Defending Desdemona, Reclaiming Cordelia:
A Woman-Centric Defense of Shakespeare’s Heroines

in *Othello* and *King Lear*

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Abstract

Since the debut of *Othello* and *King Lear* more than 400 years ago, the characters of Desdemona and Cordelia have largely served to highlight the despair and fall of their male counterparts. The rise of women’s power in the modern age, however, raises questions about this dismissive approach to two of Shakespeare’s most formidable heroines. Theatre professionals are approaching Desdemona and Cordelia with enlightened eyes, and today’s playwrights are even penning continuations of both Desdemona and Cordelia’s stories, reclaiming them for new audiences and continuing their journeys. Why do these characters resonate so deeply with us today, and is their resurgence justified? In-depth, woman-centric analysis of Shakespeare’s texts, extensive interviews with expert professionals in Shakespearean performance, and examinations of modern works that put both Desdemona and Cordelia center stage reveal an ongoing transformation in how these women are perceived, presented, and empowered in the modern age. While this evolution is by no means complete, the rise of women’s power, and the continued struggle for their own dreams, rights, and their very lives, plays an enormous role in how Desdemona and Cordelia are perceived. When we consider Desdemona and Cordelia as full human beings who deserve to be heard and to live, rather than as collateral damage for the tragic journeys of Othello and Lear, respectively, can we appreciate the true depth of Shakespeare’s tragedies.
Dedication

For Wilson Mejia Sims -

(yes, you)

- who only ever needed to hear;

and believe.
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# Table of Contents

Dedication..............................................................................................................iv

Acknowledgements..............................................................................................v

I. Introduction.........................................................................................................1

II. Text Analysis: Desdemona in *Othello*............................................................10

   Text Analysis: Cordelia/The Fool in *King Lear*...............................................30

III. Performance: Desdemona in *Othello* at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, 2007.................................................................59

   Performance: Cordelia/The Fool in *King Lear* at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, 2013-2014.................................................................82

IV. New Works: *Desdemona*, 2011....................................................................99

   New Works: *Lear/Cordelia*, 2016.................................................................113

V. Conclusion.........................................................................................................122

Appendix A: Interviews

   Bill Buckhurst, Director, *King Lear*...............................................................125

   Bethan Cullinane, Cordelia/The Fool, *King Lear*............................................136

   Wilson Milam, Director, *Othello*...................................................................146

   Farrah Chaudhry, Playwright, *Cordelia*.......................................................157

   Ben Spiller, Dramaturg and Director, *Lear*.....................................................166

Appendix B: Figures
Appendix C: Script for Lear/Cordelia, 2016

Lear .................................................................................184

Cordelia .........................................................................226

Bibliography ....................................................................266
Chapter I
Introduction

This thesis explores the modern significance of Desdemona and Cordelia/The Fool, characters from Shakespeare’s plays *Othello* and *King Lear*, respectively. In considering them from a 21st-century perspective - as individuals with their own dreams of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (U.S. Declaration of Independence, 1776), rather than characters whose purpose is to provide the reader or audience with greater insight to their male counterparts - I find that their value has been greatly underappreciated. Fortunately, in scholarship, performance, and new texts, academics and performers are beginning to advocate for Desdemona and Cordelia/The Fool, given them the greater respect, visibility, and attention that they deserve.

In part, this phenomenon has sprung from the roots up, directly from actors and performers themselves. In 2013, responding to a question about violence toward women, Sir Patrick Stewart opened up about his own childhood experience with domestic violence:

“...the people who could do (the) most to improve the situation of so many women and children are, in fact, men. It’s in our hands to stop violence toward women... as a child, I heard doctors and ambulance men say (to my mother), ‘Mrs. Stewart, you must have done something to provoke him.’ ‘Mrs. Stewart, it takes two to make an argument.’ Wrong. Wrong! My mother did nothing to provoke that, and even if she had, violence is never, ever a choice that a man should makes. Ever.” (Stewart 2013)
Stewart is not alone in advocating for women. Actors Benedict Cumberbatch and Tom Hiddleston appeared in Elle Magazine for its 2014 feminism issue, wearing T-shirts emblazoned with the words, “This is what a feminist looks like” (Grossman, 2014; images provided in Appendix B, 187-188). While one must not be a performer to speak out for women - President Obama notably said the same words of himself while addressing the first-ever United State of Women summit in 2016 (Rhodan 2016) - it is noteworthy that the three actors, all master performers, each have extensive stage training in the performance of Shakespeare. Stewart first joined the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1966 and won the 1979 Laurence Olivier Award for Actor of the Year (Biography). Cumberbatch performed the title role of Hamlet at the Barbican in 2015, as well as Richard III in Henry IV, Part II as part of a 2016 BBC mini-series (The Hollow Crown: War of the Roses 2016). Hiddleston won the Laurence Olivier Best Newcomer Award for playing both Cloten and Posthumus in Shakespeare’s Cymbeline (Hiddleston 2008) and went on to perform multiple roles in the BBC’s The Hollow Crown (The Hollow Crown 2012), playing Prince Hal in Henry IV, Part I and Henry IV, Part II, and King Henry in Henry V. Given the extensive Shakespearean training of these three actors, if violence toward women is, in Stewart’s words, “never, ever a choice that a man should make, ever,” how can we reconcile that with the misogyny, abuse, and murder of female characters in Shakespeare’s canon? If we believe that violence against women is inexcusable, what effect does that have on our interpretations of Othello or King Lear? How does that new, pro-women worldview affect modern productions of those plays, and how do they differ from productions that existed prior to that worldview? What can we gain from new plays that reimagine or
build upon Shakespeare’s canon, giving female characters even more time and space to share their experiences and their stories with modern audiences?

The idea that Shakespeare’s women are valuable as individuals and worthy of their own study - in Shakespeare’s text, in the performance of his plays, and in the new stories that continue their histories - comes at a pivotal moment for women. In 2016, one of the most qualified candidates to ever pursue the office of President of the United States, Hillary Clinton, become the first female candidate to be nominated by a major political party; yet she also lost to a man deemed “manifestly unqualified — by experience, temperament and outlook” for the job (Washington Post Editorial Board 2016). Despite her loss, Clinton’s unapologetic pursuit of the highest office in America reflects a sea change for women: between 1997 and 2007, the U.S. Department of Commerce reported that the number of women-owned businesses in the United States grew by 44 percent, twice as fast as firms owned by men (U.S. Department of Commerce 2010). More and more, women are seeking a place at the table, pursuing opportunities to claim power for themselves, testing their own limits and seeing just how far they can go. A 2016 NY Magazine article titled ‘The Single American Woman’ declared single women “the most powerful voter this year,” and added:

“the proportion of American women who were married (has) dropped below 50 percent... (this) is an exciting turn of historical events because it entails a complete rethinking of who women are and what family is and who holds dominion within it - and outside it” (Traister 2016, italics mine).

While feminist theory has flourished for some time, the article underscores a pivotal moment in how we see women, and in how we see Shakespeare. As women claim their own power more and more, their own stories, and their own agency, so too
can we turn to Shakespeare’s women and find that the same power, stories, and independence has existed within them all along.

And yet, recent gains notwithstanding, women still struggle against pervasive and implicit misogyny and oppression. Clinton could not debate her opponent without him attacking her identity as a woman, declaring her “a nasty woman” (Berenson, 2016). Human trafficking moves approximately 800,000 people across international borders each year, 80% of which are women or girls, and 50% of which are minors (Deshpande et al 2013). Qandeel Baloch, a Pakistani woman who became a social media sensation for her empowering videos, was drugged and strangled to death by her brother, Waseem Azeem, for “dishonoring her family. ‘Girls are born only to stay at home and to bring honor to the family by following family traditions, but Qandeel had never done that,’” Azeem said” (Khan 2016). Malala Yousafzai, the youngest person to ever receive the Nobel peace prize - in 2014, at the age of 17 - for demanding girls’ right to education, survived a point-blank assassination attempt by the Taliban on her way home from school when she was just 15 years old (Nobel Prize Foundation 2014).

In an article written for The Guardian after the election, renowned feminist Gloria Steinem observed that, in domestic violence, a woman’s life is most endangered “just before or just after escape.” She compared the aftermath of Clinton’s loss to that desperate moment:

“This is when a person is most likely to be beaten or killed because she or he is escaping control… this country is in a time of danger because most of us are escaping control by some of us… (but) we will not mourn, we will organize. Maybe we are about to be free.” (Steinem 2016)

Maybe we are about to be free. But not yet.
What does this transformation of feminism - among men, at the highest level of politics, and on the stage - have to do with Shakespeare? Everything: just as Shakespeare has everything to do with us. In *Shakespeare After All*, Marjorie Garber argues that “Shakespeare’s plays are living works of art. Their meanings grow and change as they encounter vivid critical and theatrical imaginations” (Garber 18). In fact, Garber argues that “Every age creates its own Shakespeare… (he) is in a way always two playwrights, not one: the playwright of *his* time, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England, and the playwright of *our* time, whatever time that is. The playwright of *now*” (Garber 28, italics by the author). Shakespeare’s influence is so embedded and so profound, Garber says, that he is “part of our common culture… our cultural shorthand” (29). Garber notes that Shakespeare is repeatedly cited by the giants of our time, from Sigmund Freud to Karl Marx and Thomas Jefferson to Robert Kennedy (33-35), underscoring the “uncanny associations between Shakespeare and history” (34). Garber suggests that we cannot help but perceive Shakespeare through our own collective experiences, shames, and regrets: we cannot consider Shylock, for example, without also recalling the Holocaust (282), despite the fact that it took place centuries after Shakespeare’s death. Fortunately, Garber reasons,

“We need not give up any of our Shakespeares in order to encounter new ones… the plays are tough, durable, rich, flexible, capacious, and endlessly evocative. They are also provocative, alluring, suggestive, and challenging. They will not break from being bent or reshaped to fit a new context, or a new idea. Every production is an interpretation. That these plays can sustain so many powerful and persuasive interpretations is in fact as close as I can come to explaining the elusive nature of their greatness” (40).

Shakespeare’s canon, then, is like a muscle: one that can be flexed - indeed, one that *must* be flexed, so as to avoid atrophy - and one that must not be considered from a rigid point of view, but from a flexible, dynamic, and modern perspective.
Challenge accepted.

Working from Garber’s premise that Shakespeare is both a playwright of his
time and our time, this thesis argues that Shakespeare’s heroines - in particular,
Desdemona from *Othello*, and Cordelia/The Fool from *King Lear* - are entirely worthy
of our admiration, and not of our dismissal or condemnation, exactly as they are
written. To achieve this, I will explore both Desdemona and Cordelia/The Fool as
characters whose time for greater consideration and appreciation has finally
come, and will do so in examining each in three aspects: in Shakespeare’s original
text; in modern performance; and in new plays that expand upon these two female
characters. I argue that it is in fact the male title characters in *Othello* and *King Lear*
who are solely responsible for their unjust, cruel, and murderous actions toward their
more-laudable female counterparts; as such, those men should be condemned for their
actions. I also argue that performance is vital to showcasing the courage, power, and
strength of character inherent in both Desdemona and Cordelia/The Fool. Finally, I
argue that modern playwrights currently reimagining and building upon these
characters reflect how underappreciated these characters have been, and how worthy of
our consideration they are, even beyond Shakespeare’s canon.

I deliberately list Cordelia/The Fool as one unit, rather than Cordelia alone. This
decision is based on the double-casting of these roles that is well-documented through
centuries of scholarship. I argue that in the text, and in performance, the connection
between Cordelia and The Fool is too powerful to be brushed aside. Indeed, as this
thesis will show, the benefits of double-casting Cordelia/The Fool creates a unique
opportunity to understand Cordelia, Lear, and The Fool - in fact, not double-casting
Cordelia/The Fool results in a missed chance to understand each of these characters on a greater level. As a result, I have created the term “Cordelia/The Fool” to show that the two characters are, and should in performance also be, indelibly linked with one another. This is not to say that Cordelia is not enough on her own: merely that her connection with the Fool, another vital character in the journey of Lear, is critical to understanding Cordelia, Lear, and the Fool. It is not that Cordelia is less if she is not also double-cast as the Fool, but that she and the Fool together are greater than the sum of their parts.

The thesis will cover an in-depth, woman-centric analysis of the text; extensive interviews with directors and actors from Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre (SGT); and in-depth interviews with playwrights from 1623 Theatre Company (1623). SGT and 1623 leaders were deliberately sought out for this thesis, as both institutions focus on our understanding of Shakespeare through performance. SGT is an “international resource dedicated to the exploration of Shakespeare's work and the playhouse for which he wrote, through the connected means of performance and education… and seek(s) to further the experience and international understanding of Shakespeare in performance” (SGT), while 1623 considers “life through the lens of Shakespeare” (Appendix A, 176), which works “to inspire, surprise and affect (audiences) with Shakespeare's work through theatre/digital performances” (1623, About Us).

In the first chapter, I examine both texts through a detailed, woman-centered lens, examining the character’s actions or inactions, particularly with regard to the male authority figures in each character’s life. I also consider themes of heroism that the two characters share, such as speaking truth to power; choosing their own path rather than
following the paths their fathers or husbands have planned for them; advocating for justice; and demonstrating a powerful will to survive.

In the second chapter, I examine productions of *Othello* and *King Lear*, both performed at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre: the 2007 production of *Othello*, notable both for Zoe Tapper’s riveting performance and violent struggle against her husband in the final scene; and the 2013-2014 production of *King Lear*, which double-cast the actress Bethan Cullinane as both Cordelia and the Fool, a performance that helped inspire this thesis. In exploring these productions, I conducted personal phone interviews with Wilson Milam, director of *Othello*; Bill Buckhurst, director of *King Lear*; and Bethan Cullinane, who acted Cordelia/The Fool for *King Lear* (Appendix A).

In the final chapter, I examine new, 21st-century works that focus on Desdemona and Cordelia: Toni Morrison’s play *Desdemona* (2011) and 1623 Theatre Company’s *Lear/Cordelia* (2016). Through textual analysis and interviews I conducted with the directors, actors, and playwrights of these plays (Appendix A), I shed light on why playwrights - and in particular, female playwrights - are returning to Shakespeare’s female characters to extend their voices and deepen their stories.

Through examining these characters, I consider them from a new perspective: not as victims of the men in their lives, as so many scholars have done before, but as worthy souls who fought for what they believed to be true, and who paid for that belief with their lives. Their deaths are not only profound because they unmoor - forgive the pun - the men in their lives, but because their deaths are a loss for us, for our shared consciousness, for our own human experience. The misperceptions and the poor
judgment of the men surrounding them should not be laid at the feet of these women, but where they originated: with men who falsely rejected and condemned them.
This chapter dives deeply into Shakespeare’s text, exploring both the character and choices of Desdemona and Cordelia/The Fool through a woman-centric lens. While exploring past scholarship in depth, I also approach these characters from a current perspective. I will not ask how women of Shakespeare’s time would have acted, for example, or what expectations men of the 1600s might have had of them. Rather, I analyze Desdemona and Cordelia/The Fool as modern, empowered women - human beings endowed with the same inalienable rights, liberties, and character flaws as their male counterparts. This does not mean that I discount the power dynamics between Othello and Desdemona as husband and wife, for example, anymore than I do between Cordelia as daughter and Lear as father, but rather that I will explore scenes that provide critical information about Desdemona and Cordelia/The Fools’ characters. In showcasing patterns of insight, compassion, willingness to defend others, and heroism between both characters, I find these characters are worthy of greater appreciation and consideration, and that we can glean insights about our daily lives and relationships from them.

The first part of this chapter focuses on Desdemona, one of the most complex and compelling characters in Shakespeare’s canon. For following her heart, she is disowned
by her father; for following her sense of justice, she is brutally murdered by her newlywed husband. Even amidst increasingly threatening circumstances, Desdemona’s character remains defiant, compassionate, and eloquent. Her alliance to goodness is her defining quality: it does not waver when she is disinherited, when she leaves civilization for the metaphorical wilderness of Cyprus, when she is challenged by her husband, when she is physically and publicly abused by him, or even when he tries to murder her. From her deathbed, Desdemona uses “faith as her shield” (Holmer 133) - and it is only her ultimate sacrifice, demanding the truth be told with her final breath, that unravels the genius of Iago’s deception. Far from a demure, submissive, or helpless woman, it is Desdemona’s strength of character that ultimately conquers both Othello’s rage and Iago’s subterfuge. It is no coincidence that her strength leaves the mighty Othello dead and the loquacious Iago mute; it is due to Desdemona’s bravery, independence, and eloquence that good triumphs at all, even if that victory comes at a devastating cost.

