KING LEAR

By William Shakespeare

A Royal Exchange Theatre and Talawa Theatre Company co-production in association with Birmingham Repertory Theatre

1 APRIL – 28 MAY 2016

DIRECTOR Michael Buffong
DESIGNER Signe Beckmann
LIGHTING DESIGNER Johanna Town
COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER Tayo Akinbode
MOVEMENT Coral Messam
FIGHT DIRECTOR Kevin McCurdy

PERFORMED BY Rakie Ayola (Goneril), Fraser Ayres (Edmund), Rhys Bevan (Duke of Burgundy), Norman Bowman (Cornwall), Thomas Coombes (Oswald), Alfred Enoch (Edgar), Sam Glen (Curan), Wil Johnson (Earl of Kent), Debbie Korley (Regan), Pepter Lunkuse (Cordelia), Miles Mitchell (King of France), Sarah Quist (Old Woman), Mark Springer (Albany), Don Warrington (King Lear), Philip Whitchurch (Earl of Gloucester), Miltos Yerolemou (The Fool).

TEACHER RESOURCE

This resource has been created by Talawa, Birmingham Repertory Theatre and the Royal Exchange. It has been written with Key Stage 3, 4 & 5 Drama and English teachers in mind, but many of the activities can be adapted to suit other subject areas and age groups. The resource aims to enhance students’ understanding of the KING LEAR rehearsal process and spark interesting conversations about the production.

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20 POINT SYNOPSIS

• King Lear, the ageing King of Britain, decides that it is time to retire and divide his kingdom amongst his three daughters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. Before doing so, he decides to test his daughters by asking them to declare their love for him.

• Goneril and Regan make excessive declarations of love. However Cordelia, the youngest (and King Lear’s favourite), simply says she loves him as a daughter should. Infuriated by her response, he disowns her and divides his kingdom between his other daughters.

• Kent, King Lear’s loyal nobleman, tries to defend Cordelia but is banished from the kingdom for speaking out of turn.

• The King of France (who is engaged to Cordelia), learns that King Lear has disowned Cordelia but chooses to marry her anyway. They leave for France.

• Kent, although banished from the Kingdom, disguises himself as a peasant called Caius and convinces Lear to take him on as servant. Kent uses this as an opportunity to keep an eye on the King and protect him from his power hungry daughters, Goneril and Regan.

• Gloucester is also experiencing family issues. His illegitimate son Edmund (who stands to inherit nothing), tricks him into believing that his legitimate son, Edgar (who stands to inherit everything) is plotting to kill him.

• Edmund advises Edgar to flee their angry father. Edgar disguises himself as a crazy beggar called ‘Poor Tom’ and leaves to wander on the heath.

• King Lear discovers that he has made a big mistake in dividing his kingdom between Goneril and Regan. They are quick to undermine him and refuse to look after him. Upset by their behavior, King Lear wanders aimlessly on the heath in a mighty storm, accompanied by Kent (in disguise as Caius) and his Fool.

• Gloucester learns that King Lear’s daughters have turned against him and attempts to help him.

• Edmund informs Regan and Cornwall that his father is attempting to help King Lear and they find Gloucester, accuse him of treason and gauge out his eyes as punishment. Gloucester is left to wander on the heath, blind.

• Edgar, still disguised as Poor Tom, discovers his blind father on the heath. Gloucester asks Poor Tom to lead him towards the city of Dover, not realizing he is talking to his son.

• In Dover, Gloucester attempts to commit suicide; but Edgar tricks him into believing that he is jumping off an imaginary cliff so he survives.
Edmund becomes romantically involved with both Goneril and Regan at the same time. Goneril plots with Edmund to kill her husband, Albany.

In Dover, Cordelia lands with the French army. She has come to invade Dover and save her father.

Briefly, King Lear and Cordelia are reunited and she forgives him, but Goneril and Regan’s soldiers find them and hold them captive. Edmund sentences Cordelia to death.

The French troops are defeated by the British soldiers.

Albany, who has learnt that Edmund is romantically involved with Goneril and Regan, accuses him of treachery and challenges him to a duel. Albany asks Poor Tom (Edgar in disguise) to fight in the duel. Edmund is severely wounded.

After the duel, Goneril finds out that Regan is also having an affair with Edmund and poisons her. Albany attempts to have her arrested for infidelity and sends a guard to govern her.

