchy symbolised by the elaborate architectural structure helped to strengthen the effect of social, political and family disintegration which was soon to follow.

He dealt matter-of-factly with the formal announcement and then he settled himself back in his throne³⁹ for the ceremony of his daughters' confessions of affection with "the air of one who loves ceremony and accepts it as his kingly due".⁴⁰ It was visible that Cordelia was his favourite and her answer was expected to please him most. Throughout the whole ceremony of giving away his kingdom he behaved like an all powerful, wise, just and loving monarch and parent, playing God in his own world and not paying much attention to what he was doing.⁴¹ Cordelia's "Nothing" was not a blow struck at his kingly authority, it was a shock.⁴² His first reaction to her refusal was bland incomprehension. Accustomed to flattery he simply did not understand anything and the way he said his "Nothing will come of nothing; speak again" indicated that he was deeply puzzled.⁴³ His knees began to tap nervously beneath his white robes and one could sense the oncoming danger.⁴⁴ But it took not only Cordelia's refusal to flatter him but also Kent's bold denial to strike finally the genuine, violent anger out of him.⁴⁵ Clare Byrne described Laughton's acting with more

³⁶ Author unknown.

³⁷ D. Wainwright, *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, August 19 (1959) and R. Mavor, *The Stratford Season*, date unknown.

³⁸ Photographs, slides and the Prompt-book sketches.

³⁹ M. St. Clare-Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

⁴⁰ R. Mavor, *The Stratford Season*, date unknown.

⁴¹ Author unknown, *Birmingham Mail*, August 19 (1959) and M. St. Clare-Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

⁴² J. C. Trewin, *The Times*, August 19 (1959).

⁴³ W. A. Darlington, *Daily Telegraph*, August 19 (1959).

⁴⁴ J. C. Trewin, *Stratford-On-Avon Herald*, August 19 (1959).

⁴⁵ J. C. Trewin, *The Times*, August 19 (1959).

details. Lear's uncomprehended frustration and his wounded self-esteem retaliated with hurt for hurt, like in an angry child. His heart was unrelenting but his mind was somewhat separate. When he said to Kent – "Come not between the dragon and his wrath", he spoke the line as if conscious of the ludicrousness of his claim to be dragon like, as if aware of the fact that his former strength is long gone. She and Bernard Levin also noted a fleeting moment that came at the end of the scene suggesting that his mind was very much at odds and he was beginning to realise his injustice. When he was leaving the stage upon the words "I did her wrong" his manner, voice and face expressed sadness and willingness to repent.⁴⁶

Many reviewers were disappointed and could not come to terms with Laughton's Lear. They found it too difficult, almost inconceivable, to reconcile this poor old and foolish man with the idea of kingship.⁴⁷ They saw the first scene as a mistake which was only forgotten when madness seized Lear and Laughton attained "the level of high tragedy"⁴⁸ by securing "a firm and moving grip on the character".⁴⁹ Gerard Fay wrote that this Lear failed, because he was not every inch a king, lacked grandeur, usual Olympian rage, and authority. It was a homely Lear devoid of "the heroic stature of Shakespeare's conception".⁵⁰

But the main aim of this production was, as Bernard Levin interpreted it, to make Lear "every inch a man".⁵¹ Clare Byrne propounded an idea that it was a modern, realistic *Lear*. A *Lear* for those times and of those times, understandable to all people even those who had never read the play.⁵²

After the first, unusual scene, Mr Laughton began to complete his vision of Lear. The reviewers noticed that Laughton's Lear was not only a foolish, old man. J. C. Trewin wrote that Laughton's Lear seemed to slowly realise his failure as a king. His momentary weakness enabled the generation of cynical youths to take over. And he had the authority of which Kent spoke but it was not the outward authority, as was usually stressed in Lear's part, it was the authority of the mind of a man once strong and genuinely commanding and now aware of his helplessness and the inevitability of oncoming catastrophe.⁵³

The storm scenes were played without any interval and the scenery was reduced to the minimum. There were some visual effects of rain and cloud

⁴⁶ M. St. Clare-Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 191 and B. Levin, *Birmingham Evening Dispatch*, date unknown.