Some scholars and readers see Desdemona as a divine innocent, “a truly saintly vision of inexhaustible tenderness,” a “young (and) inexperienced girl... by nature shy and silent… (with) no opportunity to exercise her imagination” (Lewes 279-280). Lewes further argues that Desdemona “knows nothing of the world” and “perishes through pure ignorance” (281). Given these assessments, it is understandable that scholars might focus their analysis more closely on the dynamic between Othello and Iago, relegating Desdemona to the role of the helpless, outmatched corpse draped across her wedding-night bedsheets.

This interpretation, however, which prizes female innocence and purity rather than insightfulness and ingenuity, is not consistent with Shakespeare’s text. Rather, it
best describes the preferred delusion of Desdemona’s father, Brabantio: “A maiden never bold; of spirit so still and quiet, that her motion blush’d at herself” (Act I, scene iii, lines 95-96). This saintly version of his daughter stands in sharp contrast to the sexually liberated Venice of the time, which Honigmann, editor of the Arden Shakespeare Othello, describes as “the pleasure capital of Europe, especially in its sexual tolerance” (AS Othello 9). Perhaps Brabantio’s illusion is compounded by his own sexual exploits. Another way of saying it might be: do as I say or be as I wish you to be, daughter, but above all, do not as I do.

In any case, the idea that his “still and quiet” daughter could fall in love, much less elope with Othello, is unfathomable to Brabantio; likewise, he cannot imagine that she initiated the secret romance. To the mind of a father who does not know his only daughter, the only possible answer is witchcraft (Act I, scene iii, line 106). Interestingly, the thought that his daughter is being controlled by supernatural forces is somehow less terrifying than having a daughter who makes her own decisions, fights for what she believes in, and does not follow the path her father desires. In addition to unjustly shackling Desdemona’s agency as a character, this interpretation also reveals a deeper desire to cage the independence, freedom, and sexuality of women. It is an attempt to control a young woman who is strong, independent, and noble, all qualities that would be embraced and celebrated in a male character. It is significant that Desdemona’s unapologetic embrace of these qualities throw the men in her orbit - father, husband, and even her nemesis, Iago - into chaos.

A more respectful and sympathetic perspective of Desdemona as an individual with her own power, and even as a hero, is not new. Modern critics find Desdemona’s
character to be a complex, admirable, and outspoken heroine. In *Desdemona, Woman Warrior*, Joan Holmer observes, “not only did Shakespeare make the blackest man on stage a white man (Iago)… he made the bravest warrior onstage a woman” (132). Holmer further cites the fact that, in addition to Desdemona, Shakespeare employed “the descriptive term ‘warrior’… for only one other female character, the Amazon Hippolyta” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (132). Holmer’s observations indicate that there is more to Desdemona than meets the eye, and highlights the pains Shakespeare takes to describe her in words normally reserved for male characters. Indeed, the qualities often associated with male heroism - ambition, fortitude, and determination - are all characteristics that Desdemona embodies.

Before Desdemona ever stands before an audience, she defies social norms and her own father by eloping with a man of color. In her first entrance, she is magnificently eloquent, stunning a room of men into silence with her argument and persuading the most powerful leaders to agree with her. When she appears, she “strengthens the image Othello has presented” (Garner 236). Yet Othello’s description of Desdemona, almost that of a doting, flirtatious maiden, is also insufficient for the complex character she is. Despite being summoned on her wedding night before the leaders of Venice to explain her elopement, Desdemona is not just unrepentant, but unflappable. In logical and eloquent language, she says that while she bears an allegiance and love to her father, “so much duty as my mother owed to you, preferring you before her father, so much I challenge that I may profess due to the Moor my Lord” (Act I, scene iii, lines 186-9).

A crucial aspect to this scene, which may escape modern audiences, is the historical taboo of Desdemona’s wedding without Brabantio’s consent. Cook goes so far
as to claim that “for Shakespeare’s audiences the fact of an unlikely alliance with a Moor might have been far less troubling than the elopement itself... marriage without parental consent was specifically forbidden to anyone under the age of twenty-one according to the canon law of 1603, which came into effect shortly before Othello was written” (Cook 188). Given Brabantio’s shock and outrage at her marriage, it is unlikely he would have approved the union; yet Desdemona deftly outwitted her father as to her intentions, was at least “half the wooer” in her courtship, and eloped with Othello without Brabantio ever having more than a vague suspicion of such events (Act I, scene i, line 140). Faced with his daughter’s unrepentant elopement, all Brabantio can do is acknowledge that his image of a modest, submissive daughter was deeply flawed. His claim of “witchcraft,” so easily raised by a desperate father, is never mentioned by him again.

Desdemona’s boldness is again emphasized in her request to accompany Othello on a military mission, which he must undertake on their wedding night. When the Duke commands Othello to immediately depart for Cyprus, Desdemona asserts that “if I be left behind... the rites for which I love him are bereft me” (Act I, scene iii, lines 258-260). Again, Desdemona’s outspoken nature, eloquence, and unapologetic awareness of her sexuality are highlighted here, as “it is she, and not Othello, who first raises the possibility of her going to Cyprus” (Garner 236). Desdemona’s interest in accompanying Othello is symbolic of her embracing his career as a warrior, but also serves as confirmation of “her own sexual attraction to him as well as her own sexuality by insisting that she wants the full ‘rites’ of her marriage” (Garner 237). In short, as Cook notes:

“At her departure, after only two speeches, the audience knows that Desdemona is lovely, intelligent, strong willed, openly passionate, highly unconventional…”
forward in wooing, disobedient to proper parental authority, shrewd enough to
deceive her father quite completely, and sufficiently poised to keep her self-
possessión in the most trying situation.” (Cook 190).

In her next appearance (Act II, scene i), Desdemona experiences another intense
confrontation. On the shores of Cyprus, Desdemona engages in a complex battle of words
with Iago, deflecting his outright misogyny from wife, Emilia, and toward herself. During
their banter, Iago focuses on the alleged weakness and hypocrisy of women, slandering
all women by portraying them as lustful, sly, hypocritical creatures. At no point does
Desdemona take the attacks personally; instead, she seems more to blithely observe Iago,
assessing the defiant, brilliant, and malignant man before her. While many critics have
viewed this as a comedic scene – or, even more far-fetched, a flirtatious scene (Sproat 44)
– it reads as a duel of equals. Iago is certainly better equipped for cynical, witty
wordplay, but Desdemona matches him with level-headedness, detachment, and virtue.

Sproat suggests that this scene is when Iago resolves to destroy Desdemona utterly (45);
yet, as the brief scene of repartee ends and Desdemona turns to Cassio to denounce Iago’s
views (“Is he not a profane and liberal counsellor?” Act II, scene i, lines 163-164), Iago’s
subsequent monologue of fury does not focus on Desdemona at all. Instead, he swears his
revenge upon Cassio (“With a little web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio,”
Act II, scene i, 167-168). It is almost as if Iago is angry that his banter with Desdemona
has concluded, and that Cassio helped to end their discourse.

Desdemona cannot match Iago in wordplay or wit, any more than any other
character in the play can. But her mental capacity to spar with him, as well as her
emotional willingness to stand up to him, seems to suggest that Iago may indeed find her,
at least in this scene, to be a worthy adversary. Desdemona is smart enough to use her
intellect and composure when confronted with either the senators or Iago; by contrast, her
passion emerges when she is championing someone who is being wrongly abused, a claim most clearly seen in her ardent defense of Cassio.

Interestingly, many critics state an outright revulsion for this scene, in part because it does not fit with their image of Desdemona as a pure and virtuous maiden. In an article re-reading the scene, Sproat cites Arden editor M. R. Ridley, who brands the scene “cheap backchat… one of the most unsatisfactory passages in Shakespeare” (Ridley qtd in Sproat, 44). This dismissive assessment, rooted in patriarchal discomfort with assertive female sexuality, eviscerates a key aspect of Desdemona’s character: her ease with own sexuality, her intellectual wit, and her willingness to expose injustice and immediately confront it. Honigmann has stated that Venice was “the pleasure capital of Europe” and notes that “its courtesans were... celebrated” (AS Othello, 9). As a wealthy woman growing up in Venetian society, Desdemona would certainly have had some exposure to courtesans and discussions about sex. To deny her that observational knowledge, much less to be threatened by it, is to assume the same illusions as Brabantio.

As Desdemona and Iago banter, Desdemona reveals herself to not only be bold and outspoken, but also intelligent, compassionate, and uncannily insightful. As Garner rightly observes, her battle of wits with Iago reinforces our image of “the spirited and sensual Desdemona… revealed in the first act. Her scene with Iago shows her to be the same woman who could initiate Othello’s courtship and complain before the senators about the ‘rites’ she would lose in Othello’s absence” (Garner 238). As logical, eloquent, and clear-minded as Desdemona was before the senators, Desdemona is entirely unfazed by Iago. Despite his condemnation of all women – what Cook rightly describes as “75 lines of clever, sexually suggestive wordplay” (191) – Desdemona is impassive. She is
immune to Iago’s charged remarks; indeed, “they do not offend her and serve her well enough (for a distraction) until Othello arrives” (Garner 237). Again, this is hardly the artless and inexperienced girl described by Lewes (280). In addition to further enforcing Desdemona’s wit and intelligence, the scene also provides an important glimpse into Desdemona’s ardor for defending those wrongly accused and poorly treated – a pattern she will continue by coming to Cassio’s defense.

When Desdemona witnesses Iago’s cruel treatment of his wife, Emilia, Desdemona deliberately interjects and refocuses Iago’s attentions on herself (“What wouldst thou write of me, if thou shouldst praise me?” Act II, scene iii, lines 905-6). Sproat observes that in doing so, Desdemona forces Iago to pivot from domineering verbal abuse to diplomacy, “to desist or to abuse his superior’s wife openly and directly” (Sproat 47). Here, Desdemona impeccably displays her powers of language and wit, as well as her willingness to protect those wrongly or unfairly attacked – in this case, her future maid and Iago’s wife.

Considering Iago’s brilliance and mastery of wordplay, it is significant that Desdemona is not simply impervious to his misogynist and provocative barbs, but that she parries every assault; in addition to effortlessly batting each onslaught aside, she prompts him to continue his attack. While lively and crackling with energy, their repartee is in fact a distraction for Desdemona herself: it is a way to deflect her own worry for Othello’s safety, and to channel Iago’s abuse away from his wife, a woman she has just met. This action indicates bravery, confidence, a sharp wit, and compassion for those who are weak – virtues that Iago will turn to his advantage. As Sproat observes, Desdemona even summarizes “the entire plot in one word (and) sees Iago for what he is”
(Sproat 46) when she boldly scolds Iago for his condemnation of all women: “O, fie upon thee, *slanderer!*” (Act II, scene i, line 113, italics mine). In one word, Desdemona unwittingly unmask Iago, naming the very way in which he will become a master puppeteer of Othello and orchestrate her death. Her insight reflects her powerful, if subconscious, understanding of the truth; unlike Othello, Desdemona’s moral compass, her intuition, is almost always correct.

As Iago defames Cassio, Desdemona agrees to defend Cassio repeatedly and in the strongest terms. As she says, “Assure thee, if I do vow a friendship I’ll perform it to the last article. My lord shall never rest… I’ll intermingle everything he does with Cassio’s suit” (Act III, scene ii, lines 21-26). True to her word, Desdemona constantly appeals to Othello on Cassio’s behalf. Again, as in her scene with Iago on the shores of Cyprus, when confronted with a situation in which someone is being treated wrongly or poorly by an authority figure, Desdemona rightfully intervenes on their behalf; and again, as she was in standing up to Iago on behalf of Emilia, Desdemona is in the right in fighting for Cassio, establishing her accurate instinct for kindness and for a moral compass firmly affixed upon justice. As Holmer notes, “Desdemona not only fights on behalf of Cassio... more importantly she fights for the right reason” (Holmer 138).

Bartels takes this assessment even further, suggesting that “while the agenda is Cassio’s, at issue is her will and her right to voice it” (Bartels 425). Throughout the play, Desdemona’s language, judgment of character, and eloquence is proven time and again: in defending her elopement to the senators, in arranging to travel with her husband on a military mission, and in deflecting the verbal assaults of Iago. Bartels argues that Desdemona “rewrites her outspokenness as part of, and not (as a quality) subversive to,
her duty as wife” (Bartels 42). When Othello says that he will “deny (his wife) nothing” (Act III, scene iii, line 76). In the context of this scene, the statement is brusque: a reader or audience could reasonably infer he feels nagged and wishes to end the debate. But Desdemona deftly invalidates the argument: “Why, this is not a boon; ‘tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves, or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm, or sue to you to do a peculiar profit to your own person” (Act III, scene iii, line 77-80). Her suit for Cassio is not for her own good: it is for the good of Othello. As the audience knows from Iago’s soliloquies, Desdemona is again absolutely right.

As Othello becomes more and more convinced of Desdemona and Cassio’s alleged affair, his language regresses. Othello, the self-effacing and eloquent husband, is reduced to babble, repeating some words over and over, while finding it impossible to say others aloud. When Othello finally confronts Desdemona about the handkerchief he gave her, Desdemona’s first response concerns the de-evolution of his language:

Desdemona: Would to God that I had never seen’t!
Othello: Ha! Wherefore?
Desdemona: Why do you speak so startlingly and rash?
(Act III, scene iv, lines 79-81)

In this exchange, Desdemona uses her eloquence in an attempt to reveal a deeper truth. This is in exact opposition to Iago’s wordplay, which he uses to evade and manipulate. Cook notes that her composure remains intact under his tirade:

“the same forceful spirit that led her to defy convention in her marriage and stand up to the Senate enables her to bear the public humiliation of a blow, to insist to a raging Othello that she is indeed honest, and to argue her innocence with considerable passion” (Cook 192).

In contrast, Bartels claims that “although (Desdemona) promises to mediate further for Cassio, she gives up speaking for herself” (Bartels 428). While it is true that Desdemona is gradually less and less prepared to cope with Othello’s ambiguous fury,
her frustration is not a result of her being childlike or innocent. Desdemona’s greatest weakness is the exact same quality which is her greatest strength: her good faith. Even as Othello rages at her, Desdemona continues to exhibit the courage and composure that she held before the Senate in Venice. As she gradually realizes that “my lord is not my lord”, she adapts her language: not discarding it as a tool, but rather saying more with less.

After Othello strikes her in public, all she will say is “I have not deserved this” (Act IV, scene i, line 240). She does not rage at him or accuse him of unfair treatment (as Emilia will later, in the privacy of Desdemona’s chambers), but speaks the simple truth. It is an injustice; she does not deserve it. Her eloquence is no longer useful under such dire circumstances – all she can do is speak plainly.

Similarly, when Othello calls her a strumpet and a whore, she flatly refuses both charges: “No, and I shall be saved” (Act IV, scene ii, line 87). As Lodovico and Emilia defend Desdemona – standing up for her, as she previously stood up for others who were unjustly persecuted – the entourage is more shocked at Othello’s behavior than at Desdemona’s implied actions (“Are his wits safe? Is he not light of brain?” Act IV, scene i, line 269). Her point-blank refusals of guilt and insistence upon her own innocence are so steadfast that even Othello is repeatedly thrown into doubt – “Is’t possible?” (Act IV, scene ii, line 90) – and yet Othello is unable to embrace the good faith that Desdemona possesses. When he finally explodes in rage, calling her “that cunning whore of Venice” (Act IV, scene ii, line 91) and abandoning her to Emilia, Desdemona is speechless for the first time in the play. Emilia asks her how she fares, and Desdemona claims to be “half asleep” (Act IV, scene ii, line 99), a phrase that modern audiences could easily understand to be in shock. In this scene, Desdemona realizes that her eloquent words and
her virtue, which up to now have navigated her successfully through enormous challenges and circumstances, are no longer sufficient. Desdemona begins to relinquish the tool that has thus far been so successful for her: she implores Emilia, “Do not talk to me… answers have I none” (Act IV, scene ii, line 104-5). In a shift from spoken language to physical action, she asks Emilia to put her wedding sheets on her bed.