Edmund attempts to show remorse by pardoning Cordelia, but the order comes too late: she is already dead. Out of overwhelming grief and poor health, King Lear dies.

All that remains is Albany, Edgar and Kent to take care of the country in its time of sorrow and regret.

**WHY NOT?** Use this synopsis to help your students understand the story:

- Print out the synopsis and cut into strips, so you have a pack of ‘plot points’. Ask your class to try and arrange the plot points in order.
- When you have worked out the correct order, get your class into groups and ask them to choose three consecutive plot points each. Each group can then dramatize their part of the story using freeze frames, cross-cutting or improvisation techniques.

**EXTENSION ACTIVITY**

- Clear a space and place 11 chairs within it (one chair for every character named in the synopsis). Place a piece of paper with the name of a character on each chair.
- Give your class a selection of different colored string/ribbon and some scissors.
- Read the synopsis aloud and ask your class to tie the chairs together to show how the characters are connected together in the story. It works quite well if the different colors represent different sorts of bonds i.e. blue for family, red for romance, green for friendship.
- If a bond is broken, they should cut the ties with the scissors.
- If a character dies, they should turn that particular chair over.
- At the end of the exercise, have a discussion about the way that relationships work in the play. What did your group notice as they tied the chairs together and then cut the ties? What did the room look like at the end of the exercise, compared with how it looked at the start?
THEMES & TALKING POINTS

FAMILY:

The director of KING LEAR, Michael Buffong, described the story in an interview with The Guardian as “a bloody family tale of powerful people tearing each other apart”.

According to Buffong, the main theme that underpins the play is family – in particular, the parent-child relationship. At the start of the play, the character of King Lear breaks his parent-child relationship with Cordelia and sets the tragedy in motion:

“Here I disclaim all my parental care” (Act 1, Scene 1)

At the same time, Gloucester’s illegitimate son, Edmund, breaks his bond with his father by convincing him that his brother, Edgar, is plotting to kill him.

Sibling bonds are also demolished. Goneril and Regan have no sympathy or solidarity towards Cordelia at the start of the play, and by the end of the play they are pitched against each other in a jealous battle over Edmund.

Questions for Discussion:

• There are many different family structures in the play. Can you identify all the different families and types of relationships?
• What family members or structures are missing? Would they make a difference if they were there?
• How do these family structures and relationships compare with family structures that you have seen or encountered?

AUTHORITY & CHAOS:

At the beginning of the play, King Lear has the power and authority to demand or dismiss his family and followers. When King Lear gives up that authority, it gives way to chaos and conflict, both externally (e.g. the war that breaks out between England and France) and internally (e.g. King Lear’s own grief and confusion).

The storm in the play can be seen as a metaphor for the chaos that King Lear has found himself in: it is a tumultuous backdrop highlighting Lear’s loss of authority over his family, his kingdom and his own destiny:

"Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm, / How shall your houseless heads and unfed raggedness defend you / From seasons such as these? O I have taken / Too little care of this." (Act 3, Scene 4)
Questions for Discussion:

- Do you think King Lear abuses his authority?
- Why do you think Regan and Goneril undermine their father’s authority?
- List as many real-life examples of authority as you can. What makes people respect them?
- What might cause these real-life examples to lose their power?

OLD AGE & MENTAL HEALTH:

King Lear divides his kingdom between his daughters because he is getting older and needs to unburden himself of the responsibility of ruling a kingdom. Regan and Goneril are aware that their father is getting old, however, and use his weakness as an opportunity to take power for themselves. Similarly, Edmund takes advantage of his father’s old age when he tricks him into thinking Edgar is plotting to kill him.

Tragedy occurs when both Lear and Gloucester (Edmund’s father) find themselves homeless. In their old age, they find themselves despised, disrespected and unwanted. Both have lost their property, their rights and their children’s love and care.

Mental health appears as a theme within the play as well. King Lear and Gloucester both appear to experience mental breakdowns, which cause them suffering and add to their isolation.

"O heavens / If you do love old men, if your sweet sway / Allow obedience, if you yourselves are old, / Make it your cause. Send down and take my part."

