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INDIANA'S THEATRE LAUREATE

Lilly presents Exploring William Shakespeare's KING LEAR

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS PRESENTS

SHAKESPEARE IN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

IRT Mainstage : March 1 - 25, 2006

This production is part of *Shakespeare in American Communities:* ***Shakespeare for a New Generation,*** sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts in cooperation with Arts Midwest.

"Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!"

The Story

King Lear decides to retire and to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. In order to determine each daughter's portion, he requires each to proclaim her love for him. His two oldest daughters, Goneril (married to the Duke of Albany) and Regan (married to the Duke of Cornwall), both heap their father with lavish declarations. Lear's youngest and favorite daughter, Cordelia, however, refuses to measure her love in words, simply replying, "Nothing, my lord."

Outraged by what he feels is disrespect, Lear disowns Cordelia. Without her dowry—the traditional payment from a bride's family to her groom—Cordelia loses one of her suitors, the Duke of Burgundy; but the King of France, valuing Cordelia's beauty and pure heart, happily takes her as his wife. The Earl of Kent, one of the noblemen of the court, tries to reason with Lear on behalf of Cordelia, and is banished for his defiance.

Meanwhile, Edmund, the illegitimate son of the Earl of Gloucester (pronounced *Gloster*), is plotting to discredit his legitimate brother, Edgar. With a forged letter, Edmund convinces Gloucester that Edgar is trying to kill him. When Edmund warns Edgar of their father's rage, Edgar escapes, disguising himself as "Poor Tom," a crazy beggar.

Kent returns in disguise and joins Lear's retinue as a servant to keep a protective eye on Lear along with the Fool, Lear's court jester. In Cordelia's absence, Goneril and Regan join forces and begin to strip their father of his followers, complaining of the knights' unwieldy numbers and riotous behavior. Cornwall further humiliates Lear by locking his servant Kent in the stocks for a minor infraction.

Feeling betrayed, Lear rages out into the oncoming storm, challenging the foul weather, his only companions the Fool and Kent. In the tempest they are briefly joined by Poor Tom, whom Lear in his madness sees as a sage and philospher.

Defying orders from Cornwall, Gloucester decides to find Lear and help him. Edmund, wanting to prove his loyalty to Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall, tells them of his father's plans. Gloucester finds Lear in the storm and leads him to shelter; but when Gloucester returns to his castle for supplies, he hears that there is a plan to kill Lear. Gloucester sends Lear to Dover, where Cordelia and the French army have landed on their way to rescue Lear.

Poster for a Polish production of *King Lear.*

Gloucester returns to the castle, where Cornwall blinds him as punishment. A servant attempting to save Gloucester manages to kill Cornwall, but is himself slain by Regan. Gloucester is left to wander the countryside, where he is reunited with his son Edgar, still disguised as Poor Tom. At Gloucester's request, Edgar leads him to Dover. There Gloucester plans to throw himself from the cliff, but Edgar tricks him and saves him.

Lear stumbles upon Edgar and Gloucester. He seems to recognize Gloucester, but his speech mixes incoherence with surprising perceptiveness. Kent finds Lear and takes him to safety. Goneril's servant Oswald plans to kill Gloucester and collect the reward, but Edgar defends his father and kills Oswald. Finding a letter on Oswald's body in which Goneril urges Edmund to kill Albany so that Edmund and Goneril can be together, Edgar realizes he can use it to catch his brother.

In the French camp, Lear and Cordelia are reunited. He begs her forgiveness, but she assures him that there is no need.

Led by Albany and Edmund, the British forces arrive in Dover, and the two armies battle. Edmund captures Lear and Cordelia and sends them to prison. Albany and Edmund argue over who is to rule, while Goneril and Regan squabble jealously over Edmund. Edgar arrives to challenge Edmund and unveil his treachery. The final moments of the play are filled with revelations and deaths, as this, Shakespeare's most epic tragedy, comes to its moving conclusion. ★

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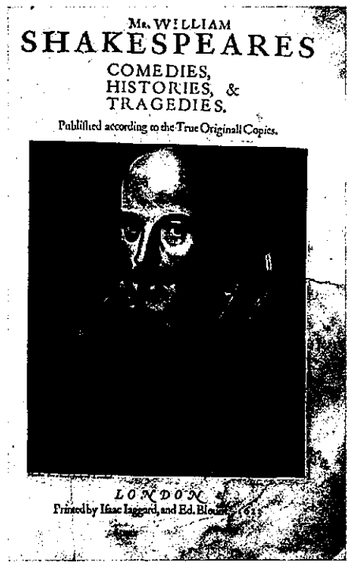
http://absoluteshakespeare.com/

Check out this book:
Shakespeare A to Z by Charles Boyce

Shakespeare, His World, and the Globe

Although William Shakespeare is generally considered the greatest dramatist in the English language, few facts are known about his life. Only a handful of legal documents verify his existence. Tradition has it that he was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, a small market town, on April 23, 1564. His father was a glove maker who became High Bailiff of Stratford, a position similar to our mayor.