Garner sees Desdemona’s reticence in the face of Othello’s fury as a form of denial: “nothing in her life in the rarefied atmosphere of Brabantio’s home and society could have anticipated this… she must close it out” (Garner 247). This line of thought, however, follows Brabantio’s logic, assuming Desdemona to be far more naive than she proved to be. Just as Brabantio’s assessment fell short, the idea that Desdemona’s loss of language is based in denial seems to be only half the story. What more, after all, can she say to her husband: “You do me wrong”; “I have not deserved this”; “No, and I shall be saved”? In the most direct language possible, Desdemona rejects Othello’s accusations, insists upon her fidelity, and refuses to acknowledge any wrongdoing on her part. The failure of language lies not in Desdemona and her inability to communicate, but in Othello and his refusal to listen. Because he is no longer willing to trust the person he swore to cherish hours before (“My life upon her faith,” Act I, scene iii, line 295), Desdemona’s eloquence is rendered useless.

In what for the audience is an added insult to her injury, Desdemona asks for Iago, whom Cook calls “the only male ally (Desdemona) has left” (192). In a reversal of the Cyprus beach scene, Desdemona is now disempowered, both socially and verbally. When Emilia complains to Iago that Othello has “bewhored” Desdemona, Desdemona asks: “Am I that name, Iago?... I am sure I am none such” (Act IV, scene ii, lines 119-
125). She later indicates that she can barely pronounce the word, and yet she brings herself to speak it: “I cannot say whore; it does abhor me now I speak the word” (Act IV, scene ii, lines 163-4). Some find this inability to be an “avoidance of sexual language, coupled with her ignorance of the reality of marital infidelity, (which) seriously inhibits her in her capacity to respond to Othello’s accusations” (Gohlke 166). But to reject Desdemona’s “sexual language” is also to deny her being “half the wooer” of Othello, as well as to reject her insistence upon her “rites” of marriage before the Senate of Venice. Desdemona is not unable to say the word ‘whore’ because she does not have a sexual or sensual vocabulary; after all, in the very moment she claims she cannot say the word aloud, she does so. The reason the word is almost impossible for her to say is because the betrayal implicit in the word is inconceivable to her. It is the concept that her husband may think her capable of such an act, that he may have lost all of his professed good faith in her, that is beyond her comprehension – and rightly so, of course, as the audience well knows.

As she begins to anticipate her death, the audience sees Desdemona in private, talking with Emilia. In singing the willow song, Garner suggests that Desdemona “not only foreshadows her death but also expresses an unconscious desire for it” (Garner 248). While Desdemona clearly identifies with her mother’s former maid, Barbary – a name that recalls the animalistic insult Iago hurled at Brabantio in the opening scene of the play, claiming that Desdemona was at that moment “covered with a Barbary horse” (Act I, scene i, line 110) – Garner’s suggestion that Desdemona has a death wish is at odds with her bargaining for more time to live. In addition, Othello’s line, “Nay, and if you strive” (Act V, scene ii, line 91), indicates a struggle or escape on her part. Garner argues
that “death wishes are more often hopes of finding peace and escape rather than real wishes to die” (Garner 248), and I agree that Desdemona longs for peace or resolution; I disagree with Garner’s claim, however, that Desdemona “does not know the world, or herself” (Garner 249). Desdemona is one of the few characters in the play who is constant, who is able to recognize good in others, who speaks truth to power and defends those unjustly treated. What she cannot reconcile or comprehend is the undeserved loss of Othello’s good faith. Rather, I concur with Bartels’ assessment of Desdemona in the willow scene: that “as she prepares herself for the bed that… will be her deathbed, she sets herself in the context of other women who suffered or died wrongly at the hands of their lovers” (Bartels 429).

The song also foreshadows her conflicting feelings with regard to Othello: “Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve” (Act IV, scene iii, line 51), she sings, and yet she immediately notes “that’s not next” (Act IV, scene iii, line 52). Bartels notes that Desdemona “inserts what should have preceded, what explains the speaker’s acquiescence – the possibility that she herself will be slandered” (Bartels 429). Citing the “If I court moe women, you’ll couch with moe men” line from the song (Act IV, scene iii, line 56), Bartels notes that “in refusing to blame her lover, the speaker (followed by Barbary) keeps blame from herself… by exposing the circumstances that surround her submission, she exposes also the falseness and vacuity of his position” (Bartels 429-430). Indeed, Desdemona will do the same, speaking from her deathbed to absolve Othello – and by doing so, set the exposure of the slander against her into motion. The failure of language in Othello, the inability of Othello to see through the expert and manipulative wordplay of Iago, can only be exposed by a joint effort of righteous language and good
actions. Desdemona’s strict adherence to both, in her final moments, may not result in the triumph of good over evil – Desdemona’s unjustified murder is too much of a loss for that – but at the very least, it is an act of good unmasking evil.

Othello murders Desdemona on stage, before an audience that knows her to be not only innocent, but free from malice of any kind. For centuries, the on-stage and unjust slaughter prompted audiences to shouting at Othello, with some even attempting to climb the stage in order to stop him (Lindfors, Performing Shakespeare in Europe, 182; Lindfors, The Last Years, 186).

Othello’s line, “Nay, if you strive - ” (Act V, scene ii, line 80), indicates that Desdemona does, in fact, fight for her life, and the scene is neither short nor painless. In contradiction to Garner’s suggestion that Desdemona harbors a naïve death wish, Desdemona refuses to give up her life easily. When she fails to escape or overpower her warrior husband, Desdemona again appeals with the tools that Othello has rejected or lost – compassion and language. She begs repeatedly for her life, bargaining first for a divorce rather than death (Act V, scene ii, line 77), then for a stay of execution, then a half-hour, then time for a prayer (Act V, scene ii, lines 79-81). Othello refuses all her appeals and smothers her, saying “It is too late” (Act V, scene ii, line 82) as he does so, not realizing that he speaks not solely of Desdemona’s life, but his own salvation.

Yet even in death, Desdemona’s strength survives. Holmer observes that Desdemona’s “will to live is so strong that even the physically superior strength of Othello has to be exerted a second time to silence her: ‘Not dead? Not quite yet dead? I that am cruel am yet merciful, I would not have thee linger in thy pain. So, so’ (Act V, scene ii, lines 85-7)” (139). Even Othello’s second attempt to murder Desdemona fails, a
phenomenon Othello seems to sense as he hears Emilia calling to him: “No more moving? Still as the grave. Shall she come in? Were’t good? I think she stirs again -” (Act V, scene ii, lines 106-108). Despite Othello’s physical prowess and his renowned ability as a warrior, Desdemona revives for a third time - and is strong enough to call for justice. Othello’s inability to kill his wife, despite his physical strength, warrior training, and rage seem strange and even unrealistic unless one considers Desdemona’s strengths: hope, eloquence, and most importantly, nobility of spirit. This is the unlikely scenario of a trained, violent warrior who is unable to defeat an unarmed and untrained opponent, despite several failed attempts. Yet the scene becomes entirely clear if it is viewed not as a murder scene, but as a struggle for divine justice. What we witness in this moment is a marital trial by combat. Othello is incapable of murdering Desdemona not because she is too physically strong, but because Othello is in the wrong.

The concept of trial by combat - or “ordeal by combat,” as it was originally known - is a means of determining justice, an ancient rite of divining truth. It is “based on the belief that the outcome will reflect the judgment of supernatural powers and that these powers will ensure the triumph of right” (Encyclopædia Brittanica). Othello, who is acting as jury, judge, and executioner, believes that he is dispensing appropriate justice for Desdemona’s betrayal; he does not realize that he is in the wrong, both in regards to being betrayed and in being almost incapable of killing her. Desdemona’s determination to live despite Othello’s experience in battle and what must surely be his overwhelming physical strength reflects the righteousness of her character and her cause. Othello repeatedly fails to kill his wife not because his own physical strength is weak; he repeatedly fails because her divine strength is stronger. When Emilia enters the room to
inform Othello that the attempt in Cassio’s life has failed (another example of divine 
justice) Desdemona rises again, calling out that she is “falsely, falsely murdered!” (Act 
V, scene ii, line 115). It is worth noting that despite numerous attempts to kill her through 
strangulation - adding insult to injury, as Othello is subconsciously attempting not just to 
kill but to silence her - Desdemona simply will not stay quiet; her spirit will not let her.

As Emilia runs to her mistress’ side, begging her mistress to use her language (“O 
lady, speak again; sweet Desdemona, O sweet mistress, speak!” Act V, scene ii, lines 
119-20), Desdemona shifts from addressing Othello to Emilia. First she reiterates “a 
guiltless death I die” (Act V, scene ii, line 121), but when Emilia pressures her to reveal 
her murderer, intriguingly, Desdemona declines: “Nobody. I myself. Farewell.” (Act V, 
scene ii, line 123). However her motivations are interpreted, Desdemona deliberately 
refuses to condemn Othello for his murder of her, and in fact absolves him by telling 
Emilia “I myself” was to blame. Cook sees this not as forgiveness of Othello, but as 
Desdemona accepting accountability:

“(Desdemona) reveals herself to be the same woman whose behavior seemed so 
doubtful at the play’s beginning: if her choice of Othello involves parental 
defiance or social disgrace or public humiliation or even undeserved death, so be 
it. She alone – ‘Nobody – I myself’ has made the choice, and she alone accepts 
the responsibility for its consequences.” (193)

Garner agrees that “as Desdemona could not have smothered or strangled 
herself… her answer acknowledges her full responsibility for her marriage and its 
consequences,” (249), but Garner views Desdemona’s statement as forgiveness of 
Othello. Garner argues that “Desdemona has come to see Othello with the prejudices of 
her countrymen… acting according to a barbarian nature that will not allow him to act 
otherwise. She forgives him, then, as she would a child” (250). If this were the case, 
however, why would Desdemona immediately subordinate herself to Othello with her
final words to Emilia: “Commend me to my kind lord” (Act V, scene ii, line 122)?

Bartels observes that Desdemona’s ‘nobody’ points suggestively back to the ‘Willow Song,’ to the speaker’s directive that ‘nobody’ blame her lover, and reiterates the loyalty that has defined “the speaker, Barbary, and Desdemona” (430). Bartels also points out that Desdemona’s obvious lie “destabilizes the master narrative that has defamed her and puts incriminating words in Othello’s mouth. Ironically, in order to prove her a liar (which is, to him, a whore) and to usurp the claim to truth, Othello confesses to the crime” (430). With this line, Desdemona “courageously sacrifices the loss of her good name… and gains the infamous reputation of a suicide” (Holmer 143), a confession that would rob her of her burial rites. Further, Holmer remarks:

“The character most militant against slander ironically lies stifled on her deathbed after slandering herself with a lie that not only illuminates her magnanimity but also triggers ultimately the stifling of Iago’s slanders, through Othello’s immediate truth-telling that in turn enables Emilia’s unraveling of Iago’s web of lies.” (144)

This, then, is Desdemona’s bittersweet triumph over Iago. In choosing to protect her husband and embrace a lie that Othello knows to be false, she reveals the bitter truth: she was faithful to him all along.

In examining Desdemona’s final line, “Commend me to my kind lord” (Act V, scene ii, line 122), Holmer suggests that “in publicly identifying him to Emilia as her ‘kind’ lord, she shows she has forgiven his… hurtfulness, and she does so not naively, but knowingly” (147). It is consistent with her willingness to forgive not just Othello, but the person who slandered her as well: “If any such there be, heaven pardon him” (Act IV, scene ii, line 137), a line she unwittingly delivers to the person who has so grossly slandered her – Iago. Cook argues that, “in both the Senate scene and the death scene, Desdemona exercises her considerable skills at persuasion, winning the public argument
but tragically losing the private one” (194).

Yet, as with so many of Shakespeare’s texts, other interpretations are possible. “Commend me to my kind lord” could be more kin to the last words of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart… in this harsh world, draw thy breath in pain to tell my story” (*Hamlet*, Act V, scene ii, lines 344-347). In her final words, Desdemona challenges Emilia to advocate on her behalf, to speak the truth about her character. Part of sharing that truth requires telling Desdemona’s story, even if Emilia is sharing it with the man that just took her life. To her credit, spurred by the unjust murder of her lady and friend, Emilia immediately and unrelentingly does so. She does not stop despite the physical danger of confronting a man who has just violently slaughtered his wife, despite realizing that her own husband orchestrated Desdemona’s murder, not even when Othello *draws his sword* on Emilia (Act V, scene ii, line 170). Like Desdemona, Emilia will not stay silent: “Thou hast not half that power to do me harm… I care not for thy sword! I’ll make thee known though I lost twenty lives” (Act V, scene ii, lines 171-188).

With Emilia’s impassioned and inspired help - with the language, strength of spirit, and determination to speak out for what is right, all qualities that are a sisterly inheritance from Desdemona - Iago’s masterpiece of deception begins to unravel. Between Desdemona’s righteousness and Emilia’s outspoken defiance, Iago, the master manipulator and wordsmith, is struck dumb and brought to justice: “From this time forth I never will speak word” (Act V, scene ii, line 301). While the grisly tableau at the end of the play is the culmination of Iago’s efforts, it is critical to note that the villain who has bragged, bandied, and broken faith with others using words for the entire play is suddenly...
and forever muted - though Gratiano’s chilling response, “The torments will ope thy lips,” (Act V, scene ii, line 303) allude to an off-stage denouement of justice. The tragedy’s title, after all, reflects the character who loses the most, the least of which is himself: Othello. In contrast, Desdemona may have lost her life, but she never lost herself. She stands alone as the play’s conscience, innocent, and true hero.
Chapter II

Text Analysis:

Cordelia/The Fool in *King Lear*

Before exploring the relationship between Cordelia and the Fool in text and on the stage, it is important to note the historical interplay of gender in double-casting these roles. Women could not on the English stage until after 1660 (Mabillard, 2000), yet scholars from the late 19th-century believed the roles were often double-cast in production (Shakespeare Online Study Tools; McLean). This means that, in Shakespeare’s time, a male actor would perform both the role of Cordelia and The Fool. As it is now commonplace for female actors to be on stage, this multi-layered, gender-bending performance - a male actor performing a female role (Cordelia) as well as a role that could, theoretically, be played from any part of the gender spectrum (The Fool) - is no longer common. As this thesis operates from the intersection of gender equality, Shakespearean scholarship, and stage performance, I therefore deliberately refer to performers acting the roles of Cordelia and The Fool by the word “actress.”

In the scholarship connecting Cordelia with the Fool in *King Lear*, none are cited more often than Lear’s lines on the Fool’s “houseless poverty” (Act III, scene iv, line 26-27), spoken as Lear and the Fool endure a torrential storm during their exile, and “my poor Fool is hanged” (Act V, scene iii, line 304), spoken as Lear cradles the body of his
youngest daughter. In addition, the latter line indicates a direct line to Cordelia and the Fool through double-casting, highlighting a layered relationship between Cordelia, the Fool, and Lear. But it also reflects a relationship between Lear, the actor/actress who plays both parts, and the audience itself, shattering the fourth wall and signaling an ironic return to lucidity for Lear with the death of Cordelia/the Fool. In playing the role of Lear, Sir Ian McKellen referred to these moments as Lear’s “actually understanding the world for the first time…. he sees clearly in the end” (The Economist, 2007). While some scholars have noted that the text of Lear allows for double-casting Cordelia and The Fool, I argue that double-casting the roles is in fact vital for the play, citing evidence within the text itself, qualities shared by Cordelia and The Fool, and the words of Lear himself as evidence.

Scholarship on double-casting Cordelia and The Fool is recorded as early as 1894 (Brandl, qtd in McLean). In 1917’s *The Yale Shakespeare*, Tucker Brooke observed that if the Fool were played by Shakespeare’s company player Robert Armin, “it seems strange that so conspicuous an actor should have been allowed no appearance in the fourth or fifth act. The likelihood is that Armin, who was not very old, was obliged to undertake the part of Cordelia as well as his normal one” - that of the Fool (173., n., qtd in Stroup). Indeed, Cordelia and the Fool never share the stage in Shakespeare’s text. Cordelia first appears in Act 1, scene i, and is both banished and disowned in the same scene, not returning to the play until the fourth act. In her absence, The Fool appears in Act 1, scene iv - exactly three scenes after Cordelia’s departure - and is the only soul to stay by Lear’s side until a sudden and unexplained departure in Act III, scene vi. Cordelia returns to the stage exactly four scenes later in Act 4, scene iv, and appears multiple times
before the end of the play, while The Fool never appears again. The Fool’s abrupt
departure has flummoxed directors, some to the point that they add in scenes to explain it:
in 2007, in a “twist on the text,” director Trevor Nunn actually hung Lear’s Fool on stage
at the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC). In addition, while just one actress has played
Lear’s Fool at the RSC from 1936-2013 - Linda Kerr Scott in Nicholas Hytner’s 1990
RSC production - she was not double-cast as Cordelia (RSC).