(Act 2, Scene 4)

Questions for Discussion:

- At what moments in the play do mental health problems and old age cause suffering and isolation?
- Are Goneril, Regan and Edmund justified in their behavior towards their fathers?
- Think about older family members and friends. What do you think are some of the misunderstandings that come out of generational gaps?
BLINDNESS & INSIGHT:

King Lear and Gloucester both experience blindness in a metaphorical and physical sense. Metaphorically, they lack insight into the true characters of their children and it costs them dearly:

“See better, Lear” (Act 1, Scene 1)

Gloucester is also physically blinded when he has his eyes gauged out, and for the remainder of the play he represents the tragic errors of being metaphorically blind.

You could also say that other characters, such as Regan, Goneril and Edmund, are blinded by ambition and jealousy.

Questions for Discussion:

- What evidence is there in the play for King Lear being metaphorically blind?
- Which other characters do you think experience a lack of insight into another character during the play?
- What might the ‘message’ of the play be?
BLACK LEADERS / BLACK LEARS

Many people believe that the Black presence in Europe is a relatively recent result of colonialism. In fact, due to Europe’s close proximity to Africa, the Middle East and trade routes leading across Asia, Europe has been an ethnically diverse continent for thousands of years.

From Roman Emperors and Moorish sovereigns, to 16th Century monarchs and 18th Century philosophers, Black people have held positions of power across the continent since its birth.

In APPENDIX A you will find two examples of Black European leaders:
- Lucius Septimius Severus
- Queen Charlotte Mecklenberg-Strelitz

If you like, you could also research:
- Alessandro de ‘Medici’, the Duke of Florence
- Abram Petrovich Gannibal
- Thomas Alexandre Dumas
- Queen Philippa of Hainault

WHY NOT? Take your class through these exercises, designed to introduce young people to the history of Black leadership in Europe and the history of Black actors playing King Lear.

BLACK LEADERS ACTIVITY
1. Conversation starter (can be used for the whole class or in talking partners):
   - Do you think there has ever been a Black King or Queen in Europe?
   - Do you think there have been any high ranking Black leaders in Britain?
   - When do you think Black people started coming to Britain?
   - Correct answer: there have been several Black leaders and monarchs across European history!

2. Split the class into groups and give them one of the Black Leader sheets; Queen Charlotte or Septimius Severus. Ask the groups to discuss the leader they’ve been given and pick 3 key moments from their life. Where did these moments take place? Who else might have been there? What might they have been feeling?

3. Ask each group to create still images of their chosen moments.

4. Each group can then pick their favourite moment and bring it to life in a short 2 minute scene. Share the scenes and discuss. Why did they choose those particular moments?

5. Now ask students to write a list of questions that they would like to ask the leaders, and then take it in turns to be hot-seated for 2 minutes as Queen Charlotte or Septimius Severus. Students should be encouraged to imagine what the leaders might have been like and improvise answers as they see fit.

6. Bring the class back together and ask them what they have discovered about Queen Charlotte and Septimius Severus. Were there any similarities or differences between the leaders? How accurate do you think the scenes and hot-seating were?

7. As an extension activity, ask students to write a letter or a speech from the point of view of one of the leaders.
BLACK KING LEARS ACTIVITY

1. Split your class into 4 groups and give each group one of the Black King Lear Sheets (you will find these in APPENDIX B). Ask students to read and discuss, answering the following questions:
   - What do you think this production of King Lear might have been like?
   - What do you feel the director might have been trying to ‘say’?
   - What type of audience do you think went to see the production?
   - What do you think the audiences and critics of the time would have thought of the casting?

2. Ask each group to present the production and their thoughts on it to the rest of the class.

3. In pairs, invite students to pick one of the productions they have talked about and write a diary entry from the point of view of the actor playing King Lear. How might they have been feeling before and/or after the first performance? Once the monologue is written, ask one student from each pair to perform the piece, with their partner acting as director.

4. As an extension activity, ask the class to think about the audiences that saw the productions. Using the information in the sheets as a starting point, challenge them to create characters, thinking about:
   - Who are they – what class, age or ethnicity might they be?
   - Why are they going to see the show – are they excited, curious, skeptical?

5. Ask students to create 2 short scenes. The first should show their characters before they go to the theatre, the second when they have been to the theatre. Share and discuss the scenes. How might contemporary audiences be similar/different to the characters in these scenes?

REHEARSAL SHOTS
DIRECTING KING LEAR – AN INTERVIEW
WITH MICHAEL BUFFONG

Michael Buffong is the artistic director of Talawa Theatre Company. He has previously directed PRIVATE LIVES and the multi-award winning A RAISIN IN THE SUN for the Royal Exchange Theatre.

