

## The 2000 Alabama Shakespeare Festival's *King Lear* by Craig Barrow

The day after *King Lear* opened at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Kent Thompson, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's Artistic Director and the director of *King Lear*, gave a lecture in the Theatre of the Mind series on his experience directing the play in 1992 and for this season. Since I was going to see the play later that day and had seen and reviewed Thompson's 1992 *King Lear* as well as all previous productions of *King Lear* that the ASF had done, I was curious about what he thought of the play and his shaping intent in determining his production's qualities. The lecture was given in the Octagon, a theatre that seats approximately 200 in a U-shaped configuration about a thrust where *King Lear* would be performed later that evening. This would prove handy, since Thompson could point out features on the stage throughout his hour-long talk.

The background of the stage was filled with a cloudy sky made larger than the room's physical limits by mirrors flanking the rear of the performing area. The air and clouds, said Thompson, were part of an emphasis in the production of the four classical elements of earth, air, wind, and fire. In coming to grips with the meaning of the play, Thompson narrated a personal experience about his father who had suffered a breakdown about the time that Thompson was directing the 1992 *Lear*. Nearly every weekend Thompson would visit him in Louisville. He had retired at that time because his wife was beginning to suffer from Alzheimer's disease. A Baptist minister with a Ph.D. from Edinburgh, Thompson's father's smallest church boasted five thousand parishoners, and in the last years of his career he had taught in a Baptist seminary in Louisville. His loss of position in the world and his own growing physical decline coupled with his wife's increasing illness precipitated a breakdown. This experience, which "marked the beginning of his decline toward death,"<sup>1</sup> gave his son an insight into what Lear experiences when he renounces his kingdom. The experience, filled with "painful, contentious struggle,"<sup>2</sup> also gave Thompson an approximation of what being the child of a Lear or a Gloucester would be like. Interestingly, although we sometimes think of Cordelia and Edgar as innately good, and Goneril, Regan, and Edmund as innately evil, Thompson asked his audience to imagine what it

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would be like to have a father as rash as Lear in his terrible curses of Goneril in I. iv and his judgment of Cordelia in I. i. or as crude as the Gloucester who cavalierly says to Kent that he "had good sport at his [Edmund's] making" (I. i. 23)<sup>3</sup> when his son is standing in front of him. As Thompson imagines these characters, he speculates that Goneril, Regan, and Edmund may have become corrupted by the fathers' actions in the past. Thompson sees all the characters in the play as either ascending or descending fortune's great wheel; in keeping with this idea the costuming, designed by Christine Turbitt, is either simplified, stripped, or made more ornate as the play's action unfolds. The designs for the costumes are a combination of medieval and oriental, perhaps Japanese, and the scenic design of Karen TenEyck suggests an eastern minimalism, as do other elements of the staging, so that Lear's "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!" (III. ii. 1) speech during the storm is more mental than physical; no actor is shouting at the top of his lungs over the thunder of rippling sheet metal. In keeping with this economy, Don Tindall, the sound designer, and Maurice Arnaud-Benoir, the composer, render the sounds of the storm distortions of the voices of Goneril and Regan, while Cordelia is suggested by a simple, brief melodic movement at appropriate moments throughout the play. The bare stage itself, with so many characters journeying across it, seems a metaphor of the world itself.

More than an hour of the text was cut from the 2000 *King Lear*, with most of the omissions coming in the second half of the play, so that the production, with its two intermissions, took approximately three hours. Thompson sees the matter of the play as "Shakespeare's remarkable psychological and artistic insight into aging"<sup>4</sup> accompanied by "the often destructive struggle over legacy within families, and the terrifying consequences of denial."<sup>5</sup> While Thompson appreciates the bleakness of the play, he thought that productions such as Peter Brook's in 1962, influenced by phenomena such as the Holocaust, Hiroshima, assassinations, and mass suicides, have overemphasized the theme of despair in the play. While the death of Cordelia is especially hard to bear, Thompson believes that "the painful journeys of Lear, Edgar, Cordelia, and Gloucester contain a redeeming element."<sup>6</sup> In the play of different kinds of qualities of love, friendship, and service, Thompson focuses on Edgar's struggles more than those of any other character, seeing him as the hero in the play, perhaps echoing Thompson's own response to his painful difficulties in dealing with his own father.

Sadly, of all the productions of *King Lear* done by the Ala-

bama Shakespeare Festival, the 2000 production was the weakest. The problem for the play is Barry Boys who plays Lear. Although Lear is supposed to be in his eighties, Boys looks like a man in his sixties, and unlike Charles Antalosky in the ASF *Lear* of 1976 and 1983 and Philip Pleasants in the ASF *Lear* of 1992, Boys seems unable to communicate Lear's painful journey through madness to wisdom. Too often Boys' Lear seems merely crazy or infirm; the poetry of Lear's mad insights into his being and his world and its justice are too often omitted. With their loss, the loyalty of Kent and the love of Cordelia seem almost misapplied.

While the casting of Boys was unfortunate, particularly with Pleasants, successful as Lear in 1992, playing the Fool in the 2000 production, all the other major roles in the production were performed with distinction. Greta Lambert, the most forceful and accomplished actress in the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, was a strong and passionate Goneril in red, while Monica Bell, talented herself, was convincing in turquoise as the imaginatively cruel Regan. Her kiss of Oswald in IV. v in order to obtain Goneril's letter to Edmund—either her choice or the director's—seemed her only false move. It stunned the audience. Jennifer Tucker as Cordelia is attractive but emotionally cool. She is convincing in the play's first scene and in her reunion with Lear at play's end. John Preston as Edmund is capable, but too often he plays the role for comic effects and seems to miss Edmund's viciousness. Rodney Clark is effective as Kent, but he seems older than Lear in appearance, which is bothersome. Ray Chambers is a black presence as Cornwall, but someone with his talent should have played a more significant role. The same can be said for the talented Greg Thornton as Albany who handles the domination of Goneril well but still has convincing strength at play's end when both Goneril's and Edmund's evil is unmasked.