Thomas Stroup notes that “as long ago as 1894 Professor (Alois) Brandl
suggested that the parts of Cordelia and the Fool in King Lear were written for the same
actor” (127). Stroup also cites the remarkably close number of lines spoken between
Cordelia’s departure in Act I, scene 1, and the Fool’s appearance in Act I, scene iv (357
lines) with the Fool’s disappearance in Act III, scene iv, and Cordelia’s return in Act IV,
scene 4 (356 lines, 127). He suggests that the significantly similar number of lines reflect
an exact window of time, “probably for the change of costume and make-up” (127).

However, the argument for double-casting is not purely convenience of the play’s
staging or timing. Both roles also seem to share a similar physicality based on Lear’s
descriptive language, particularly where the Fool is concerned. From his first line, Lear
describes the Fool as “a pretty knave” (Act I, scene iv, line 107), a word which can mean
“scoundrel” or “rogue,” but can also mean “boy” or “lad.” Given that men played all
roles on the stage at the time of Shakespeare, the same young actor playing the role of
Cordelia could also have played the role of a young jester. Throughout the text, Lear
repeatedly refers to the Fool’s youth and androgyny, calling the Fool “boy” or “lad”. In
his canon, Shakespeare certainly uses these words to refer to young men, but it would be
a mistake to interpret Lear’s terminology solely as an allusion to age and not to disguised
gender, since Shakespeare often employs these terms to great effect in his gender-bending comedies. Consider the following examples (all italics mine):

Orsino to Viola, the latter disguised as Orsino’s manservant, Cassio:

Dear lad, believe it. For they shall yet belie thy happy years
That say thou art a man. Diana's lip
is not more smooth and rubious. Thy small pipe
is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound,
and all is semblative a woman's part.
(Twelfth Night, Act I, scene iv, lines 29-34, italics mine)

or Phoebe, speaking of the disguised Rosalind:

Think not I love him, though I ask for him.
'Tis but a peevish boy. Yet he talks well.
But what care I for words? Yet words do well
When he that speaks them pleases those that hear.
It is a pretty youth – not very pretty –
But, sure, he's proud – and yet his pride becomes him.
He’ll make a proper man.
(As You Like It, Act III, scene v, lines 109-115, italics mine)

Or Belarius, speaking of the disguised Imogen:

By Jupiter, an angel! Or, if not,
An earthly paragon! Behold divineness
No elder than a boy!
(Cymbeline, Act III, scene vi, lines 43-45.)

Despite these examples, in describing his Fool, Lear is the only character in Shakespeare’s canon to use the specific phrase, “pretty knave” (Act I, scene iv, line 107). No other youth, male or female, receives that descriptive adjective (Shakespeare’s Words search, 2016).

The way the Fool refers to Lear also resonates with familial and youthful language. From the moment he takes the stage, the Fool addresses Lear as “nuncle,” a term that appears exclusively in King Lear; it is nowhere else in Shakespeare’s canon. Huntington Brown seizes upon this term of endearment as a reflection of the Fool’s
childlike nature: “...it is boys' language … could anybody miss the childish ring of the word ‘nuncle’, even on hearing it for the first time?” (167). While Brown argues that the role of the Fool was “plainly intended for a boy” (164), he outright advocates for a female Fool, if not double-casting the Fool with Cordelia:

“When, after a century and a half, Macready ventured, for the first time since the Restoration, to revive the authentic version (it was in 1838), the idea that the Fool could be a man never entered his head... after having expressed his fear that it could never be successfully acted, gladly accepted ('caught at') George Barclay's suggestion that it should be played by a woman... It was only in a later and prosier generation that producers began to cast the Fool as a Man.” (Brown 164, italics mine)

Beyond the timing of entrances and exits and the significance of nicknames, Cordelia and the Fool also serve similar purposes and characteristics within the play. Both speak truth to power, both are devoted almost exclusively to Lear, and both challenge Lear openly. In addition, Dusinberre observes that they inhabit similar spaces of power and disempowerment in Lear’s kingdom:

“Both stand on the periphery of the serious world of men, assessing its wisdom from the perspective of not being of any account... the values of women and Fools are an irritant to men: their function is to entertain, not to censure; but as critics they are not dangerous, because they have no power... (Lear’s) Fool and his daughter share the same area of his consciousness.” (114)

To Dusinberre’s point, Cordelia’s lack of power and status is proven in the first scene, when she is unceremoniously disowned and banished for refusing to stroke her father’s ego; when the Fool’s words hit too close to home for Lear, he is instantly threatened with violence (“Take heed, sirrah - the whip,” Act I, scene iv, line 114).

Despite their precarious place in society, however, both Cordelia and the Fool claim their agency, fearlessly speaking truth to power and loving Lear despite his megalomaniac tendencies. The two characters do express their truthfulness and devotion in different ways. Cordelia speaks little, if at all, preferring to let her actions speak for her, while the
Fool excels at wordplay and speaking in riddles. Their characters also delineate along lines of gender and power. Cordelia has the power to rebuff her father directly, while the Fool can not, but she will lose everything. In contrast, The Fool’s very job is to speak truth to power, saying what others can not in riddles and rhymes, while Cordelia is disowned and exiled for doing the same. But despite these differences, Stroup claims that:

“...so far as balance is concerned, Cordelia and the Fool function as one character… (and) serve as one competent force. And just as Kent, banished the court, disguises himself in order to remain and serve his master, so Cordelia leaves her vicar, her devoted Fool, in a sense herself disguised, to take her place with her father” (129, italics mine).

Having examined the play’s structure for exits and entrances and explored the significance of terms of endearments between Lear and the Fool, let us turn to the dialogue of the play. In Act 1, scene i, Lear assembles his three daughters and commands them to tell him how much they love him, with the most successful flatterer receiving the best third of his kingdom. Cordelia’s first two lines are asides: “What shall Cordelia say? Love, and be silent” (line 68), spoken after Goneril’s speech, and “...poor Cordelia! And yet not so, since I am sure my love’s more ponderous than my tongue” (lines 85-88). “Ponderous” often means clumsy or slow, but by its very definition, its awkwardness is tied to great weight or solemnity. Cordelia takes her love of Lear - and perhaps the concept of love, in general - quite seriously. The inclusion of the word “ponderous” casts her in opposition to Goneril and Regan, who speak of great love, but whose words are glibness incarnate: they have no substance at all. These opening lines reveal Cordelia as a character who is honest and true, a daughter who shows her quality and her love through
actions, not words. Garber underscores this choice as “the rhetoric of silence… an acknowledgment of the limitations of language” (Garber 655).

In Act I, scene iv, having banished and disowned his only true daughter for her honesty and refusal to flatter him, Lear calls for his Fool: “Where’s my knave, my fool? Go you, and call my fool hither. [Exit an Attendant; enter Steward.] You, you, sirrah, where’s my daughter?” (Act I, scene iv, line 43-45). On first read, these lines demand the attendance of two different people: The Fool and Lear’s daughter Goneril. Notably, when speaking of the Fool’s reluctance to appear, both Lear and the audience are informed that the Fool “hath much pined away” since Cordelia has “(gone) into France” (Act I, scene iv, lines 74-75), and that the Fool no longer considers Lear “with that ceremonious affection as you were wont” because of her banishment (Act I, scene iv, lines 60-61). Lear also fumes that he has not “seen (the Fool) this two days” (Act I, scene iv, line 73); the Fool chooses a social exile when Cordelia is cast out, sharing her solitude in protest.

As the exchange comes to a close, Lear again calls for his Fool and his daughter, this time an inversion of lines 43-45, cited above: “Go you and tell my daughter I would speak with her. [Exit Knight. Enter an attendant.] Go you, call hither my fool” (Act I, scene iv, lines 76-78).

But the opening lines (‘Where’s my Fool? Where’s my daughter?’) and the closing inversion (‘Where’s my daughter? Where’s my Fool?’) present an interesting bracket to this scene. When the Fool finally arrives, the audience can almost breathe a sigh of relief that this character, whose presence has been heralded and debated for almost 40 lines, has finally stepped onto the scene. Yet the lines above also indicate a potential blurring of perception when Cordelia and the Fool are double-cast, providing a
new layer that arrives with the Fool: Lear called for his Fool, and the actor portraying the daughter he wrongly exiled - not Goneril, but Cordelia - appears almost instantly.

This moment accomplishes three things almost immediately. First, the audience recognizes the actor portraying The Fool as the actor who also portrayed Cordelia, breaking the fourth wall. This moment takes the audience ‘out of the play’ for a split-second as it provides an immediate reminder that the person on stage is an actor managing two roles. In the same second, the audience reasserts the reality of the play versus actual reality: we recognize the Fool as an actor, but for the play to continue, we must suspend our disbelief and ‘lean in,’ as it were, buying into the consciousness of a stage performance rather than simply watching actors parade about a stage. In this moment, the audience also wrestles with the Fool as a character separate from Cordelia; having recognized the performer, we settle into an understanding that the former character is separate but also completely linked to this newly-introduced character. This paradox can be jarring, much like encountering an optical illusion in a surrealist painting; it requires an adjustment of perspective to successfully navigate reality. To do so, audience members adopt a new level of performative reality, viewing the actress onstage as portraying two characters, both of whom are supremely important to Lear, and for similar, albeit different, reasons. This phenomenon is mirrored in Lear’s opening and closing lines that bracket the Fool’s entrance, merging ‘Where’s my daughter? Where’s my Fool?’ and ‘Where’s my Fool? Where’s my daughter?’ to “Where’s my daughter/Fool/Fool/daughter?” Here (s)he is, standing on the stage before you. Wish granted.
Unlike Cordelia, the Fool has full reign over Lear: so long as he couches his assessments in wordplay, there is nothing he can not, and does not, say. Freed from Cordelia’s limitations of gender, familial relation, and unburdened with a regal title, pending marriage, or any royal or familial obligation, the Fool is free to point out Lear’s folly and shortcomings in a manner that Cordelia could not. Cordelia was banned for not pandering to her father; the Fool is embraced and celebrated for doing the same. Yet the Fool insists on challenging Lear, on attacking his self-importance and ego, where he has no obligation to do so. It is the connection between the Fool and Cordelia, as well as the relationships between Lear and those two characters, that moves the play inexorably forward.

From the moment the Fool walks on stage, Lear’s banishment of Cordelia and Kent’s exile for arguing on Cordelia’s behalf are front and center. Rather than address Lear, who is practically begging to banter with the Fool (perhaps because the Fool reminds him, in some ways, of Cordelia?), the Fool gives Kent his full attention: Kent, the Earl who was banished for advocating for Cordelia in the first scene, and who has returned in disguise to serve Lear still:

Fool: Let me hire him too. [to Kent] Here’s my coxcomb. [offers jester’s cap]
Lear: How now, my pretty knave, how dost thou?
Fool [to Kent]: Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb.
Lear: Why, my boy?
Fool: Why? For taking one’s part that’s out of favour.
(Act I, scene 4, lines 96-102)

The Fool’s first act upon taking the stage is to acknowledge, however tongue-in-cheek, Kent’s defense of Cordelia - and it is an act of such importance to the Fool that (s)he ignores Lear entirely. (Note also that it is Lear who questions the Fool’s meaning and intent, not Kent.) Lear is unable to recognize Caius as his loyal but recently-banished
servant Kent, yet Lear’s Fool sees through Kent’s disguise instantaneously. If the Fool is not double-cast, the illusion flows in only one direction: the Fool recognizes Caius as Kent, and literally tips his hat in discreet recognition. If the Fool is double-cast, however, a double illusion emerges: the actress portraying both Cordelia and the Fool recognizes Kent, and doffs/offers her cap to him in sympathetic tribute. In instances of double-casting Cordelia and the Fool, Abrams deems this exchange a “pseudoreunion” (355) between Cordelia and Kent, adding: “…in a double cast performance, the grateful gesture (from Cordelia/Fool) would be read as proceeding not just from Cordelia’s representative but from Cordelia-reincarnate to Kent-reincarnate. What we see (that the actor-Cordelia has returned) colors what we hear” (356). The irony is that Kent, the character, does not recognize the actress performing the role of Cordelia, and the role of the Fool, in her return. Kent’s disguise operates within the confines of the play; Cordelia/Fool’s disguise extends beyond the play to the audience itself.

In the same scene, irreverently addressing Lear as “boy,” the Fool asks Lear if the king can tell the difference between “a bitter fool and a sweet one” (Act I, scene iv, lines 134-135). When Lear says no, the Fool breaks into verse:

    FOOL: That lord that counseled thee
    To give away thy land,
    Come place him here by me;
    Do thou for him stand.
    The sweet and bitter fool
    Will presently appear:
    The one in motley here,
    The other found out there.

    LEAR Dost thou call me “fool,” boy?

    FOOL All thy other titles thou hast given away. That thou wast born with. (Act I, scene iv, lines 137-143)
Shickman notes that this scene is more successful when the Fool uses a handheld mirror, a well-established tool of the Fool’s trade (80). In this scenario, if the Fool holds the mirror in his hand and invites Lear to stand next to him (“Come place him here by me”), extending his arm so they can see their own reflections in the mirror (“The one in motley here, the other found out there”), Lear could then recognize the “bitter fool” - himself - in the mirror’s reflection (80). Fools were known to use mirrors in performance in multiple ways: viewing their own reflections, practicing exaggerated faces, and holding it up to others “so that a sinner might see his folly” (Shickman 77). Indeed, as a tool in the Fool’s arsenal, the mirror is a crucial symbol embodying the purpose of all Fools: “The fool of medieval and Renaissance art has a mirror because in the metaphorical sense he is one” (Shickman 77, italics mine). There are multiple opportunities for a mirror within the text, both specified and unspecified. In Act III, scene ii, in the midst of a terrifying storm, the Fool will randomly state that “For there was never yet fair woman but she made mouths in a glass” (lines 37-38) - a staging choice made more understandable if the Fool produces his mirror and begins to make exaggerated pouts or moues in it. Also, Lear himself will call for a “looking-glass” at the end of the play in an attempt to deny Cordelia’s death - not to gaze into it, but in the hopes that her breath will fog the glass. Rather, what he sees or does not see will shatter him.

Returning to Act I, scene iv, another connection between Cordelia and the Fool is made shortly thereafter in the same scene, when the Fool asks Lear for an egg:

Fool: Nuncle, give me an egg and I’ll give thee two crowns.
Lear: What two crowns shall they be?
Fool: Why, after I have cut the egg i’the middle and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest thy crown i’the middle and gav/st away
both parts, thou bor’st thine ass on thy back o’er the dirt. Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav’st thy golden one away.

(Act I, scene 4, lines 148-156.)

Here, the Fool compares two ‘crowns’ of an egg, sliced down the middle with the yolk (‘the meat’) removed, to the king’s recent division of his kingdom. The line recalls Lear’s monologue of Act 1, scene i, a speech packed with far-reaching consequences. In it, Lear warns Kent against speaking up for Cordelia; disowns and banishes Cordelia; officially divides his kingdom between Goneril and Regan’s husbands; and ends his speech with the image of a halved crown:

Lear: Peace, Kent, come not between the dragon and his wrath!
I loved her most, and thought to set my rest
On her kind nursery. [To Cordelia:] Hence and avoid my sight.
So be my grave my peace, as here I give
Her father’s heart from her. (...)
Cornwall and Albany, with my two daughters’ dowers, digest this third.
Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her.
I do invest you jointly with my power… the sway,
Revenue, execution of the rest,
Beloved sons, be yours; which to confirm,
This coronet part between you. (Act I, scene 1, lines 121-139, italics mine)

When the Fool and Cordelia are not double-cast, it is possible that the Fool plucked Lear’s imagery of a divided and doomed crown from castle gossip or from his own imagination. When the role of Cordelia and the Fool are double-cast, however, no gossip is necessary: the actress portraying both Cordelia and the Fool was onstage to witness Lear’s words. By returning to the stage as the Fool, and in proper fool fashion, she delivers his own words back to him, though he does not yet understand the importance of her message.

Shortly after this exchange, the Fool shifts gears and breaks into song - a choice that stuns Lear:
Lear: When were you wont to be so full of songs, sirrah?
Fool: I have used it, nuncle, e’er since thou mad’st thy daughters thy mothers. (Act I, scene iv, lines 162-164.)