⁴⁷ Author unknown, *Warwickshire Advertiser*, August 21 (1959).

⁴⁸ J. C. Trewin, *Birmingham Post*, August 19 (1959).

⁴⁹ A. Dent, *News Chronicle*, August 19 (1959).

⁵⁰ G. Fay, *Manchester Guardian*, August 23 (1959).

⁵¹ B. Levin, *Birmingham Evening Dispatch*, date unknown.

⁵² M. St. Clare-Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

⁵³ J. C. Trewin, *Birmingham Post*, August 19 (1959).

produced by means of a gauze curtain. Those effects were completed by the cold, clear, subdued light.⁵⁴ Two scenes during the storm are of special significance. One took place when Lear, arguing with the elements, had the Fool and Mad Tom clinging to his clothes and thus, as Clare Byrne put it, "the picture of 'unaccommodated man ... the thing itself' was stabbed home ...[to the audience's] eyes, pitifully and unforgettably; the king, the naked, gibbering beggar and the dying⁵⁵ Fool".⁵⁶ The other scene concerned Lear only when the moment of illumination seized him. He ordered the Fool and Edgar to get into the hovel, knelt and facing the audience began to pray silently "for the poor wretches".⁵⁷

The Hovel scene, set in the upper part of Gloucester's house, also contributed to the interpretation of Lear's part. When Gloucester was being blinded downstairs, Lear, Edgar and the Fool were upstairs. It made more clear and doubled the effect of Lear's mistake by showing in action those on whom he put the responsibility for the state. The scene had a deeply poignant moment stressing Lear's helplessness. Upon the lines: "To have a thousand with red burning spits/ come hissing in upon 'em", Laughton snatched a burning stick from the fire and waved it wildly so that Kent had to quieten him.⁵⁸

The meeting of Lear with Gloucester was dubbed by many reviewers and spectators "the scene with a cart".⁵⁹ The reapers drew their cart onto the stage and went downstage to finish their work.⁶⁰ On a clear, sunny, summer morning during harvest time Nature seemed to have been reborn after the storm. Lear sat down on the bale of straw near the haycart. The throne from the first scene was replaced by a simple bale of straw signifying "the ripeness that was all". Byrne wrote that he sat quietly, almost relaxed, with Edgar and Gloucester leaning against the cart. When Gloucester came close to him, and Lear noticed his mutilation, he kneeled and put his head on his knees and comfortingly stroke Gloucester's wearied head. His inner peace of mind, despite the madness, was in sharp contrast to the first scene in which he ran nervously up and down the throne when things began to go against his wishes.⁶¹ It was a man who had learned to distinguish good

⁵⁴ The Prompt-book sketches and photos.

⁵⁵ I do not think that Clare Byrne meant to say that the Fool actually died in that scene; I found no information suggesting such a resolution of the Fool's story. I believe that the author wanted to stress the physical agony of the Fool suffering from cold and rain, as well as his mental anguish.

⁵⁶ M. St. Clare-Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 197 and the Prompt-book.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁵⁸ The Prompt-book.

⁵⁹ M. St. Clare-Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

⁶⁰ The Prompt-book, sketches and photos.

⁶¹ M. St. Clare-Byrne, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

from evil and to feel for other people. That scene was the true turning point of the production. Lear was spiritually reborn, wise and, at last, truly a king.

His inner transformation was also visible in the recognition scene. When he woke up in the French Camp Cordelia knelt at once, showing respect for her father and king. But Lear dropped on both knees, exactly as he had done earlier in the mock scene with Regan saying: "Dear daughter, I confess that I am old" mockingly playing the part his daughters wanted to assign him. Here, they both knelt together for a while, face to face, hands raised toward heaven, as if in a prayer. When the soldiers came to take them both to prison, Lear's pain was immense. But he was a man reconciled with his fate and ready to embrace eternity. When he said to Cordelia "Come, let's away to prison" his voice could tell that he anticipated the oncoming gratuitous death of his beloved daughter whom he had found anew and of himself.