As the son of a leading citizen and public official, Shakespeare would have gone to school as soon as he learned to read and write. The Stratford grammar school was excellent by comparison to similar schools in bigger towns. School was in session year round, and students attended for nine hours a day. The curriculum was limited, consisting almost entirely of Latin: grammar, reading, writing, and recitation. By the time Shakespeare was a youth, many traveling theatre companies of significance had visited Stratford, so it is fair to guess that Shakespeare had seen some of them and admired their art.



At age 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years his senior. Six months later, Shakespeare's eldest child, Susanna, was born. Two years later he became the father of twins, Hamnet and Judith. Little is known of Shakespeare's life at this time. It is clear that by the early 1590s, however, Shakespeare was a part of the theatrical scene in London, although we know nothing of the circumstances by which he left Stratford and his family to become an actor and playwright in the city. By 1594 Shakespeare was established at the center of theatrical activity, for he is recorded as a shareholder in the Globe Theatre.

Over the next fifteen years, Shakespeare wrote 37 plays, several narrative poems, and over 150 sonnets. He became the most popular playwright in London's highly competitive theatrical world. He was granted a coat of arms, thus officially making him a gentleman, and he bought sizeable pieces of real estate in and around Stratford with his earnings. His plays exhibit not only a fine sense of poetry and stagecraft, but also an excellent awareness of the political and literary atmosphere in which he lived. These were tempestuous times socially and politically, and Shakespeare used his plays metaphorically to suggest how in a changing society order could be made out of chaos.

Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616—his 52nd birthday—and was buried in the church chancel in Stratford. A tribute to his genius occurred in 1623, when two of his fellow actors and a London printer published a collected edition of his plays. This kind of publication was rare in its day, as plays were valued for their commercial appeal on the stage, with little thought of them as literature to be preserved. No doubt some of the texts were reconstructed from memory or from a stage manager's promptbook. In any case the First Folio, as this collection has come to be called, is a document of great historic and literary importance, for it preserved for posterity some of the greatest writing in the English language, allowing us to study and perform Shakespeare's plays more than 400 years later and for generations to come. ★

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Check out this book:
Will in the World by Stephen Greenblatt

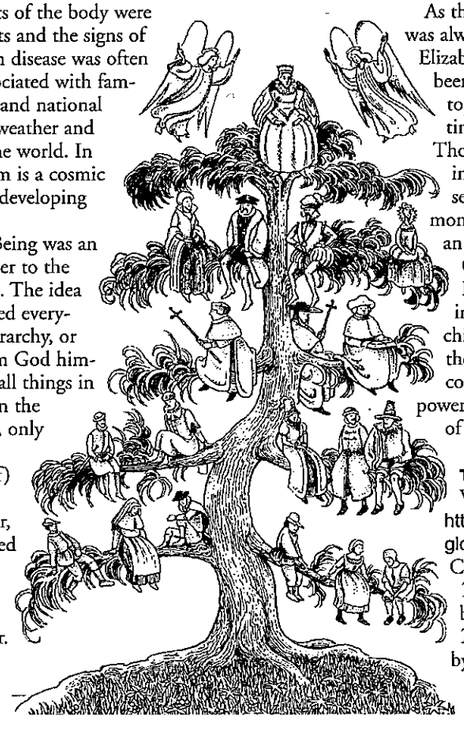
Watch this DVD series:
"In Search of Shakespeare"

Queen Elizabeth I ruled England from 1558 to 1603. A strong and powerful ruler, perhaps the greatest in British history, she was also known for her love of the arts, particularly theatre. Shakespeare was one of the queen's favorite playwrights; his works were performed at Court before the queen on several occasions. No doubt Shakespeare's strong and powerful female characters were very appealing to a monarch who never let her feminity impede her rule.

Life in Elizabethan England could be hard: poverty and hunger were widespread; medical treatment could be more painful than the disease. People made sense of their existence through strong belief systems. Most were deeply religious; since Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, had broken away from the Catholic church, England was a predominantly Protestant nation. Just as important as official religious doctrines were folklore and superstition: fairies, magic, witches, spells, and prophecies were real to most people. Originally set in the mythic past, *King Lear* inhabits a primitive world where superstition and Christianity battle for supremacy.

The human body was thought to be a miniature representation of the universe as a whole. Various parts of the body were linked to the planets and the signs of the Zodiac. Human disease was often metaphorically associated with family squabbles, civic and national strife, or even bad weather and other discords in the world. In *King Lear*, the storm is a cosmic extension of Lear's developing madness.