Lear’s response is puzzling, since it implies that the Fool does not normally sing. Even more significant is the Fool’s response: he began singing two days ago, when Lear relinquished his crown, divided his kingdom, and banished Cordelia. Late in the play, Lear remarks on Cordelia’s voice, which he describes as “ever soft / Gentle and low” (Act V, scene iii, lines 270-271). The timing of the Fool’s unexpected singing is therefore another allusion to double-casting the role of Cordelia and the Fool: within the context of the play, the Fool only began singing when Cordelia was cast out. From the perspective of the audience and the theater itself, however, the Fool began singing when the actress who sang as Cordelia shifted into the Fool’s role.

As Lear and the Fool leave Goneril’s house for Regan’s, Lear grows more fearful of his encroaching madness. As Lear prepares to leave the stage, the Fool speaks these lines, although the intended listener - Lear or the audience - is left unclear:

Fool: She that’s a maid now and laughs at my departure,
Shall not be a maid long, unless things be cut shorter.
(Act I, scene v, lines 49-50.)

Who is ‘she’, since only Lear and the Fool are on the stage? Some scholars believe that here the Fool breaks the fourth wall and speaks to the audience, addressing his lines to a woman in the crowd, and delivering a sexual threat to any woman laughing at him (“she that’s a maid now… shall not be a maid long”). While Fools often included vulgarity and sexual puns in their repertoire, this line and its interpretation are jarring - and Ghose argues that is, in fact, the point. She views the line as “an obscene jest… a sudden grotesque injection of mirth into an increasingly bleak world on stage. The effect
is a radical disruption of tragic illusionism and a reminder of the reality of the world of the audience” (192, italics mine).

An alternate interpretation arises, however, if the Fool is double-cast as Cordelia. That dynamic allows the line to be a nod to the audience, again breaking the fourth wall, as the Fool refers not to a “maid” in the audience, but Cordelia/the Fool herself. Ghose also emphasizes the manner in which the Fool speaks both to the reality of the world onstage and to the reality of the world of the audience as they view the performance. This dichotomy can only be further established when the Fool and Cordelia are double-cast; the audience’s recognition and awareness of Cordelia’s character residing in the character of the Fool are underscored with every line, such as the one cited above.

In addition, Garber reminds us that “one of the many connotations of the word ‘nothing’ in this period was a slang reference to the female sexual organs… such as Hamlet’s lines on the ‘no thing’ that lies ‘between maids’ legs’ [Hamlet 3.2.107, 109]” (Garber 665). Abrams observes that “Castration anxieties recur throughout the Fool's speeches, reminding us of his secret sharing in the identity of a character of opposite gender. If the Fool's ‘thing’ is cut shorter... the actor's stage life as a man will also come to an end. He will become a maid again, resuming Cordelia's cast-off shape” (358).

The Fool repeatedly chides, comforts, and challenges Lear throughout the play. And yet, despite the Fool’s recognition of Lear’s folly, the Fool refuses to abandon him. When the Fool and Lear find Kent in the stocks in Act II, the Fool has a moment to talk alone with Kent. He chooses to speak openly about servitude and loyalty:

That sir which serves and seeks for gain,
And follows but for form,
Will pack when it begins to rain,
And leave thee in the storm;
But I will tarry, the fool will stay,  
*And let the wise man fly:*  
The knave turns fool that runs away,  
The fool no knave perdy. (Act II, scene ii, lines 267-274, italics mine)

Why, when the Fool so clearly recognizes Lear’s folly, should he continue to follow and counsel him? What could possibly motivate such loyalty? Perhaps, as with Cordelia, it is a desire to help a beloved man who is clearly in the wrong, to see and understand the world, himself, and those who love him more clearly - to place a greater value on love than on power. The closing lines also indicate the strength of the Fool’s character: it would be cowardly to run, to abandon his king when Lear needs him most. It is a loyalty matched only by Lear’s youngest daughter.

Rejected by Regan, Lear and the Fool wander helplessly in the open, enduring a violent tempest that reflects Lear’s insanity and rage. As Lear howls at the storm, urging it to its thunderous heights, the Fool begs Lear for calmness and rational thought: “Good nuncle, in. Ask thy daughters’ blessing. Here’s a night pities neither wise men nor fools” (Act III, scene ii, lines 11-13). The Fool’s words may refer to Regan, suggesting a return to her household, but if the Fool and Cordelia are double-cast, a new possibility emerges. As Lear’s daughter/Fool seeking shelter for her father/his King, the Fool speaks in tandem with the Fool’s alter ego, Cordelia, whose spirit shares the stage with the Fool and Lear in that moment. An invitation to ask for his daughter’s blessing is both a call to beg Regan for shelter and a request to ask Cordelia for forgiveness. It is an open invitation on multiple levels, a request for Lear to back away from his madness and rage… and the father/King cannot even acknowledge it, so enraptured is he by the storm (“Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!” Act III, scene ii, line 14).
When Lear and the disguised Kent leave in search of shelter, the Fool stays on stage and delivers a strange monologue full of inversion and dualism. He refers to a time of inaction (“when priests are more in word than matter”), dilution (“When brewers mar their malt with water”), class anarchy (“when nobles are their tailors’ suitors”) injustice (“no heretics burned but wenches’ suitors”) and libel (“when slanders do not live in tongues”). In other words, when the world has gone mad, inside-out, or topsy-turvy - as Lear has abdicated his throne to his daughters who loved him not - then “shall the realm of Albion come to great confusion” and “going shall be used with feet” (Act III, scene iii, lines 79-96). While Albion refers to England, the allusion to feet is confusing - is the Fool saying that men shall flee England in droves, or that men are currently incapable of walking upright?

None of these lines, however, have generated so much scholarship as the closing line of the soliloquy: “This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time” (lines 95-96). For Abrams, “the Fool's odd scene-closing prophecy of Merlin prophesying ratifies our impression of his doubleness, since, as well as sharing his being with Cordelia, Lear's Fool exists both in the audience's present (hence confidently alluding to the historical Merlin) and in a distant past before Merlin was heard of” (359). Peterson sees the prophecy as a commentary “on both a distopic and utopic vision of the world” (107) that positions the Fool as “self-consciously outside the bounds of the mimetic construct, but also outside of language” (108). When considered through the lens of Cordelia and the Fool being double-cast, however, the speech takes on an additional form: that of the Fool, Cordelia, and the actress speaking concurrently: she is the present
character (The Fool), the absent character (Cordelia), and the actress herself - the performer that has been with us since the dawn of time, well before the time of Merlin.

When the Fool rejoins Lear, the duo encounter Edgar. Like Kent, Edgar is wrongly cast out by his father, and has disguised himself as “Poor Tom” (notably, when Cordelia is ‘disguised’/double-cast as the Fool, disguised characters [Kent, Edgar, Fool/Cordelia] on stage outnumber those undisguised [Lear] by 3 to 1). After encouraging the Fool to take shelter in a hovel (“In, boy, go first. You houseless poverty - nay, get thee in,” Act III, scene iv, line 26-27), Lear’s madness shifts to philosophy with an obsessive focus on Edgar: “First let me talk with this philosopher” (line 150), “I’ll talk a word with this same learned Theban: what is your study?” (lines 153-4), “Noble philosopher, your company… Come, good Athenian” (lines 168-176, all from Act III, scene iv). As Lear’s focus drifts from wordplay with the Fool to philosophy with Edgar/Poor Tom, the Fool has fewer and fewer lines. Just two scenes later, in Act III, scene 6, the Fool speaks his last lines of the play (“And I’ll go to bed at noon,” line 82), and never returns to the stage.

Scholarship on the Fool’s parting line is immense and diverse. Shickman suggests it is yet another example of the inverted nature of the play: like Lear turning his kingdom over to his children, making his daughters his masters, one might as well retire to bed when the sun is at its highest point (83). Abrams sees the line as a riposte to Lear’s line which precedes it, “We’ll go to supper in the morning” (Act III, scene iv, line 82-83), adding: “By now the Fool's function has been drastically reduced by Lear's revival of conscience and by Poor Tom's usurpation of the Fool's place in Lear's counsel… ‘I'll go to bed at noon’ signals the disappearance we have long awaited, to which many dramatic
signs are now pointing,” stoking the audience’s anticipation of Cordelia’s return (359).

For Garber, the line has multiple meanings, first as a “proverbial phrase meaning ‘I’ll play the Fool, too’.” (674). But she also explains that a common term for the purple goat’s-beard flower was “Jack-to-to-bed-at-noon,” so described because its flower closes at midday (674). She also points out that the Fool’s departure comes in “the middle of the play (‘at noon’)” (674): in a play that is five acts, three scenes, and 320 lines long, declaring the third act, sixth scene, and 82nd line to be “the middle of the play” certainly comes close. To these interpretations, I would add another: since the performance of the double-cast actress has shifted to the Fool, the spirit of Cordelia has been dormant, or “asleep.” With the Fool’s departure, she can awaken, and the Fool may “sleep” instead.

Although Cordelia has been absent since Act I, scene iv, the text informs us that she knows all that has transpired, having received reports from Kent:

Gentleman: ...You have seen
sunshine and rain at once, her smiles and tears
were like a better way. Those happy smiles
That played on her ripe lip seemed not to know
What guests were in her eyes, which parted thence
As pearls from diamonds dropped. In brief,
Sorrow would be a rarity most beloved
If all could so become it” (Act IV, scene iii, lines 17-24)

While the above passage describes her actions as beautiful and sincere, both qualities we have associated with Cordelia from the outset, Kent presses - like Lear - for a verbal response:

Kent: Made she no verbal question?
Gentleman: Faith, once or twice she heaved the name of father
Pantingly forth as if it pressed her heart;
Cried ‘Sisters, sisters, shame of ladies, sisters!
Kent, father, sisters! What, i’th storm, i’ the night?
Let pity not be believed!’ There she shook
The holy water from her heavenly eyes,
And clamour mastered her; then away she started,
To deal with grief alone. (Act IV, scene iii, lines 25-33)

This description emphasizes Cordelia’s silence once more, as her grief overwhelms her and drives her to solitude. However, her appearance on stage just twenty lines later presents us with a side of her that is surprisingly military. Entering “with drum and colors,” as well as an “officer and soldiers,” Cordelia has confronted her despair and channeled it into action:

Cordelia: [to Officer] ...A century send forth;
Search every acre in the high-grown field
And bring him to our eye. What can man’s wisdom
In the restoring his bereaved sense,
He that helps him take all my outward worth. (Act IV, scene iv, lines 6-10)

Informed that “the British powers are marching,” Cordelia reveals that she has been planning her military coup for some time: “‘Tis known before. Our preparation stands in expectation of them” (Act IV, scene iv, lines 22-23). Lear’s favorite daughter has not been idle; she has been amassing forces to reclaim his kingdom from her false sisters. In galvanizing France’s forces, Cordelia proves herself not simply a queen, but a character who chooses actions over words. This is an evolution of the daughter we saw in the first scene of the play; “nothing” alone is not enough. Cordelia is now an adult, ready to show her love through finding her father and fighting for his kingdom. When Cordelia and the Fool are double-cast, this is not a surprising leap. The Fool accompanied Lear through his despair and madness, and Cordelia emerged to guide him back to sanity. Contextually, if Lear had no “sovereign shame” of his treatment of Cordelia (Act IV, scene iii, line 43), Cordelia might not have had the power to return. Lear had to first accept that it was “his own unkindness that stripped her from his benediction, turned her to foreign casualties, (and) gave her dear rights to his dog-hearted daughters” (Act IV,
scene iii, lines 43-46) before Cordelia could return to the play. The King had to recognize his own Fool-ishness.

When Lear returns to the stage - alone, for the first time - he speaks bluntly to this change of heart: “To say ‘ay’ and ‘no’ to everything that I said “ay’ and ‘no’ to was no good divinity… they are not men o’ their words: they told me I was everything” (Act IV, scene vi, lines 98-104). In Lear’s madness, he is finally able to see clearly.

When Lear and Cordelia are finally united, Cordelia wakes her father, and he responds: “Thou art a soul in bliss… you are a spirit, I know; where did you die?” (Act IV, scene vii, line 46-49). Abrams notes that when Cordelia and the Fool are double-cast this scene mirrors the three actors meeting in Act I, scene iv: the moment is “a retake of the actors' reunion scene which brought Kent, Lear, and the actor-Cordelia together as a trio ‘out of favor’; the major antagonists of the play's opening are finally reconciled in their own persons” (359). But even taking Lear’s madness into consideration, his question is a curious response: why deem Cordelia a spirit, and why ask after the place of her death? Is it because Lear, having recognized his own failures and shortcomings, is unable to see the reality of his daughter standing before of him? When Cordelia and the Fool are double-cast, the line alludes to multiple deaths: that of Cordelia when he exiled her, and that of Lear’s Fool, who is gone. In the next few lines, Cordelia sees her father is entirely changed, not only in his fortunes and his mind, but in his humility: “I am a very foolish, fond old man… and to deal plainly, I fear I am not in my perfect mind. Methinks I should know you and know this man,” he says, referring to Kent. Lear ends his speech with: “Do not laugh at me, for, as I am a man, I think this lady to be my child Cordelia”
(Act IV, scene vii, lines 67-69). Lear’s inability to recognize Kent and Cordelia, as if he is still in a fog on the heath, will come into focus with Cordelia’s death.

When Lear and Cordelia are captured by Edmund in Act V, scene iii, Lear has lost all interest in revenge. He longs only to share his remaining years with Cordelia, no matter how brutal their surroundings, determined that they will find comfort in each other’s company:

Lear: [to Cordelia] Come, let’s away to prison;
We two alone will sing like birds i’th cage.
When thou dost ask me blessing I’ll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we’ll live
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies... (Act V, scene iii, lines 8-13.)

In this moment, Lear has at last the retirement he hoped for in the play’s first scene, right before he banished his one true daughter: “I loved her most, and thought to set my rest upon her kind nursery” (Act I, scene i, lines 123-124). Wish granted.

Lear sees clearly enough to know a prison sentence is no dream retirement, and yet he claims that “the good years” he and Cordelia have before them will “devour (their enemies), flesh and fell” (Act V, scene iii, 24-25). It will not happen. Thrown from power, Edmund confesses that he ordered a captain “to hang Cordelia in the prison and to lay the blame upon her own despair, that she fordid herself” (Act V, scene iii, lines 251-254).

Edmund’s plan, however sly, discounts Cordelia’s character and evolution, as well as succumbing to sexist stereotypes. Cordelia would no more abandon her father than she would go mad herself. This is the woman who asked her sisters to “Use well our father” (Act I, scene i, line 280) even as he disowned her and exiled her just for speaking plainly and honestly (“So young, my lord, and true” Act I, scene i, line 108), and was still
so moved by his plight that she returned with an army to save him from his own self-imposed destruction (“No blown ambition doth our arms incite, But love, dear love, and our aged father’s right,” Act IV, scene 4, lines 27-28). When Cordelia perceives injustice, whether it is insincere flattery or hearing of her father’s anguish, she speaks up and goes to war. Cordelia’s strength is that she knows who she is, and who she loves, from the very beginning (“What shall Cordelia say? Love, and be silent,” Act I, scene i) - a quality that shines from her like a beacon in the later stages of the play. As Lear finds her and says she has reason to hate him, Cordelia is pure forgiveness: she says she has “No cause, no cause” to hate him (Act IV, scene vii, line 75). Her integrity, strength, and compassion toward her father makes suicide an absurd option, and only makes sense when considered through the lens of gender. If a male commander such as Othello were taken prisoner, for example, would one expect him to take his own life? No: we would expect him to bide his time and escape with his life, or to escape and stage a new attack. The suggestion that Cordelia would give in to despair defies everything she has learned - and everything we have learned about her - in the course of the play. She returns, after all, with a crown of her own, commanding an army, and having just crossed the seas to rescue the father who rejected her. Her determination is as strong as that of any King, and her moral compass is far more true than her father’s. To assume that a woman with such strength and determination would commit suicide simply because she has been taken prisoner shows a disregard of women’s power, not to mention Cordelia as an individual.