III

The immediate inspiration for Brook's production was Jan Kott's article "King Lear, or Endgame".⁶² The starting point for Kott's analysis was the reflection that "The world of tragedy and the world of grotesque have a similar structure".⁶³ Both ask the same fundamental questions concerning human life but they come up with different answers. The tragic and the grotesque are embodiments of two opposite notions: "the moral order and everyday practice",⁶⁴ tragedy being the theatre of priests, the grotesque being the theatre of clowns.

For Kott, *King Lear* is a play about the decay and fall of the world. It is a world in which social order, from the kingdom to the family, is destroyed. Subjects rise against their kings; children turn against their parents. There are only monsters, devouring one another like beasts. Parallel to this is the morality play on human fate.

Charles Marowitz wrote in "Lear Log" that for Brook *Lear* was not an "unactable play". He perceived it as a "series of intellectual strands which only performance can tie together ... a metaphysical farce about sight and blindness".⁶⁵ He was also inspired by the grotesque elements which

⁶² J. Kott, "King Lear, or Endgame", in F. Kermode (ed.), *King Lear - Casebook Series*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1980).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

⁶⁵ Ch. Marowitz, "Lear Log", *Encore*, 41(1963), pp. 20-33.

manifested themselves in the image of the futile human endeavour to comprehend one's fate in a world of savage cruelty as is presented in *King Lear*. He also wanted to explore certain artistic and stylistic possibilities that *King Lear* had to offer. To achieve this he was determined to strip down the old story to its crudest outlines, to dispose of its romanticism and historical burden.

Brook's production began on a brightly lit stage. There was no curtain. Brook thus indicated that the conventions of the realistic theatre would not be observed. The stage was almost bare throughout. The set consisted of geometrical sheets of metal which were ginger with rust and corrosion.⁶⁶ The costumes, dominantly leather, were textured to suggest long and hard wear. All was rough and primitive. Charles Marowitz wrote: "Apart from the rust, the leather and the old wood, there is nothing but space giant white flats opening on to a blank cyclorama."⁶⁷

Lear, played by Paul Scofield, entered quite unexpectedly through the side entrance surprising the whole court which welcomed him with great formality.⁶⁸ Scofield looked like some "retired Field Marshal" with his "close-cropped grey hair and bristly whiskers".⁶⁹ He sat on his throne and the division of the kingdom began. Scofield's Lear was an impressive character. J. C. Trewin described him as "a King of Britain, a figure of rigid, cold arrogance, set in tarnished gold."⁷⁰ When he listened to his elder daughters' declarations of love his countenance showed a cold indifference. He gave away his kingdom with a quiet, formal dismissiveness. Harold Hobson wrote that Scofield "... had the air of a vigorous, testy, self-opinionated old man of eighty, whose sharp, focused eyes and an aggressive voice indicated a lot of energy".⁷¹

Scofield in his interpretation repudiated the kind of grandeur that very often distanced the later madness of Lear from the audience, but he retained an impression of his dangerous power. He was sturdy, self-absorbed. He spoke "with the voice of a man to be feared: the voice of one bred to supreme authority."⁷² Scofield himself felt that Lear was extremely sane and very wise at this point.⁷³ When Cordelia refused to 'heave her heart into her mouth' he did not respond with the rage of a tyrant; only his voice thickened and he sank in a stubborn pride.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶⁸ The Prompt-book and H. Hobson, *The Sunday Times*, Nov. 11 (1962).

⁶⁹ Author unknown, *Evening Standard*, Nov. 7 (1962).

⁷⁰ J. C. Trewin, *Stratford-upon-Avon*, Nov. 7 (1962).

⁷¹ H. Hobson, *The Sunday Times*, Dec. 16 (1962).

⁷² J. C. Trewin, *Stratford-upon-Avon*, Nov. 7 (1962).

⁷³ Interview with Scofield, *Stratford-upon-Avon*, Nov. 7 (1962).