The Chain of Being was an attempt to give order to the vastness of creation. The idea was that God created everything in a strict hierarchy, or chain, that ran from God himself down through all things in existence. As seen in the illustration at right, only the angels (and of course God himself) were above the Queen. Beneath her, in order, were ranked the nobility, the clergy, merchants and shopkeepers, and finally the poor. (In a more detailed list by St. Thomas Aquinas, actors are ranked just below beggars but just above thieves and pirates.) Accepting one's place in the Chain of Being led to peace and tranquility. In *King Lear*, the Chain is clearly broken when Lear chooses to descend from the throne before his time. Meanwhile, Edmund takes every opportunity to force his way up the Chain, aiming for the very top.



Queen Elizabeth never married. When she died in 1603, it was the end of a Golden Age. Shakespeare's works seem to reflect this realization in a shift toward what today we call "the problem plays." Dark comedies such as *Troilus and Cressida, All's Well That Ends Well,* and *Measure for Measure* explore the edges of the human conscience through tales of ambiguous morality and corruption.

Elizabeth left no direct heir, so the crown of England went to her cousin, the king of Scotland. Like Elizabeth, King James I supported the arts and humanities. Shakespeare's company, the Chamberlain's Men, became the King's Men, and they performed eleven plays at Court over the next year, seven of them by Shakespeare. Perhaps most famously, James gathered religious scholars from around the world to create the first "authorized version" of the Bible, now known as the King James Bible.

As the question of succession was always a touchy subject for Elizabeth, Shakespeare may have been reluctant to address the topic directly during her lifetime as he does in *King Lear.* Thought to have been written in 1605 or 1606, the play seems to reflect ideas the new monarch expressed to his son in an address called "The King's Gift." Here James warns Prince Henry against dividing his lands between his children and thereby "leaving the seed of division and discord." Shakespeare's tragedy powerfully dramatizes the dangers of an uncertain succession. ★

TO LEARN MORE

Visit this website:
http://www.shakespeares-globe.org

Check out these books:
The Age of Shakespeare
by François Laroque
The World of Shakespeare
by Claybourne & Treays

In Shakespeare's day, playgoing was enormously popular for all classes of people, and new theatres were springing up across London. None was more popular than Shakespeare's home theatre. The Globe functioned in many ways as a metaphor for contemporary concepts of society, civilization, and the universe at large. The name of the theatre itself—the Globe—suggested that the events portrayed on its stage were symbolic of events happening in the world. The building's shape, an octagon, suggested the round shape of the world itself.

The Globe was located on the south bank of the River Thames in a disreputable part of London. Built in 1599, the wood-and-plaster building held more than 2,000 spectators, and popular plays often sold out. The public entered through a narrow door located at the base of a small tower. Inside, the building was open to the sky, and performances took place in the afternoon sun.

The audience surrounding the stage was arranged to reflect society at large. Standing on the ground around the stage itself, in the area known as the Pit, were the groundlings—those of the lowest classes who paid the least for admittance. Three surrounding levels of balconies rose above them, with correspondingly rising admission prices; Elizabethan and Jacobean society, from top to bottom, were clearly divided and arranged for all to see. Thus an audience member at the Globe could not help but feel his or her place in the world order.

The stage itself jutted out into the center of the yard. On each side of the stage, two tall columns, known as the Pillars of Hercules, were carved and brightly painted. Underneath the roof, the "heavens" were painted sky blue and decorated with starry signs of the Zodiac. Tucked under that ceiling was a small balcony where the theatre's musicians played "the Music of the Spheres." At the rear of the stage, on each side, were doors to the backstage area, known as the tiring house, through which the players made their entrances and exits. Between the doors, a brightly painted curtain hid a small alcove, the "discovery" area; above was an often-used balcony.

There was very little scenery, but richly colored fabrics and trimmings clothed upper-class characters. Soldiers appeared in shining armor, their swords and shields gleaming. Audiences loved noise and spectacle, so the plays had lots of action and violence. Thunder was created by rolling a cannonball across the wooden floor above. Ghosts and other spirits could be raised from below the stage through trap doors or lowered from the "heavens" by a small crane.

At the center of the Globe was the actor. Men played all the parts, since it was against the law for women to act on the stage; young teenage boys played the female roles. The groundlings crowded close to the stage, and the actor-audience relationship was an intimate one.

Shakespeare wrote for an audience that was largely illiterate; most people obtained their news, instruction (in sermons), and entertainment by ear. Without modern stage and lighting effects, location, time, and atmosphere, as well as emotions and ideas, had to be communicated through dialogue.