Bearing all that Cordelia has accomplished in mind makes what comes next all the more devastating. Lear enters the stage two lines later carrying Cordelia’s body in his hands, and we witness one of the most raw expressions of grief in all literature:
Lear: Howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones!
Had I your tongues and eyes, I’d use them so
That heaven’s vault should crack. She’s gone forever.
I know when one is dead and when one lives.
She’s dead as earth.—Lend me a looking glass.
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why, then she lives. (Act V, scene iii, lines 255-261)

Shock at Cordelia’s death - reflected in Lear’s description of the others on stage
as “men of stones,” much like the Callanish Stones or ‘standing stones’ still scattered
across the British isles - has reverberated throughout scholarship for centuries. Samuel
Johnson famously claimed to be so shocked at her death “many years ago… that I know
not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to
revise them as an editor” (Johnson qtd in Benson, 437). Cordelia’s death so upset 17th-
century playwright Nahum Tate that he “rewrote (Shakespeare’s play) in 1681, leaving
Lear and Cordelia to live, and live happily ever after” (Tate qtd in Benson, 437). Indeed,
in Tate’s version, Albany happily volunteers the crown to Lear, the now sane and
restored once and future King, and Lear immediately confers the crown upon Cordelia,
who will marry Edgar. Tate’s play was far more successful than Shakespeare’s version
for centuries; productions of it took the place of Shakespeare’s Lear until well into the
19th century (Wells 63).

But even in profound grief, Lear’s words echo the duality and inversion that has
been present in the play’s text since the beginning. Lear has outlived his child, a horror
universally recognized as something “contrary to nature” (Shickman 83). The moment he
carries her on stage “evokes an inverted pieta: instead of the bereaved mother embracing
her son’s body, we witness the aged father cradling his daughter’s” (Goodland 201).

Overwhelmed with grief and raging with despair, Lear vacillates between
accepting Cordelia’s death and defying it: “I know when one is dead - she’s gone
forever” counterposed with “If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, why, then she lives.” In this moment, Lear himself is caught between two realities, the horror of death and the hope for life, and he calls for a mirror or looking glass as a tool to confirm which reality is true. Shickman asks, “Is the mirror ever brought as he commands? No stage direction indicates that it is, but if it is, surely it would be the long-absent Fool's own mirror” (85-86). Kent is on the stage with Lear, and could certainly have been given the Fool’s mirror a number of times during their shared scenes, which he could then offer to Lear. Lear’s next words, however, refer not to a mirror, but to a feather:

Lear: This feather stirs. She lives. If it be so, 
      It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows 
      That ever I have felt. 
    Kent: O, my good master— 
    Lear: Prithee, away. (Act V, scene iii, lines 262-266)

Either the mirror has not been produced, or its results are not what Lear hoped for. It is easy to imagine Lear grabbing a feather from his surroundings and lifting it to his daughter’s lips in the hopes that her breath will stir it - but the ensuing “Prithee, away” indicates that the feather either does not move, or that its movement is due to Lear’s trembling hand rather than Cordelia’s breath. It is at this moment that Lear’s grief resurges, raging at the others onstage:

A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all! 
I might have saved her. Now she’s gone forever.— 
Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little. Ha! 
What is ‘t thou sayst?—Her voice was ever soft, 
Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman. (Act V, scene iii, lines 269-271)

Indeed, Lear might have saved her: by not relinquishing his crown, by not dividing his kingdom, by not casting out the only daughter who loved him, by listening to his Fool, and by reaching out to Cordelia sooner, despite his shame. Yet it is in this moment of despair that Lear’s vision returns, and he begins to see clearly. He turns to
Kent, who has been in disguise alongside him for almost the entire play, and says: “Are you not Kent?” (line 279). This sudden understanding appears like a fog lifting from the land, but it is not random: only with Cordelia’s death can Lear begin to see clearly again. It is only when this occurs that Lear can finally connect Cordelia and his beloved jester, moments before his own death:

*And my poor fool is hanged.* No, no, no life?
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou ’lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never.—
Pray you undo this button. Thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there! (Act V, scene iii, lines 304-309, italics mine)

Lear’s final words recall the looking-glass he has demanded just moments before. If the Fool/Cordelia presents Lear with their own reflections using a mirror in Act I, scene iv (“the bitter and the sweet fool / will presently appear” lines 139-140), if Lear calls for a looking-glass as he cradles Cordelia, and Kent would be present to give him the same mirror, then it may be that Lear’s final lines are of Lear looking at himself and Cordelia in the Fool’s looking-glass. The significance of this staging would be profound, as it would be a literal mirror of the previously-staged scene between Lear and the Fool. In this moment, looking at Cordelia’s face in the Fool’s mirror, Lear could recognize the Fool as the same person who also portrays Cordelia. Booth notes that “Shakespeare seems always to have been fascinated with the double consciousness inherent in watching actors on a stage and watching the characters they portray… (and) likes to experiment with the unsettling but enriching effects to be had from making an audience’s two incompatible consciousnesses indivisible” (129-130). When Cordelia and the Fool are
double-cast, Lear is, in this moment, experiencing the same jarring duality of nature that the audience perceived at the Fool’s entrance in Act I, scene iv.

As with that event, this moment accomplishes three things: the fourth wall is shattered as members of the audience recognize the actor portraying the Fool; it reasserts the fourth wall as the audience wrestles with Cordelia as a character separate from the Fool; and it finally leaves both the audience and Lear in a state of cognitive dissonance as the lines between stage reality and actual reality combine, separate, and combine again. Like oil and water, these realities mix without blending, and in this moment, Lear experiences an existential conflict: he recognizes the Fool as Cordelia, Cordelia as the Fool, his onstage world as a theater, and his life as a play.

In recognizing the implications of multiple realities, dualities, and inversions, Lear is reduced to pointing and calling out to his fellow people on stage (“look there, look there”), unable to put into words how his universe is suddenly multiplying in all directions, expanding and contracting all at once. It is a moment that shatters the fourth wall and Lear himself: he dies from a broken heart, from sudden understanding, and from absolute grief. Better to share in Cordelia’s death than to live another moment with such unresolvable tension.

Finally, patterns of repeating language indicate a profound connection between Cordelia, the Fool, and Lear. When Lear turns to Cordelia at the beginning of the play, expecting eloquence from the daughter he terms “our joy” (Act I, scene i, line 82) - an emotional term that contrasts the formal, lineage-based introductions he provides for his elder daughters (“our eldest born” for Goneril, line 54, and “our second daughter, our
dearest Regan,” lines 67-68) - he is severely disappointed when Cordelia chooses not to praise him:

Cordelia: Nothing.
Lear: Nothing?
Cordelia: Nothing.
Lear: Nothing will come of nothing. (lines 87-90)

This deluge of the word “nothing” - uttered five times in four lines by two different characters - is unusual in Shakespeare’s canon, but not for King Lear. It is the first salvo in a conversation that continues throughout the play: first here with Cordelia, then with the Fool upon his arrival in Act 1, scene 4:

Kent: This is nothing, Fool.
Fool: Then ‘tis like the breath of an unfee’d laywer.
You gave me nothing for ‘t. - Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?
Lear: Why, no, boy. Nothing can be made of nothing. (lines 126-130, italics mine)

This exchange, made three scenes after Lear has exiled his “joy,” stripping Cordelia of her land, title, and lineage because she refused to flatter him, again contains five utterances of the word “nothing,” this time in five lines between three characters. Comparing the two sets of lines also shows some similarities: the first time, Lear states that “nothing will come of nothing;” the second time, he says “nothing can be made of nothing.”

The final occurrence of five negations takes place in Lear’s death scene (Act 5, scene 4). Fascinatingly, the negations occur one after the other, first as a repetition of the word “no”, and second as a repetition of the word “never”:

And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life?
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never. (lines 304-307, italics mine)
Here, we find ten negations, two groups of five, literally following another. First Lear repeats the word “no” five times in three lines, and then he repeats the word “never” - in what Lyell Asher terms “the five most downbeat trochees in all of English drama” (227) - five times in a single line. The repetitive pattern from the first scene to the last, then, is: five times in five lines, three of those consisting of the single word “nothing,” between Lear and Cordelia; five times in five lines, between Kent, Lear, and The Fool; and back-to-back negations delivered in the same speech by Lear as he holds Cordelia in his arms, repeating “no” five times in three lines, and repeating “never” five times in one single line. Each of these negations is far more descriptive and absolute than “not,” which is far more commonly used. In Shakespeare After All, Garber argues, “Lear’s repeated iterations of the same word over and over again… mark the very limit of language as communication” (656). I suggest that the appearance of these repeated negatives - occurring both at the introductions of Cordelia and The Fool, as well as occurring twice as Cordelia dies and Lear’s madness abates - indicates layered connections between Cordelia/The Fool and Lear, and that they do not occur elsewhere in the play because all three characters, and both actors, must be on stage for them to occur. The choice to repeat negations in particular, rather than words such as “love” or “honor,” alludes to the nihilistic ethos of the play: all are doomed from the moment Lear chose flattery over integrity, division over union, and style over substance.

Some scholars have questioned why Cordelia need die at all. Indeed, the success of Tate’s Disneyfied version of Shakespeare’s play indicates that audiences preferred a text that rewarded good and defeated evil. I contend that Cordelia had to die because
Lear, however unwittingly, demanded it in Act I, scene i: [to Cordelia] “Better thou hadst not been born than not t’ have pleased me better” (lines 235-236).

Parents speak some words that can never be taken back, and some thoughts, however offhandedly spoken, sink into our very skin. They haunt us, bending our bones, curbing our faith in ourselves and our ambitions. But these words are not only heard by the child, but by Fate itself, triggering heartbreak and tragic destinies. Only part of Cordelia/Fool, the Fool, exists out of time; as a fully-fledged mortal, Lear’s daughter is beholden to it. As Cordelia cannot be un-born, she can only die before her time.

“I wish you had never been born,” her father said.

Wish granted.

While *King Lear* is famous for depicting Lear’s battle against madness, perhaps the greater story is the conflict within Lear’s heart, not his mind. At the beginning of the play, he owns a kingdom and values nothing, discarding the daughter who loves him. At the end of the play, he values only what cannot be bought - his daughter’s love - and loses that too. It is the only thing, I believe any audience would agree, that he realized was worth more than life itself. In contrast, Cordelia understands the value of the human heart, and what is truly important, from the very beginning. “Love, and be silent,” she whispered to herself. If only that had been enough for Lear. The true tragedy of King Lear, as with Othello, is that both tragedies are entirely of their own making, and due to their own hubris and insecurities, respectively. If Cordelia’s heart, soul, and spirit been prized more by Lear than empty words that stoked his ego, he might never have lost his kingdom, his daughter/Fool, or “(their) joy” at all.
Chapter III
Performance:

Desdemona in *Othello* at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, 2007

Examining Shakespeare in performance is critical to understanding the plays. Reading the plays is critical to understanding the text, but viewing the plays in performance brings them to life, and the result is not always a direct-line, cookie-cutter, A-to-B result. Indeed, performances of Shakespeare’s works are as nuanced, diverse, and multifaceted as the plays themselves. As has repeatedly been shown on stage and will be underscored in this thesis, how each generation interprets and presents Shakespeare shapes our cultural landscape—not only of Shakespeare’s work, but of ourselves. A thousand decisions go into the staging of any play, from what venue to use and who can attend to each emphasis and inflection delivered by an actor. Every choice changes and shapes Shakespeare, turning his words into a three-dimensional, interactive experience with a living, breathing audience, centuries removed from Shakespeare’s time. It is therefore insightful to explore how the depiction of Shakespeare’s characters, such as Desdemona and Cordelia/The Fool, have changed over time, and how they are being depicted today.

Shakespeare’s play about the Moor of Venice and his brutal murder of his wife has prompted powerful responses from audiences for hundreds of years. Consider the
news report of a 1852 performance in Cologne, Germany, during a scene in which Othello grabbed Iago by the throat:

“‘That’s right! Kill the dog!’ I heard those words shouted out next to me… the man who spat out these words in such a fashion … pushed himself forward as if to help. Hearing the laughter that surged up around him, the man blushed, grabbed for his hat, and left the theater saying, ‘No, that’s more than a man can bear!’” (Lindfors, Performing Shakespeare in Europe, 182).

Or another example describing a production in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1862:

“In the last (act), at the moment Othello smothers Desdemona, a young gentleman started to his feet shrieking *She is innocent! Othello she is innocent!* and fell into violent hysteries and in that state was borne from the Theatre” (Lindfors, The Last Years, 186).

Or yet another example, from a 2007 production at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre in London:

“(During the murder scene,) one gentleman one night just yelled, “No, no, stop!” There was so much pain in his voice. He was in the front row, so (Desdemona)... was two feet away from him. It was just wrenching” (Milam, Appendix A, 161).

These three incidents, spanning more than 150 years, reflect the intense audience response to *Othello*, particularly to Desdemona’s murder. Yet, as I shall show, scholarship and performance focused not on the injustice of her murder, but on the tortured relationship between Othello and Iago. Recently, however, directors and actors have begun to reconsider Desdemona’s value and importance, choosing instead to depict a woman who is defiant and bold and fights for her life, rather than a passive wife who simply submits to her husband’s will. To better understand the impact of performance in experiencing and understanding Shakespeare, this chapter will critique the costuming, stage blocking, and rehearsal notes, as well as analyzing a personal interview with the director of the Shakespeare Globe Theatre’s 2007 production of *Othello*. In doing so, I hope to highlight a multitude of possible interpretations of Shakespeare’s work, and why
Some interpretations are more powerful and timely than others.

Some directors have begun to rethink Desdemona’s defiance, boldness, and zeal for life, challenging the long-held idea that *Othello* is about race, and even re-evaluating the play’s message as being less about a man undone by violent jealousy and more about a woman who is unjustly murdered. Consider the point of Leo Bill, a Shakespearean actor, in a clip from the documentary *Muse of Fire*:

“Why is *(Othello)* never about a woman who marries a guy and then is wrongfully murdered, and it’s horrendous?… even the murder scene is always about *(Othello)*, and I find that strange. In talking about how there’s a million ways of doing Shakespeare, I’d like to see a play that’s somehow about... the victim’s *her*, really. Othello’s our victim, (but) he’s just stupid. There’s *one* victim, and that’s *her*. And it’s never really done like that.” (Bill, Muse of Fire documentary, emphasis by the speaker)

Why, indeed? Bill’s question reflects not only a modern, feminist interpretation of *Othello*, but a rejection of the play as primarily about race. Indeed, it puts the tragedy of *Desdemona* center stage, rather than the tragedy of Othello: it reflects the idea that women’s lives are valuable and worthy of consideration, and that the murder of a woman is not just an indicator that a man has suffered a devastating loss, but that the loss of her life alone is devastating for us all.

While Bill’s question might seem extraordinary, it resonates with the 2007 production of *Othello* at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre directed by Wilson Milam, which took a new angle on Desdemona and was “sold out every night” (Milam, Appendix A, 159). In a phone interview, Milam spoke extensively about the production. He began by focusing on the production’s approach to race:

“...we actually had a mixed-race Emilia (actress Lorraine Borroughs), so we took the ‘race card’ out of the equation a bit. It was an interesting reaction from the audience when they saw her. When Emilia first walks out and you see Iago is married to a person of color, they had to recalibrate very quickly. They’d come to
see a play about overt racism, and (we said), ‘That’s not going to be part of it… this is something more than, other than, or along with race’.” (Milam, Appendix A, 154).

In addition to Emilia’s cultural diversity, Milam added, the production featured a “black” Bianca, actress Zawe Ashton, and an Asian bartender, actress Gabby Wong (SGT cast listing). Milam said his approach was guided not by an interest in flipping the tradition of a racially binary cast - with Othello being black, and the rest of the cast being white - but by historic reasons. Milam set the play in Venice during the invasion of Cyprus, in 1570:

“When you look at Venice (at that time), it was the most cosmopolitan city in the world. So as part of that, (in our production)... the rich upper-class, the elite of Venice, they were caucasian. They were the white folks. And after that, everyone was African, mixed-race, Asian, Maltesian, Corsican… it was a seaport, polyglot town” (Milam, Appendix A, 154).

Milam’s decision to feature a multicultural cast and thereby remove - or at the very least, dilute - the examination of race from the play shifts its dynamic. If Othello is not about race, with Othello being black and the rest of the cast being white, what is it then about? One possibility is that it is about a man - not necessarily isolated by his race, but simply a man - who believes the worst of his wife and murders her for it.