When talking about directing KING LEAR, he explained that the play “represents a huge and exciting challenge [for] a director. It is an epic story of extremes in which families fight, tear each other apart and are pitted against the elements. It takes us back to an old world that's searching for answers to questions about our very existence”. We asked him some questions about his directorial process.

How are you approaching the play? What is your particular vision and how did you arrive at it?

Michael: When I read King Lear, I instinctively felt that it should be set where Shakespeare originally set it: in a pagan England. I really like that idea; it chimes with me that without the rules of a religion, other controlling elements are used: for example, the idea of absolute loyalty the father and the King. The idea of setting it in ancient England was twofold to me: one, I thought that the language and the landscape of the actual piece resonated in this setting. Secondly, it also made me want to explore the idea of a black presence in England at that time, of which I am absolutely sure there was historically. The reality that Black people have lived in, and contributed to, English society for hundreds and hundreds of years but have been erased from the history books is only now being gradually uncovered and discussed. The fact that we can present KING LEAR in this context is, for me, very important.

How have you formed your interpretation of Lear’s character?

Michael: This is where the design becomes integral. Once I’d decided that our production would be set in ancient times, we discussed the elemental world we wanted to configure. We felt strongly about making its presence felt in a really tangible way. Singe Beckmann, the designer, and I arrived at a circular design holding a disc within it (that could potentially look like an eclipse) made of compacted earth. When we thought about what it meant for Lear as king to walk on this earth floor, then our formation of the character grew upwards from there.

In KING LEAR, the characters understand they are totally subject to, and respectful of, the elements, therefor nature is given the name of God because it controls them. It strips people down to the fundamentals if they are that close to nature, life is hard and people have to be tough to survive. King Lear has a direct connection to nature, or God, and it's within his gift as king to be able to call on it. What is really interesting is that he does so in several ways in this play, even in terms of his own destruction. I feel that the earth floor is a constant reminder of this idea.
How does the play resonate with you?

Michael: As you approach the play is feels so daunting, and then you start exploring it and all your other artistic sensibilities start to kick in and you become hungry for it and you want to rip it apart. I think the extraordinary thing about the play is just how human it is. It touches on so many emotional situations, and when it does it’s like an echo inside you; it illuminates humanity and truth. The play is a vast and fertile ground to plough, and that’s what’s also terrifying: there’s an awful lot of ideas to face up to and to feel. It shakes you up because it asks you to do things that are scary beyond belief. But it’s waking me up.

WHY NOT? Ask your class to read the interview with Michael Buffong and then watch this promotional video made at the Royal Exchange Theatre, of the behind the scenes process making the poster (image above): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5TvKV0YWVBs

Either individually or in groups, ask your students to create a mood board connected to this production of KING LEAR. There is no right way of doing this, but some suggestions for the mood board are:

- Write a list of words (any words that come to mind!)
- Add themes, emotions, colours, tastes, textures, song titles/lyrics, types of weather, and names of television programs/films.
- Add images (these could be found online through google images, or you could provide your class with a table of ready printed images), pieces of material and objects to the mood boards.
- Ask your class to try and sum up all of the ideas on their mood boards in one sentence that starts: ‘this is a world where…’
- Finally, challenge your students to turn their mood boards into live trailers for the play. The aim of this is to articulate the ‘feeling’ of the piece, so it does not matter if your students don’t know the story!
DESIGNING KING LEAR – AN INTERVIEW
WITH SIGNE BECKMANN

Signe Beckmann is a set and costume designer, who worked with Michael Buffong on this production of KING LEAR. Her set was built at the Royal Exchange Theatre and then adapted for its move to the Birmingham Repertory Theatre.

Here are some of her thoughts on the design process.

On approaching the play, what were the most important visual elements mentioned/referenced in the play that you felt had to be incorporated in your design?

Signe: I was very inspired by the natural elements and darkness of the play and the way the storm echoes Lear’s inner turmoil and mounting madness, as well as symbolizing the political disarray that has engulfed the country. The stable, hierarchical order that Lear initially represents falls apart and disorder engulfs the realm.

The desolation of the heath is also a very powerful image which captures the atmosphere of the play, so this was also a great inspiration.