Shakespeare's plays were very popular, appealing to a wide spectrum of society. Yet his use of language clearly shows that he expected his audience to understand and appreciate puns, paradoxes, and nuances of meaning, complex metaphors, and innovative vocabulary. It may be a bit more challenging in our highly visual age to tune in our ears, but theatregoers of all ages still thrill to Shakespeare's eloquent exploration of the human condition. ★

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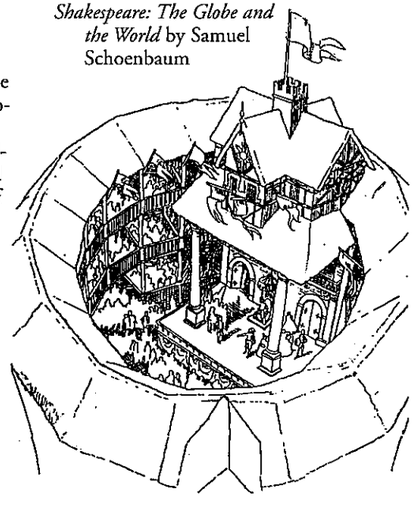

Lear on Stage

King Lear is the closest Shakespeare ever came to Greek tragedy. Its near-pagan setting, its focus on ruptured royal families, and its cataclysmic storm suggest the kind of mythological forces that destroyed Oedipus and Orestes. It is a play of great size: the heights and depths of emotion, the broad spectrum of humanity, the extremes of virtue and vice—all may be found within its pages. Many theatre lovers consider *King Lear* to be the greatest of Shakespeare's plays; some scholars consider the play unstageable.

For 157 years, from 1681 to 1838, *King Lear* was only known through Nahum Tate's version, with its happy ending. (This idea is perhaps less bizarre than it sounds: Shakespeare's audience was shocked that the playwright had made a tragedy of what they were familiar with as a happy tale.) Only in the last century has Shakespeare's play found its way back to the stage unsweetened; perhaps it took the horrors of two world wars to let the play fit into humanity's point of view.

Preliminary sketches by designer David Zinn for Goneril at Court (above) and Kent at War (below).

When director Michael Donald Edwards approached the play for the IRT, he wanted to find a way "to reveal the play, not reduce it. Every 'concept' I came up with seemed to limit the play. Ultimately I wanted to do the play on a bare stage with nothing but actors—a radical concept for a play about the whole world."

The production was conceived by Edwards and IRT artistic director Janet Allen for a company of eleven actors—an unusual choice for such an epic play, but not unprecedented. In Shakespeare's company, actors often played multiple roles. Some scholars believe, for example, that the roles of the Fool and Cordelia were originally intended to be played by the same actor, as they will be in the IRT production. "We're creating a place where the characters are real people, with a human scale," says Edwards. "We've edited a shorter text that fuses the Quarto and the Folio versions, with muscle and vigor and passion."

Scenic and costume designer David Zinn is Edwards's partner in this mission. "I didn't want to *choose* a period. I just wanted to do the play—to get out of its way. I want it to be as nothing as possible, a blank space in which the actors can just do the play."

Because of the many letters essential to the play's action, Edwards felt the setting could not be modern. "If they could just pick up a phone, the play's over." After following many different paths, director and designer settled on a broad red stage with an angled red wall and three red doors. Against this strong yet simple backdrop, black and white clothes with a vaguely turn-of-the-last-century feeling and uniforms with a slight Asian influence will stand in bold relief. Such a world allows the events of Shakespeare's most ancient tragedy to speak to a modern audience with minimum interference, letting the actors "just do the play." ★

Questions for Discussion

Look at the three characters who first speak at the beginning of the play? How does this preliminary conversation affect the development of the rest of the play?

What role do women play in the world of the play? How might this be unusual given the setting of the play and the time in which it was written?

How does Lear contribute to his own downfall?

What is the significance of age and death in the play?

What is the significance of the Fool in the play? Who in today's society fulfills that function, and how?

What symbolism do you see in the storm?

Why do you suppose the Fool disappears from the action?

What parallels can be drawn between madness and blindness?

What is a tragic hero? Who is (are) the tragic hero(es) of the play?

What is the importance of word repetition in the play? What different ideas are suggested by the repetition?

How do you see *King Lear* as relevant to issues in modern society? Why?

How does *King Lear* use family relationships to intensify its tragic effect?

What thematic connections were suggested to you by having one actor play both Cordelia and the Fool?

Does Lear move towards a better understanding of himself and his world? Does Gloucester do the same? If so, how? ★

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Upcoming Student Matinees

Underneath the Lintel
March 29, April 12, 18, May 3

Driving Miss Daisy
April 25, 26, 28, May 3, 4, 5, 9, 10

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Call the IRT Education Department at
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