Indeed, in addition to focusing less on race, Milam’s production also featured a strong Desdemona who loves Othello, challenges him, and fights for her life when Othello attacks her. In speaking about the ‘landing scene’ (Act II, scene i), Milam noted that he cut a few of the lines earlier in the scene - “but not the exchange with Desdemona, because that was key” (Milam, Appendix A, 152). When asked to describe Desdemona’s character during that exchange, Milam said: “She held her ground, certainly. She did not truckle, ever. (Iago) would probe and she would probe right back” (Milam, Appendix A,
In her rehearsal notes about the production, actress Zoe Tapper wrote extensively about the experience of playing Desdemona. Like Milam, the play was her first professional Shakespeare production: “...it's very exciting and a big challenge,” she wrote (Tapper, Rehearsal Notes 1). In fact, from her first rehearsal notes, Tapper had specific ideas about Desdemona’s strength and defiance:

“(Desdemona) shows real strength... she's actually a very moral person and it would have taken such a lot for her to have defied her father... the only way she would have defied him is because she absolutely fell in love with Othello and she had to be with him. I think if you start from that you’ve already got a character who is not only ruled by her passions...but also by her morals... She's very fervent in her defence and standing up for what she believes in. When she knows and believes something in her mind she absolutely stands her ground and I think that's a lovely quality. It makes her very direct” (Tapper, Rehearsal Notes 1, italics mine).

Tapper’s interpretation of Desdemona in terms of such power - “strength,” “very moral,” “fervent,” a character who “stands up for what she believes in” and “stands her ground” - all support the idea of Desdemona as a powerful, ethical, and vital character. In addition, Tapper also speaks to the powerful love between Desdemona and Othello - “...I think there's a passion that she has which is akin to his passion. I think they have found a kindred spirit in each other” (Tapper, Rehearsal Notes 1) - as well as Desdemona’s assertiveness:

“...she's a very sensual, sensitive person. I very much want to veer away from making her too angelic and ‘airy fairy’ because I think she's absolutely direct. She knows she hasn’t betrayed Othello and she knows who she loves. I think, at the moment, that's very much how I’m wanting to play her” (Tapper, SG, Rehearsal Notes 1).
In her second post of rehearsal notes, Tapper holds to her premise that Othello and Desdemona are indeed deeply in love:

“Desdemona and Othello are kindred spirits and they’ve found each other. They are soul mates. She fell in love with his passion and his drive and he is a great warrior of the battlefield, I don’t think he would fall in love with a ‘little girl’. Desdemona admires Othello’s strength and he admires her strength… you need to believe that her and Othello are made for each other and hope their relationship will last. When all this jealousy starts eating away at Othello, you can see that ‘oh no’ - this one true thing that everyone believed in, this love, is now slowly disintegrating.” (Tapper, SG, Rehearsal Notes 2)

Tapper’s understanding of Desdemona as Othello’s equal - “kindred spirits (who have) found each other” and “soul mates” - frame Desdemona as a warrior in her own right, one who is unafraid to battle social norms, injustice, or even her own husband’s failings. Tapper sees Desdemona as someone who deserves the complete trust and admiration of her husband, something Othello himself openly admits in their first shared scene: “My life upon her faith” (Act I, scene iii, line 290). Her interpretation speaks to the argument that Desdemona is as much a hero of the heart, honorable in both character and deed, as Othello is a renowned warrior on the field.

Yet despite Tapper’s description of the couple’s love as ‘slowly disintegrating,’ Shakespeare’s five-act play only spans two days. Stephen Greenblatt goes so far as to suggest that “perhaps it is wrong even to speak of that particular relationship as a marriage: it seems to last something like a day and a half before it falls apart” (Greenblatt 133, 2004). Indeed, the play begins on the interrupted wedding night of Desdemona and Othello and takes them the next morning to Cyprus, where Othello publicly assaults Desdemona and murders her the following night. While the amount of dialogue is
extensive - more than 3,300 lines (Shakespeare Line Count), the span of time covered by the play is incredibly brief. This is a love that burns not like fire but like flash paper: once ignited, it consumes itself. Given the short window of time in the play, it is even more astonishing how quickly and absolutely Othello’s adoration turns to hate. It is important to note that Desdemona’s love does not change. Unlike Othello, Desdemona’s love and character are consistent: of the two of them, she is the stronger one.

In the third set of rehearsal notes, Tapper discusses her character’s murder scene, and how the rehearsal process has shifted her understanding of Desdemona:

“When I started I was determined to make her strong – feisty in a way. I still want to show her strength. When you are faced with something like the confrontation with your father, you really explore that. But… I think, although she is strong, she has a lot of sympathy and she has become a lot more thoughtful towards the end. It is not just standing up for her rights – her main aim is to reach out to (Othello)... I still don’t want to make her, in any way, a weak little wallflower, because then she couldn’t defy her father and marry somebody who everybody disapproves of” (Tapper, Rehearsal Notes 3).

Tapper’s understanding of Desdemona as “strong” and “standing up for her rights” depicts a woman who unapologetically claims her own power and her own agency. Indeed, the benefit of having a strong and confident Desdemona was reflected in the play’s critical reception. Among them was a review in The Guardian with the headline, “A Desdemona to Die For” (Kellaway, 2007). In addition to Desdemona being referenced in the headline, rather than Othello or Iago, the review includes the following sub-header: “Othello, Iago and Emilia are sensational, too, as the Globe stages a truly shattering tragedy.” The female reviewer, Kate Kellaway, wrote:

“It is an evening of integrity, illuminated by its four excellent central performances... Desdemona is perfection - the best I have ever seen… most of all it is her graceful confidence that is winning. She is so sure of Othello that it is
agonizing to see her extinguished” (Kellaway, 2007).

Kellaway’s review is important because it reflects and celebrates an empowered Desdemona - one who claims her own strength and agency, like many other women in modern audiences. Note that Kellaway’s review is not about Othello the character, but about Desdemona: her name is in the article’s title, while Othello and Iago are shunted to the sub-header, and Desdemona is now the lede (if not the lead). While Kellaway has praise for Tim McInnerny’s Iago (“brilliantly cast… anyone would believe him”), she also notes that “one of the pleasures of seeing Iago at the Globe is that he is treated by the audience as a pantomime villain. They hiss at him and (the line) ‘honest Iago’ attracts laughter” (Kellaway, 2007). Another review of the play in Variety, written by David Benedict, suggests that the female performers shine most brightly in Milam’s production: “Zoe Tapper and Lorraine Burroughs” - Desdemona and Emilia, respectively - “walk away with the production:

The most complete performance comes from Tapper in the usually thankless role of Desdemona, a woman who loves, dies but barely lives... Tapper’s grounded physical presence and well-supported voice bring sweet intelligence and focused energy to every line without ever appearing to milk the role. She’s plucky without being tomboyish and tender without losing resilience, making the most of her character’s limited power via quiet authority” (Benedict, 2007, italics mine).

Another review of the play from May 26, 2007 with the simple headline “Othello” - written by Michael Billington, and also published in The Guardian - views the production differently. While Billington praises “Zoe Tapper's unusually feisty Desdemona” (italics mine) who “struggles vehemently with her murderous husband,” he bemoans “Milam's decision to opt for generic Renaissance costume brings mixed results” (Billington, 2007). Billington claims that while Milam’s traditional costume is “refreshing” visually, he argues that it also “sacrifices the specificity of modern dress that
both delineates rank and clarifies character,” adding that “the chief beneficiary of this updating has been Iago.”

In his review, Billington observes three key elements: Desdemona’s strength; how uncommon it is to see that strength on stage (“unusually feisty”); and the decreased prominence of Iago’s role. While coming from a different point of view, Billington’s last note resonates with Kellaway’s observation that Globe Theatre patrons appreciate “a pantomime villain,” prompting knowing boos and hisses from the audience. This is not to say that Milam’s direction or Tim McInnerny’s performance created a caricature of Iago: it merely highlights how having a strong, powerful, and independent Desdemona can shift the dynamics of the play.

Fascinatingly, Billington closes his review with what he calls “a contentious cultural question,” seemingly in response to Milam’s racially diverse cast: “… while casting black actors as Hamlet or Lear, (shouldn’t) white heavyweights have an occasional crack at Shakespeare’s Moor? Colour-blind casting should cut both ways” (Billington, 2007). The true depth and breadth of privilege is stunning when the first stop, after viewing a multi-cultural production of a Shakespeare play normally depicted as an examination of race, is to advocate to reclaim the protagonist’s role for white actors.

Now that an understanding of the production from the points of view of the director, performer, and critics has been established, it is important to critique the production itself (*Othello at SG*, 2008). Seeing Shakespeare’s work in performance is, after all, the way in which most people are introduced to his canon. Greenblatt states that, for many, “the real ‘life’ of the characters and their plays (lie) not in the texts but in the performances of those texts… this belief should hardly surprise us, since it is the way
most audiences currently respond to plays and, still more, to film” (Greenblatt, 2016).

In Desdemona’s first appearance (Act I, scene iii), Othello, Desdemona, and Brabantio all appear in dark, Elizabethan costume. Othello’s only white clothing is his blouse, and only his cuffs and collar are visible beneath a dark-brown leather doublet and pants. Iago wears the same costume, except his attire (excepting his white blouse) is entirely in black, while Desdemona’s gown is dark burgundy. After her father reluctantly acknowledges the validity of her marriage to Othello, Othello asks for “fit disposition” for his wife “as level with her breeding.” When the Duke suggests she may stay “at her father’s,” Brabantio immediately refuses:

Brabantio: I will not have it.
Othello: Nor I.
Desdemona: Nor I!

This declaration, which Tapper delivers boldly and decisively, stepping downstage center to deliver it, is a departure from the Arden Shakespeare Othello text, which gives Desdemona the line “Nor would I there reside” (Act I, scene iii, line 242). Tapper does say that line, but not before prefacing it with “Nor I!” - a line that echoes Othello’s. While some might argue that adding these two words takes away from Desdemona’s empowerment, Milam’s stage production defies that assessment: her voice, in that moment, underscores the level playing field that she claims without apology.

The repetition of “Nor I” also highlights the mutual exclusivity between the newly married couple and Desdemona’s father, as well as emphasizing the connection between Othello and his wife. In Milam’s stage production, Desdemona is the most fierce and defiant when she proudly proclaims “Nor I!”, speaking it more loudly than Othello and casting the line directly at her father. Immediately thereafter, she boldly strides to center stage to face the Duke, but her next lines are addressed not to him, but at her father, at
whom she stares over the Duke’s shoulder: “Nor would I there reside / to put my father in impatient thoughts / by being in his eye” (Act I, scene iii, lines 242-245). Directed by Milam, Tapper’s Desdemona is unafraid to defend her choice of Othello: she delivers her words from the very center of the space, defying her father openly before the leaders of the state.

Contrast this production with Oliver Parker’s 1995 Othello. In it, Desdemona’s voice never rises above a soft murmur; instead, she is all romanticized softness. Her line “I do perceive here a divided duty” is cut, as is the entire exchange between Brabantio, Othello, and Desdemona in which she refuses to return to her father’s house. Even when she asks the Duke for permission to leave Venice with her war-bound husband, Desdemona is not impassioned, assertive, or determined. Her line “my heart’s subdued even to the very quality of my lord” is significantly changed to the words “my heart’s subdued even to the utmost pleasure of my lord” (lines 302-303), a phrase that indicates complete submission to Othello, both interpersonally and, in subtext, sexually. In this scene, Desdemona is depicted quite differently than Shakespeare’s text indicates: by cutting and even changing her words, the film remakes Desdemona in the image it wants, rather than depicting the strong, impassioned, and defiant character that Shakespeare’s text provides.

In the “landing scene” (Act II, scene i), Desdemona, Iago, and Emilia arrive at Cyprus before Othello. In Milam’s production, they enter from the theater’s pit, taking the stage through a sea of people. At her arrival, Iago stands at center stage in this scene while Emilia stands downstage left, and Desdemona downstage right. Observing Iago’s maltreatment of his wife, Desdemona correctly names Iago a slanderer (Act II, scene i,
line 19). Unfortunately, the production cuts almost the entire exchange of dialogue between Desdemona and Iago, from line 124 to 164 (“...most lame and impotent conclusion!”). Instead, the production jumps to Desdemona’s line to Emilia and Cassio (“Do not learn of him, Emilia, though he is thy husband. How say you, Cassio, is he not a most profane and liberal counsellor?” Act II, scene i, line 162-164). Cassio then moves downstage right to flirt with Desdemona while Iago, still center stage, launches into an enraged aside about Cassio, directing his words to the audience.

All in all, more than 40 lines between Desdemona and Iago - including the line in which Desdemona steps in to defend Emilia, in which she banteres with Iago, and in which Desdemona is shown to be inviolable - are cut. This despite Milam saying that Iago’s exchange with Desdemona was critical to the scene. Milam’s comments in full offer a deeper understanding:

“I cut out a few of the jokes when they first arrived in Cyprus - not the jostling between Desdemona and Iago, but the others, because they were sort of dense and not understandable. So I cut those out, but not the exchange with Desdemona, because that was key” (Milam, Appendix A, 153).

For Milam, then, the exchange between Desdemona and Iago is key for Iago’s belittling of his wife, and for Desdemona calling Iago a slanderer, but not for the rapid-fire exchanges of a strong woman against a misogynist man: those, we must assume, are the parts of the text he deemed “dense and not understandable.” Here, Milam joins the ranks of scholars such as M. R. Ridley, who also dismissed these lines - the latter of whom went so far as to deem the exchange “cheap backchat” (Ridley qtd in Sproat, 44). But by eliminating these lines, the audience is kept from witnessing Desdemona’s eloquence and strength of character when pitted directly against Iago. They do not see how willing she is to intercede on Emilia’s behalf (“What wouldst thou write of me?”,
line 116), how effortlessly she deflects Iago’s slurs against women (“Worse and worse,” line 134; “O heavy ignorance,” line 143; “O, most lame and impotent conclusion,” lines 161), or how she counsels Emilia to reject his abuse (“Do not learn from him, Emilia, though he be thy husband,” line 162). In short, when these lines are removed, the audience is kept from witnessing Desdemona’s force of character; thus, they do not experience her as a powerful, skilful, and unapologetic leader who stands on her own and faces down the most malignant character in the play.

Milam’s choice to exclude this key moment is replicated in other performances of Othello. Desdemona’s banter with Iago is completely cut from Parker’s version: in fact, the film’s dialogue skips from Iago’s closing lines at the end of Act I, scene iii (“Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light,” lines 760-761) to Iago’s line, “Ay, well said, whisper” (Act II, scene i, line 158). In doing so, Parker eliminates one of Desdemona’s key scenes wherein she establishes herself as a protector of abused women by standing up for Emilia, Iago’s wife. It also erases Desdemona’s willingness to confront injustice wittily and without hesitation, even if doing so means exposing herself to attack. In addition, Parker’s cinematography, which focuses almost exclusively on Iago in long, close-up shots, makes it clear that the figure worthy of the audience’s attention is not Desdemona, but Iago.

Orson Welles’ 1951 Othello is little better where Desdemona is concerned: she arrives on the shores of Cyprus, asks Iago where Othello is, and then trumpets announce Othello’s arrival. Welles cuts 87 lines before Desdemona speaks, and then another 70 before Othello sweeps onto the stage. Desdemona’s protection of Emilia, her confrontation of Iago, and her unflappable wordplay are all gone: the scene is shredded
merely to give the male players their entrances.

In Act 4, scene i of Milam’s stage production, Desdemona, now wearing a blue-gray dress, crosses to center stage and addresses her husband as “sweet Othello” (line 238). He responds by stepping in front of her, turning his back to the audience, and backhanding her violently to the ground. Desdemona screams, and Lodovico rushes to her side as she whimpers in shock and humiliation. As Desdemona lies on the floor, all the men cluster around her, all actors committing the cardinal sin of turning their backs to the audience: Lodovico kneels by her side, while Othello towers over her, enraged. Only one character stands away from the crowd, faces the audience, and is so brightly lit that the eyes of the audience are drawn to him: Iago. While everyone on the stage is focused on Desdemona’s assault, the audience’s focus is trained on Iago’s triumph. He stands upstage right, a smile flickering on his face. He is immobile, impervious, and in this moment, he is the focus of the scene.

Desdemona stands with Lodovico’s help, steps away from him slightly, and addresses Othello, who has moved downstage left: “I have not deserved this” (line 240). In response, Othello stalks her threateningly across the stage, nearly chasing her off as she exits stage left, shouting, “Get you away!” (line 258). As performed by Eamonn Walker, Othello is an aggressive and threatening man in this scene, unrepentantly committing a public act of violence against his spouse. He strikes her to the ground, refuses to apologize when prompted to do so by Lodovico, and stalks her as she exits as if he will strike her a second time.