Notes: Signe’s set design is circular, with a disc of raw earth set within it. This design brings to mind a solar eclipse, as well as looking a bit like an eye. This highlights the theme of blindness in the play and suggests a world at the mercy of the elements. In APPENDIX C, you can find some of her visual references for the design.

You and Michael described the world of your KING LEAR as “cold, harsh, brutal, raw, rough”. How does this translate into your set design?

Signe: The harshness of the play and the shifting between interior and exterior locations lead us to think of dark barren landscapes and cold interiors with stamped earth floors. We wanted something raw and natural.

Notes: The earth floor allows us to imagine we’re in an ancient castle, then when play switches to an outside scene the castle’s compact earth floor becomes the outside world of the heath. Lighting, sound and special effects play a big role in telling the audience where each scene is set: there are torches with real flames, smoke and even rain!

Michael reminded us that the characters are physically violent to each other. Have fights, moments of torture and violence in the play impacted on costume design?

It is quite a challenge in terms of costume when there are fights and blood, as the stains can be hard to get off and the blood goes absolutely everywhere! So the wardrobe department and I have worked to ensure that the costumes could withstand this. The costumes are made of hardwearing materials such as leather and fur to suggest a society of people that are tough and used to battling with each other as well as with the elements.

Quite a few of the characters have in-built blood pouches hidden in secret pockets in their costumes.
What characteristics stood out for you when designing individual costumes for the main characters?

Signe: The costume of Lear follows his journey from a powerful King to a more humble and caring individual. The costumes of the three daughters also reflect their characteristics; Cordelia’s being devotion, kindness, beauty and honesty, which is contrasted by Goneril and Regan, who are neither honest nor loving, but full of greedy ambition.

**COSTUME DESIGNS**

(King Lear)

(WHY NOT? Develop your own vision for KING LEAR!)

Ask your class to imagine they are going to design and/or direct the play and need to create a present-day, 21st Century concept. In groups, ask them to consider these key questions and where possible write and sketch their ideas:

- **Where?** (locations: countries, cities/towns, buildings, specific sites)
- **Who?** (Is Lear still the King or is he powerful in a different way? Does he split up his country or something else – like a business? Do you want to make changes to characters’ genders?)
- **How?** (How do key actions of the play happen in a contemporary setting? Think about fights and journeys etc.)
- **What?** (What sense do you want the audience to have of the world you’re creating? What visual aspects are really important to your ideas? How do you want your audience to feel?)
TWO VERSIONS OF ONE DESIGN

The set design for the Royal Exchange Theatre had to be in-the-round, whilst for the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, it had to be end-on. This was a big challenge for the creative team, who had to find a visual language that would mean there could be a similar theatrical world and atmosphere in both theatres.

There is an intimacy when you perform in the round, which lends itself to a very simple set design.

This is a picture of the model box created for the Royal Exchange Theatre – notice the circular discs (suggesting a solar eclipse) on the stage and the compacted earth floor.

Signe and Michael were keen to recreate some of this intimacy at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, while keeping the simplicity of the design.

This is a picture of the model box created for the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. Notice how the circular discs have been adapted slightly for the stage floor, and the addition of pillars at the back to give the set design some height.

WHY NOT? Ask your class to look at the pictures above and discuss:
- What are the challenges/advantages of each space?
- What are the similarities/differences between the 2 designs? Why are they different?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY
What are the main differences between how KING LEAR might have been performed in Shakespeare’s time and how it is being performed in 2016? To help with your answers you might find it useful to look at the RSC’s website, where there is lots of information about Shakespeare’s original performance conditions: https://www.rsc.org.uk/shakespeare's-life-and-times/performing-shakespeare-in-the-17th-century
APPENDIX A - BLACK RULES IN EUROPE

Lucius Septimius Severus

Born: 1 April 145AD

Place of birth: Leptis Magna (Libya)

Father: Publius Septimius Geta (from Tunisia in North Africa)

Mother: Fulvia Pia (belonged to an influential Roman Family)

Rise to Power: Severus left Libya in his teens and rose through the ranks of the Roman Government. He held positions of power such as Consul, Senator and Governor and was soon commanding 12 legions.

When the Emperor Pertinax was murdered by the Praetorian Guard, Severus got his opportunity to become Emperor. He killed the man responsible for Pertinax’s death and executed two rival contenders to the throne. He then dismissed the Praetorian Guard and replaced them with his own army.