The really new Lear began in the hunting scene. Shed of responsibility, enjoying his life with his hundred wild knights, he strode the stage wearing his leather coat and his tight boots. He looked menacing, like an "ancient skipper commanding the bridge of his ancient vessel".⁷⁴ He was not a myth anymore. He was, as Harold Hobson vividly described it, "a man capable of tramping twenty miles in a day over sodden fells, and arriving home at nightfall properly tired and in a filthy mood".⁷⁵ His rowdy knights behaved in a very unruly manner shouting for food, making vulgar remarks to the servants. Even Kent became a bully like the rest of the knights when he took unconcealed delight in knocking the miserable Oswald about the place. This greatly pleased Lear and also incited the knights to give Kent a helping hand. Oswald ran away really frightened. Goneril was genuinely upset by her father's behaviour. Deeply concerned and full of apprehension she admonished Lear about his unruly retinue. Incensed by her words, Lear overturned the dinner table, stood behind it just for a fraction of a moment, and then slowly advanced upon Goneril to deliver his barbaric and vicious curse. Then he stormed out. This was the cue for the knights to follow their master's example. They tipped chairs, threw plates and generally demolished the chamber. The whole scene was described by Charles Marowitz as "a general pandemonium".⁷⁶

It was a completely new presentation of that scene. Lear appeared to be an old, hot-tempered autocrat who had transferred the responsibility of authority onto someone else and wanted only to enjoy its pleasures: hunting, eating, drinking. Brook openly sided with the sisters. He spoke for them presenting a violent, brutal Lear. It increased our sympathy with Goneril when she decided to turn Lear out and stood up against his curse. And in return it decreased our sympathy with Lear. Kenneth Tynan wrote: "The effect was revolutionary. Instead of assuming that Lear is right, and therefore pitiable, we are forced to make judgements, to decide between his claims and those of his kins".⁷⁷ The balance was almost even. Lear, wilful and arrogant, deserved much of what he got. Conversely, his daughters were not fiends any more and we looked differently at Regan's suggestions to dispose of Lear's retinue. This different reading was achieved through the use of the alienation effect. A beloved character was presented from a strange and unlovely angle.

The first thunder peal at Lear's "I shall do such things – what they are yet I know not, but they shall be the terrors of the earth" sounded

⁷⁴ J. C. Trewin, *Stratford-upon-Avon*, Nov. 7 (1962).

⁷⁵ H. Hobson, *The Sunday Times*, Dec. 16 (1962).

⁷⁶ Ch. Marowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁷⁷ K. Tynan, *The Observer*, Nov. 11 (1962).

like the first prelude of a fearful doomsday which was unleashed by Lear's threat of "the terrors of the earth".⁷⁸ His "shall go mad" was a genuine warning to those who disobeyed him, not only a pathetic prediction.⁷⁹

The storm scenes were acted with full lights on as the actors mimed their struggle against the hurricane. Thus the scene was stripped of any illusion usually connected with it and Brook appealed to the audience's imagination. The rusted metal banners, each fitted with a motor enabling it to vibrate, were lowered down to aid the thunder rumbling.⁸⁰ Lear and the Fool mimed the struggle against the wind which buffeted them forward on the road to death. Lear walked steadily from the back of the stage to the front along the straight line, bent forward into the wind. Behind, the Fool circled about like a leaf.⁸¹ Scofield defied the elements with a mighty, sustained "Blow winds" which sounded like a real menace to the storm. The storm was in Lear's voice, in his mind, he identified with its fury. The vivid transformation from the proud, rigid monarch of the first scene to Lear struck with grief, his soul in agony, strengthened the pathos of the storm scene.⁸²

According to Harold Hobson, the scene on the heath with Lear and the Fool was exquisitely played. While sitting side by side on a plain bench at the corner of an empty stage, Lear, talking of common things and mankind with only half his mind, forgot that the Fool was there. Suddenly, feeling the surge of torture inflicted on his body and soul, he instinctively put his hand into his Fool's.⁸³ His previous challenge to match the elements gave in to fatalistic resignation.