Paul Herron performs the role of Gloucester with imaginative control; upstaging Lear himself at times. Gloucester's movement from callousness, anger, and fatalism, to a modulated acceptance is nicely done. Philip Pleasants, looking old and frail as the Fool, gave his usual excellent performance, although a more responsive Lear would have better complemented the strengths of Pleasants' acting. Still, the lines and the wit were clear.

Brian Kurlander as Edgar wound up being the focus of the production, partly because of the weakness of Barry Boys, but also because of Kurlander's strength as Edgar. **Gloucester's attempt at suicide could easily look laughable on stage if done inappropriately, but both actors are up to the task.** With the future in Edgar's hands at play's end, the mild optimism that

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Kent Thompson seemed to be looking for is carried off by Kurlander who is drained but accepting of his new role in the world.

On the whole, I liked Kent Thompson's lecture better than I did the performance of *King Lear*. I agree with him that every time we experience *King Lear*, "we discover something new."<sup>7</sup> I suspect that the something new for Thompson was the experience of the children of Lear and Gloucester. With a weak Lear, the play seems, as Lisa Hopkins asserts, a history as much as a tragedy.<sup>8</sup> What is clear is that the talented Mr. Thompson needs to make better casting choices for major roles such as Lear.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Cast List: *Alabama Shakespeare Festival* (Montgomery, 2000), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>Cast List, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>Quotations accord with *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

<sup>4</sup>Cast List, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup>Cast List, p. 6.

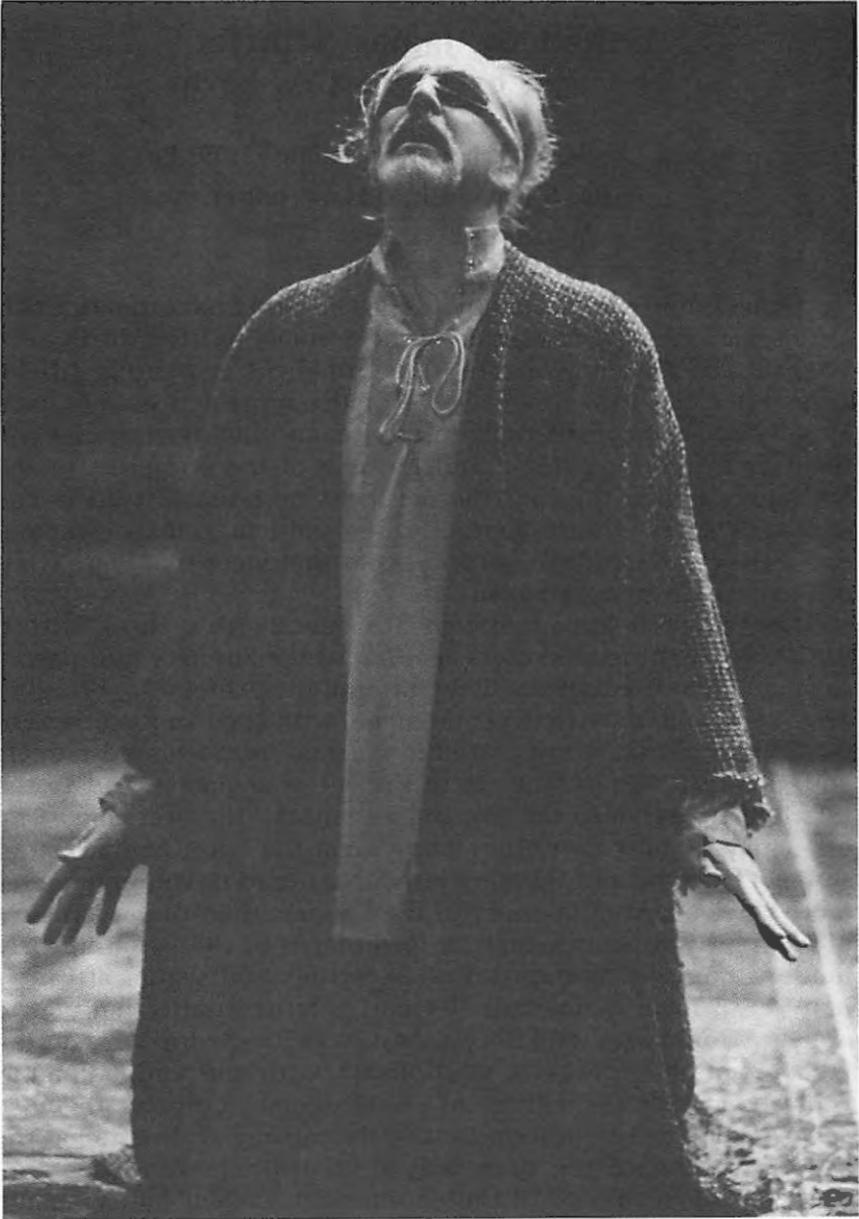
<sup>6</sup>Cast List, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>Cast List, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup>List Hopkins, "Lear, Lear, Lear!: Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the Third," *The Upstart Crow: A Shakespeare Journal*, 16 (1996), p. 113.



Barry Boys and Philip Pleasants as Lear and the Fool in the Alabama Shakespeare Festival Production of *King Lear*, 2000



Paul Hebron as Gloucester in the Alabama Shakespeare Festival Production of *King Lear*, 2000