Family Life: Severus’ first marriage was to a Libyan woman who died without having any children. In early 187AD, he married Julia Domna, a descendent of a Syrian royal dynasty. He cherished her political opinions had 2 sons with her: Caracalla and Geta.

As Emperor: Severus ruled like a military dictator. He was a small man, but powerfully built, and was renowned for his cruelty and ruthlessness. The violence of his rise to power earned him the nickname ‘Punic Sulla’: the notorious vengeful dictator.

Severus spent most of his time in Rome, rebuilding Italy, reforming provincial governments and increasing security with more police and fire brigades. He paid special attention to his African homeland and his wife’s birthplace, improving the infrastructure of these countries.

Severus restored a large number of buildings across Italy, Syria, Tunisia and Britain and inscribed his name on each of them. He was known throughout his reign as an outstanding imperial builders.

The Army Man: Severus implemented many military reforms, giving soldiers a generous pay increase and the right to marry. This ensured the loyalty of all his soldiers.

On his last military campaign to Britain, he fell seriously ill and died in Yorkshire. It is said that Severus’ last words of advice to his sons were:

‘Be good to one another, enrich the soldiers and damn the rest.’
Queen Charlotte Mecklenberg-Strelitz

Born: 19 May 1744

Place of birth: Germany

Father: Duke Charles Louis Frederick of Mecklenburg (Prince of Mirow)

Mother: Princess Elizabeth Albertina (a direct descendent from the Black branch of the Portuguese Royal family, which can be traced back to the North African Moors who ruled Spain from the 8th – 15th centuries)

Rise to Power: The young princess Charlotte wrote a letter to the German king, begging him to restrain his soldiers who were causing havoc in Germany at that time. This letter found its way to the English court, who thought Charlotte would make a suitable consort for King George III of England. After a few hours of meeting each other, Charlotte, aged 17, married George, 23, becoming the Queen of Britain and Ireland.

Family Life: King George III and Queen Charlotte’s marriage was a happy one. With 15 children in total, Queen Charlotte was known to be a supportive, proud and protective mother. She ensured that all her children, particularly her daughters, were well educated, which was considered unusual for women at that time.

As Queen: Queen Charlotte had a love for books, music, theatre and art. She was taught to play piano by Johann Christian Bach and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart dedicated his Opus 3 to her.

She was a philanthropist and her charitable causes were well known. She was a keen supporter of The Royal Hospital of St Katherine, but her favourite charities were those devoted to the welfare of women and children.

A very simple and flamboyant woman when she was able to be, Queen Charlotte was a very expressive and well-educated woman, this is evident in the total of four hundred and forty four private writings of hers that have been uncovered. Most of which were private letters to her closest confidant, her older brother Charles II, Grand Duke of Mecklenburg – Strelitz. In her letters to him she wrote about her thoughts and feelings about being queen. In one letter she wrote:

‘I find that the solitary and retiring life, which I lead is not made for me. Having admitted this I assure you I shall not ignore my duty’.
**APPENDIX B - BLACK KING LEARS**

**Actor:** Ira Aldridge

**Venue:** Various locations across Europe (Germany, Budapest, Richmond, Newcastle, Hull, Cambridge and more)

**Date of production:** 1858-1859

**Concept:** The play was set in Medieval England, so Ira Aldridge painted his face white for the role.

**More information:**

Ira Aldridge, also known as The African Tragedian, was an African-American actor who made a career performing Shakespeare and other classic plays all over Europe.

He was often cast in traditionally white roles and would perform in ‘whiteface’ in order to help the predominantly white audiences see past his colour. He was considered to be one of the first Black men to play white roles in the 19th century.

**QUOTES:**

“[Aldridge] raised the role of King Lear to the highest perfection of artistic excellence. He portrays the old, bilious man in his escalation from petulance to rage, from rage to insanity with such precision... that we are completely inclined to place this success over his others.”

_ Ira Aldridge: the Last Years, 1855 – 1867, Bernth Lindfors_

“We should give Mr Aldridge credit for understanding how to masterfully present a powerful and ingenious whole [...] with such true and natural colours [...] Aldridge has again delivered proof of his uncommon talent and adroitness as an actor [...] A most interesting phenomenon, all the more because he offers an example of rare talent in a race to which all talent has been wholly denied.”