The last scene brings some consolation and catharsis into performance but Brook decided to avoid it. When Lear was dying and Edgar was trying to bring Lear back to consciousness Kent shouted furiously at him – "Vex not his soul" which was really startling but plausible. It was as if he had demanded to let his beloved master die. At the end, there was no death march as first Lear, then Cordelia were carried away. Albany, Edgar and Kent remained behind to round off the play. When Albany and Kent went off, Edgar said the last lines. Then he raised Edmund's body and dragged it after him as the lights dimmed. After a while the lights came up again and the play was done.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ J. C. Trewin, *Stratford-upon-Avon*, Nov. 7 (1962).

⁷⁹ K. Tynan, *The Observer*, Nov. 11 (1962).

⁸⁰ Ch. Marowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁸¹ The Prompt-book and sketches.

⁸² J. C. Trewin, *Stratford-upon-Avon*, Nov. 7 (1962).

⁸³ H. Hobson, *The Sunday Times*, Dec. 16 (1962) and the Prompt-book.

⁸⁴ Ch. Marowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 32 and the Prompt-book.

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The development of *King Lear* in those three productions is spectacular. The 1953 production of George Devine and Michael Redgrave's interpretation of Lear were still traditional though, at the same time, they broke with the nineteenth century tradition. Redgrave put a heavy stress on realism. His Lear was an old man whose tragic mistake of wrong judgement stemmed from his wilful, senile age which was in line with the accepted, stereotypical vision of Lear. One could also see in Redgrave's interpretation the influence of Bradley's analysis. Redgrave's personal flaw, his rashness and love of flattery, became fully evident when his old age softened the censorship of reason. The influence of another prominent critic, namely that of Granville Barker, could be seen too and was responsible for the new elements in the interpretation. There was no attempt made to recreate any particular historical period, as was often the case in the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁸⁵ The stress was put on universality and barbarity, on the feeling of awe and mystery. The costumes designed by Robert Colquhoun, a contemporary abstract painter, are a very good example of the new approach. Colquhoun did not use wild animal furs, did not dress actors in heavy flowing robes. He tried to design costumes which would complete the director's vision and, if possible, highlight the main characters' personalities. For example, Goneril wore blue, a colder colour for her deadlier evil, whereas Regan wore red for her more violent tongue and hotter temper. Redgrave employed good examples from the past as well as new things. He focused the audience's attention on the text and its meaning. Both Devine and Redgrave were also brave enough to introduce mime which helped to stimulate the audience's imagination, encouraging other directors and actors to go further in experimentation. The production and Redgrave's Lear were generally praised by the critics and popular with the audience. It was, one might say, a very wise compromise between good, modernised tradition and moderate modernity.

Glen Byam Shaw and Laughton did not use compromise. Laughton's conception was a definite divorce from the regal, majestic, megalithic conception of Lear. Instead, the production highlighted the play's personal and family aspects. It was a humanistic interpretation. The production was very consistent throughout. It had many scenes which gave moments of repose and an opportunity for reflection. The audience was asked to radically reconsider the fixed stereotypes of *King Lear*. The production also, I believe, helped to question the definition of tragedy. Laughton's Lear was

⁸⁵ See J. S. Bratton, *op. cit.* (Introduction).

a man like many ordinary men, a man bewilderingly lost in his search for truth. Laughton showed a man whose weaknesses, shortcomings and vices prevented him from attaining heroic stature a man who suffered, was tried by cruel fate and emerged victorious despite being defeated. In the final scenes he makes peace with his fate. His soul is reconciled, alleviated. His mind is clear and positively sure about the priorities in life. Those priorities were, Laughton seemed to imply, other human beings. All of us.

At the same time, something fundamental was lost. Laughton's Lear lacked Grandeur, which is not only associated with Lear's regality. *King Lear* possesses qualities which are referred to as cosmic, eternal, godlike. Readers and theatre-goers like to be confronted with a spectacle conceived in such a manner. The horizons of that play seem to be nearly infinite and thus perhaps should not be narrowed too much.