_Temesvar Zeitung (A German Newspaper)_
BLACK KING LEARS

Actor: Ben Thomas
Company: Talawa Theatre Company
Director: Yvonne Brewster
Venue: The Cochrane Theatre and West Yorkshire Playhouse
Date: 1994
Concept: Set in the near future (early 21st century)

More information:
Originally Norman Beaton was chosen to play King Lear but 2 weeks before rehearsals he fell ill and the role was given to Ben Thomas.

Thomas was a young actor, so Ms Brewster made the artistic decision to give King Lear a heart condition. A retainer was in attendance throughout the play giving him pills, so that the audience were watching a young King Lear deteriorate into illness, as well as the threat of madness. The play was performed by a multicultural cast and set in future London. King Lear’s throne was based on Canary Wharf.

QUOTES:
“Thomas was the first black actor to play Lear in a professional production in England for 135 years, since a performance by Ira Aldridge.” English Shakespeare’s: Shakespeare on the English Stage in the 1990s, Peter Holland

“One of the production’s least endearing characteristics is its flirtation with Afro-Caribbean culture [...] Edmund becomes a Rambo figure, whose final battle is played out as a tribal dance against hooded figures beating Brixton style riot shields. It’s a dramatically effective image, but think of its implications. That Edmund, the double-crossing bastard, is an icon of Black manhood, or repressed black youth in Britain today?” Claire Armistead, The Guardian
**BLACK KING LEARS**

**Actor:** Joseph Marcell

**Director:** Bill Buckhurst

**Venue:** Globe Theatre

**Date:** 2015

**Concept:** Medieval England, Black King Lear with an all-white cast

**More Information:**

Joseph Marcell played King Lear in The Globe Theatre’s tour. The production was performed in indoor and outdoor spaces, where the elements were welcomed. No spectacular lighting or sound, just real rain, wind and sunshine. Marcell played a black King Lear in an otherwise all-white cast.

**QUOTES:**

“During our final performance at Corpus Christi College the sky opened. We had thunder, lightning and rain, but the most wonderful thing about it was that it came at the most apposite time, when Lear was on the heath. We all got soaked of course, but it was magical.”

Joseph Marcell in *Performing King Lear: Gielgud to Russell Beale*, Jonathan Croall

“Joseph Marcell is exhaustingly good as Lear. His voice is suitably bombastic, filling the beautiful void at the heart of the Bodleian – he is a king, and kings do not go quietly into the night.”

Seamus Gregan, *Daily info Oxford*

“As he struts around his court and demands like a spoilt child to hear his daughters’ gilded proclamations of love, Marcell has all the regal vanity required to precede the king’s fall from grace, but when this violent tumble arrives it feels oddly cushioned.”

_Catherine Love, Exeunt Magazine_
BLACK KING LEARS

Actor: Nonso Anozie
Company: RSC
Director: Declan Donnellan
Venue: Swan Theatre
Date: 2002
Concept: Set in an urban jungle in the 20th century

More Information:

Nonso Anozie, aged 23 at the time of production, is the youngest actor to play King Lear in a professional production.

Declan Donnellan chose to make youth the heart of this production as all the actors were fresh out of drama school. Declan chose not to hide the characters by aging them and rather allowing for their youthful energy to show.

QUOTES:

“Donnellan made the play less about Lear’s pathos than about the strain the impossible father/ King put on everyone around him. Nonso Anozie, the only black actor in the cast and physically considerably larger than any other performer, was arrogant and impulsive as Lear and always seemed threatening. Even in suffering, he remained more of a figure to fear than pity.” King Lear edited by David Bevington and David Scott Kastan

‘I thought Anozie was naturally brilliant […] he had the weight and the power you need for the part, which is important. He is like an oak tree.’
Declan Donnellan in Performing King Lear: Gielgud to Russell Beale, Jonathan Croall

“Though no fan of colour-blind casting, I was not troubled by Nonso Anozie, who has a majestic manner and a big bass rumble to go with it.”
Rhoda Koenig, The Independent
APPENDIX C – VISUAL REFERENCES

These references were used by Signe Beckmann when she was designing set and costumes for this production of KING LEAR.
APPENDIX D – KING LEAR’S CROWN

NOTES:
- The balls on the top of the crown are 3D.
- The lion head is 3D.
- The line pattern is raised from the base.