Peter Brook's production of *King Lear* was a turning point and, at the same time, a culmination in the evolution of the play on the stage and of its main protagonist. The production was highly acclaimed and praised for its masterly realisation. Many critics stressed that Brook, despite his inclination towards performance in the style of the theatre of the grotesque, managed to give the play an air of plausibility by adding realistic details which made it a three dimensional, humanistic tragedy. This was owing, to a great extent, to Paul Scofield's conception of Lear. He did not fully accept the vision of Brook who followed Brechtian and Beckettian theatre. Scofield's Lear stood in contrast to the rest of the characters who were more abstract and theorised. His character had the rich personality of a man who, absorbed with power, loses touch with his daughters and through his rash decisions brings on himself their revenge and, unable to live with it, goes mad. Such a conception helped to emphasise the disproportion between the cruelty of the punishment inflicted on ordinary man and his sin. It also alleviated the feeling of distortion which was Brook's aim. In a personal letter Scofield wrote that it was obvious to him that one scene by Shakespeare, the mock suicide scene of Gloucester, could not be equated to an entire Beckett play. Therefore, the whole *King Lear*, of which that isolated scene was just one facet, had to be approached with the help of a wider vision than Beckett's.⁸⁶ That opinion is very true. Brook's production was the most distorted version of *King Lear*. It was deliberate, of course. But in his search to answer the questions he was obsessed with, Brook lost some of the primary Shakespearean values; mainly that of hope for redemption. Scofield's interpretation counterpointed Brook's idea with a more humanistic conception thus completing the play's vision.

⁸⁶ C. J. Carlisle, *Shakespeare From The Greenroom*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1969), p. 277.

One is tempted to ask whether all those great productions would be successful today. It is impossible, I think, to say. Personally, I would not want to see Devine's production. It would smack too much of the previous century to me. But I would certainly greatly enjoy the two other productions. They touched, in my opinion, each of them differently, one of the most fundamental aspects of *King Lear*. And they did that in a highly original and masterly way.

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KRÓL LIR W TRZECH INSCENIZACJACH ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

Autor tego artykułu analizuje trzy kolejne przedstawienia *Króla Lira* Williama Shakespeare'a w wykonaniu Royal Shakespeare Company: z roku 1953 w reżyserii Georga Devine'a, z roku 1959 wyreżyserowane przez Glena Byam Shawa oraz słynne przedstawienie Petera Brooka, pochodzące z roku 1962. Autor skoncentrował się na sposobach prezentacji postaci Króla Lira.

Trzy wymienione przedstawienia stanowią bardzo ciekawy materiał do analizy. Ujęte w ramę niemal dziesięciu lat, odzwierciedlają całą epokę w zrozumieniu *Króla Lira* oraz w sposobie prezentacji i interpretacji głównego bohatera.

Przedstawienie Georga Devine'a, z Michaellem Redgrave'em w roli głównej, jest kwintesencją stylu, który został wykreowany przez teorie A. C. Bradleya oraz H. Granville-Barkera. Odrzucili oni tradycyjne sposoby grania Lira, obowiązujące w XIX w. i przygotowali podłoże pod współczesne interpretacje. Jednocześnie Devine sygnalizował w swojej koncepcji pewne zmiany, które miały wkrótce nastąpić. Przedstawienie wyreżyserowane przez Glena Byam Shaw, w którym rolę Lira zagrał Charles Laughton, zerwało całkowicie z majestatycznym, królewskim, „megalitycznym” wizerunkiem głównego bohatera. Lir Laughtona był osobą prywatną, bezskutecznie zmagającą się ze swoimi słabościami i tragedią, jaką był dla niego rozpad rodziny. Był postacią utożsamiającą się ze wszystkimi ludźmi. Przedstawienie Brooka, w którym postać tytułową grał Paul Scofield, było punktem kulminacyjnym w ewolucji sztuki i sposobie prezentacji głównego bohatera. Wykorzystując elementy teatru Becketta i Brechta, Brook całkowicie uwspółcześnił klasyczny tekst, umieszczając go w kontekście XX w.