Contrast this staging against that of Welles’ *Othello*, and we see a more elaborate, but no less aggressor-centric, scene. Welles cuts to repeated close-ups twice of Othello as
Desdemona speaks of Cassio, paying great attention to his rage, a fact that Desdemona notices. She steps forward on the line “Why, sweet Othello -” (line 187) and he punches her with a backhand, nearly sending her spinning into the crowd of noblemen who surround her. In this moment, the camera cuts not to Desdemona, but to Lodovico’s stunned expression and then again to Othello as he looms over his wife, blocking her from the audience’s view. Assaulted in front of her peers and surrounded entirely by men - all of whom either have neutral or outraged expressions - Desdemona cowers in fear and flees, whispering “I will not stay to offend you” (line 196). Shakespeare’s line that allows her to stand up to her husband, professing her innocence and defending herself against the injustice she has just suffered (“I have not deserved this,” line 189) is cut completely, as is Lodovico’s attempt to rebuke Othello and champion Desdemona’s case (“this would not be believed in Venice, though I should swear I saw ’t. ‘Tis very much. Make her amends, she weeps,” lines 190-192). Removing these lines, and including multiple close-up shots of Othello, endows Othello with absolute and unchallenged power. He alone commands the stage, and he alone asserts his point of view. Both Desdemona and Lodovico are reduced to mute, submissive creatures, neither of them able to speak against the assault or Desdemona’s impending murder.

If Milam’s scene had been blocked differently, it might convey a different message. If Othello had grabbed and pivoted Desdemona, placing her downstage before him and striking her so that she collapsed fully downstage center - even quite close to the groundlings - then the entire audience’s focus and attention would be on the injustice perpetrated upon Desdemona, rather than on either Othello’s inner turmoil or Iago’s triumph at her humiliation. In addition, from this placement, Desdemona’s line “I have
not deserved this” could then be spoken directly to the audience, who of course know her words to be true. This alternate staging would have put the insult and injustice perpetrated upon Desdemona front and center, literally, rightly focusing on Desdemona’s unjust humiliation.

In Milam’s staging of Desdemona’s murder scene (Act V, scene ii), Othello’s attire is entirely changed. Gone are his doublet, his white collared shirt, and his leather boots; instead, he now wears multiple layers of white cloth and a white turbaned headdress. He has returned to a moorish state of dress, rejecting the clothes of “civilized” Venice. His robes are not simple, however; elaborate golden embroidery is stitched down the center of his gown, and also decorates the wide cuffs of his sleeves. Desdemona is also clothed in white, but she wears a simple white shift without embroidery. Her hair is also down for the first time in the play, a sign of informality. The power dynamic between the newlywed couple could not be more visually clear: the husband’s attire is both exotic and regal, while the wife’s attire has been reduced to the lowest and most common item of clothing possible.

This choice is repeated in other productions. Parker’s Othello shows him entering the scene in elaborate, arabic robes, while Desdemona wears only a modest nightgown. When Othello casts off his robes in Parker’s production (“Put out the light, and then put out the light,” line 7), he reveals an all-black westernized ensemble - long-sleeved black shirt and black pants - under his robes. In both Milam and Parker’s productions, even without his robes, which are a symbol of other-ness and unapologetic power, Othello is fully clad in this scene. He retains his agency and strength, while his wife is reduced to the simplest of night-clothes, indicating the utmost vulnerability. Contrast this with
Welles’ *Othello,* in which Othello never disrobes at all: he walks into the bedroom clad in a regal mantle, lined with fur, while his wife wears a simple white shift and lies in their four-post bed. In this scene, no symbolic robes are removed at all: Othello is all-powerful, while Desdemona’s attire conveys pure vulnerability, submissiveness, and helplessness.

The dynamic of the changed costumes upends the level playing field that Desdemona shared with her husband in Act I, scene iii: the equality that prompted Desdemona to proudly declare she would not return to her father’s house for love of her husband is entirely gone. In this scene, clothing foreshadows Desdemona’s demise; Othello has taken everything from her, and now he will take the last thing she has: her life.

Milam’s direction for the murder scene (Act V, scene ii) is graphic, brutal, and prolonged. Othello, who enters without his white headdress, bears a sword in his arms as he prowls around Desdemona, who lies sleeping on the large bed center stage. When she says the line “I? - But not yet to die!” (line 152), Desdemona rises from the bed and away from Othello, crossing downstage left while he stands downstage right, their bed between them. When Othello tells her that Cassio is dead by Iago’s hand (line 71-72), Desdemona realizes that no aid is coming: “Alas, he is betrayed, and I undone” (line 75). In Milam’s production, Desdemona races upstage center as she says this line, hammering on the locked doors with her fists and screaming wordlessly for help. It takes a full ten seconds for Othello to cross to her, lift her up with both arms - so high and with such strength that the actress is literally almost swung over the actor’s head - and carry her forcibly back to center stage. As he carries her, Desdemona struggles violently against him, kicking her
legs, screaming in protest: “Banish me, my lord, but kill me not!” (line 77). “Down, strumpet!” Othello shouts, throwing her body underneath him onto the bed. Desdemona scrambles to escape, reaching for the downstage edge of the bed and clinging to the bed’s frame as she begs for time: a night, one hour, one prayer (lines 79-81). With each attempt, Othello drags her back to the center of the bed; at every opportunity, Desdemona screams in desperation and strains to escape. It is no use; it never is. “It. Is. Too. LATE,” Othello screams, pulling her close and kissing the top of her head as he smothers her, even as Desdemona’s feet drum against the mattress and her arms beat at him for mercy.

Emilia’s knocking begins as Othello is still asphyxiating Desdemona; his line, “who’s there?” (line 89) is shouted. It takes exactly 85 seconds, almost a minute and a half, from the moment Desdemona tries to escape Othello to the moment he releases her body. The prolonged and violent battle is excruciating to witness. After Othello arranges Desdemona body on their bed, covering her with the sheet from their wedding night, he learns from Emilia that Cassio has not been killed (line 113), and Desdemona calls out: “O falsely, falsely murdered!” (line 115). Emilia rushes in, climbing onto the bed with Desdemona and calling for help, gathering her friend in her arms. Desdemona proclaims her innocence, directing her words to Emilia (“A guiltless death I die,” line 121), and a horrified Emilia demands, “Who hath done this deed?” (line 122).

Who, indeed. In Milam’s production, Desdemona looks at Emilia for a moment, then turns and deliberately looks at Othello, who has moved stage right. Emilia follows her gaze and looks at Othello, but Desdemona turns back at her friend: “Nobody. I myself,” she says, speaking directly to Emilia. Desdemona then turns back to her husband: “Commend me to my kind lord,” she says, and dies in Emilia’s arms.
Contrast Milam’s staging of this scene with Parker’s *Othello*. In this work, the entire scene’s focus is almost exclusively on Othello. For the eight-and-a-half minutes (1:36:05 to 1:44:36) dedicated to Desdemona’s murder, Othello receives the most screen time, as well as literally being the character *in* focus; Desdemona is often half- or entirely-obsurred by the gauzy curtains that surround their bed. From Othello’s bereft tears, evident from the moment he enters, to the sweeping string section underscoring Othello’s grief, the film clearly indicates that *he* is the suffering person in this scene. The cinematography, direction, and score encourage us to grieve and sympathize with the murderer, rather than the woman he claims to love and is about to slaughter. For her part, Desdemona never leaves their bed, but kneels at the edge of the mattress as she pleads her case. Her feet never touch the ground; her voice never rises above a soft, plaintive murmur. When Othello climbs onto the bed to kill her, rather than trying to escape, she actually flings herself *at* Othello in a desperate, loving embrace: “Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight” (Act V, scene ii, line 90). Othello throws her back on the bed violently, at which point Desdemona begins to struggle, but Othello overwhelms her instantly, grabbing a pillow and smothering her to death.

At this moment, the film makes it perfectly clear that the feelings of the murderer are more important than those of his victim. For 53 seconds, multiple camera angles document Othello’s anguished expression in close-range shots - often highlighting his manly tears - as Desdemona struggles to breathe. The most horrifying moment comes when Desdemona’s death throes are nearly complete: as her hand pushes helplessly against his face, her movements suddenly become not defensive, but sweet and loving. She strokes the crown of her murderer’s head with her palm; she caresses his cheek
gently; she cradles his head in her hands before she asphyxiates, and her hand tenderly falls to the bed. When Emilia enters the room and finds Desdemona, Desdemona is still alive, but does not speak the final words given to her in Shakespeare’s play: instead, she looks at Othello with love and dies wordlessly. Emilia closes her eyelids with a gentle hand.

Parker’s film shows a male-centered interpretation of Shakespeare’s text, one that is only concerned with Desdemona’s death as it affects her murderer. Little to no care is paid to Desdemona in her death scene: her right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is of no interest. Othello is the character in crisis here, the one who deserves our empathy and forgiveness; Desdemona’s murder is relevant only in how it affects her killer.

Welles chooses to depict this scene as something out of a supernatural horror movie. Othello stands for most of the scene, looming over Desdemona threateningly; his close-ups show Welles’ black-faced features in an increasingly darkened room. The result of this choice is that Othello’s face seems to hover in a eerie, otherworldly manner, his features seemingly enveloped in malignant darkness. As with Parker’s version, Desdemona never leaves her deathbed; in fact, she barely rises from her supine position at all. She rises to her knees to protest her innocence (“No, by my life and soul,” line 55), after which she falls back onto the bed; she takes the same kneeling position again when she asks for Cassio to come and defend her (“Let him come hither, let him confess the truth,” line 75-76), after which she falls back to the bed again. Welles also cuts several of Desdemona’s lines in which she begs for more time to live, leaving her only with the line in which she asks Othello to “kill (her) tomorrow” (line 90).
Othello then covers her face with the bedsheet and places his hands around her throat, a moment that is the only time Desdemona is featured in her own close-up. In the ultimate insult to injury, Othello kisses her through the sheet as he strangles her, assaulting her sexually even as he takes her life. The camera suddenly cuts to the outside of the castle with a jarring minor-key chord, and when we return to the bedchamber, Othello is grieving over his wife’s body with more feeling than previously expressed in the scene. Welles chooses to cut Desdemona’s subsequent lines, “Oh falsely, falsely murdered!” (line 130) and “A guiltless death I die” (line 136) entirely, and her final words to Emilia are presented in the most demeaning and invalidating way possible. Emilia’s body blocks Desdemona from our view for her first line (“Nobody; I myself,” line 138), and the camera then changes to a long-range view of Othello - taken from the doorway of their bedchamber with Othello standing nobly in the distance - for her final line, “Commend me to my kind lord” (line 139). Welles’ last image of Desdemona is an aerial shot, depicting her frail body, dead eyes staring up at us, her form small and submissive against a sea of crumpled sheets. In depicting Desdemona and her death, Welles and Parker both focus almost exclusively on Othello, the murderer, and not on Desdemona, the murder victim. Their choices grossly undermine and invalidate the inherent value of Desdemona’s life and her well-being; her murder is only noteworthy in that it depicts Othello’s fall from grace.

The death of Milam’s Desdemona, in contrast, could not be more different. She speaks all of the lines that Shakespeare wrote for her; she demonstrates physical agency and self-preservation when she tries to escape Othello; she struggles desperately for her life and forces Othello to bodily lift her off the ground so he can bring her back to the
bed; she shouts and screams for help; and she physically defends herself, touching her murderer not with gentleness but with a desperate attempt to save her own life.

Yet, room for improvement still exists. Asked whether he believed that Othello and Desdemona were in love, or whether he believed that Othello’s betrayal of her love retroactively invalidated that claim, Milam demurred: “he says it himself, you see, that it wasn’t him” (Appendix A, 162). Picking up his copy of Othello, Milam quoted Othello’s line, “You heard her say herself it was not I” (Act V, scene ii, line 125). Milam then goes on to say that Othello is not himself, but “a man possessed” in that moment (Appendix A, 162). While that interpretation may be convincing, another interpretation is also possible: that of a child who has been caught red-handed. “It wasn’t me” or “not me!” is, after all, universally recognized as something that a child might say in blaming a sibling or the family dog for missing cookies. It’s an obvious and transparent lie, one that Othello immediately admits in his very next line: “‘twas I that killed her” (line 128).

Milam’s production succeeds in connecting Desdemona’s defiance against her father and her devotion to Othello with her determination to live. In our interview, Milam noted that he had since attended other productions of Othello in which “Othello puts his hands on her neck and she (instantly) dies” (Appendix A, 161) - a choice that is exceedingly close to the murder Welles depicts in his film.

Yet, despite declaring Desdemona as “a fighter first, psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually,” Milam said the production team never questioned the significance of Desdemona’s temporary resurrection. Milam described his interpretation of this moment as “a difficult moment... that she can come back to utter those speeches which clearly the playwright needs, at that moment, to advance the action” (Appendix A,
161), indicating that he felt Shakespeare may have included those lines to move the play forward. When asked if he felt that moment reflected Desdemona’s strength of character and will to live, Milam responded: “that’s an interesting thing, and if we were still in rehearsal, we’d talk about it for three hours…I took it as a dramaturgical moment” (Appendix A, 162). How much more powerful would it be to consider that Shakespeare had something more significant in mind when he resurrected Desdemona, however briefly? How much more dramatic would it be to not only depict Desdemona as someone who fights to the bitter end for her life, but overcomes death itself to speak her truth?

Milam and Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre are to be commended for presenting Desdemona as the brave “warrior” that she is: confronting racism in her father, dishonor against Cassio, and the injustice of her own murder. Depicting her death as a violent battle pays tribute to the defiant and bold woman depicted in Shakespeare’s text, a woman who is not afraid to speak her mind, whether she be called before the lord of her city or her husband. Milam’s production made great strides in portraying her as true, honorable, and a fighter. Future productions would benefit from highlighting her effortless deflection of Iago’s sexism, examining Othello’s misogyny and public assault against her, and recognizing the heart and spirit of a woman who defies, however briefly, death.
Chapter III

Performance

Cordelia/The Fool in *King Lear* at Shakespeare’s Globe Theater, 2013-2014

In reviewing the 2014 touring production of *King Lear* by Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, Tim Treanor described it as:

“...a *King Lear* for our times. I have seen noble Lears, pathological Lears, fragile Lears, arrogant Lears, and Lears who have combined all of these characteristics in one. But the Lear which Joseph Marcell and director Bill Buckhurst give us is a little king who alternates between entitlement and rage, who radiates self-pity like a blast furnace radiates heat, and whose greatest talent and defining characteristic is manipulation” (Treanor, 2014).

Yet, despite declaring the performance a “*Lear* for our times,” Bill Buckhurst’s production is rooted firmly and deliberately in the past. To best appreciate this production of *King Lear* - a production that premiered at the Globe in 2013 and continued through 2014 on a world tour - one must go back to Shakespeare’s era. As director, Buckhurst understood from the beginning that the production would include a world tour. To that end, the cast was reduced from 25 characters (Lear to an unnamed messenger) down to just eight performers, “double-, triple- and even quadruple-(casting)” several of the play’s roles (Treanor, 2014). Interestingly, this dynamic mirrors the cast that Shakespeare worked with in his own time: the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, Shakespeare’s company, had just 12 members when the company was formed (Internet Shakespeare Editions). As such, scholars believe roles were often double-cast, and Shakespeare was surely strategic.
and deliberate in writing plays that could accommodate double-cast players.

In an LA Times review of Buckhurst’s *King Lear* production, Charles McNulty wrote, “Much of the enjoyment of this ‘Lear’ comes from the playful logistics of having a small cast populate the world of this sprawling play... Disguise is built into the play... but what's the point of all this clever downsizing?” (McNulty, 2014). In fact, part of Buckhurst’s vision for the play, the director explained in a phone interview, was to bring the Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre experience to every location on the world tour:

“The show was devised at the Globe and designed for the Globe, and it was designed specifically for open-air (performance)... The whole concept was about *being the Globe everywhere we went.*” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 131).

Reviewers who perhaps desired a *King Lear* performed at arm’s length, if you will, struggled with the production’s fluid ‘fourth wall,’ the conceptual barrier between performers and the audience. Buckhurst encouraged his actors to mingle with the crowd before each performance, a decision that puzzled NY Times reviewer Charles Isherwood (Isherwood, 2014): “Before the play begins, cast members can be seen chatting with the audience, swapping, I don’t know, idle observations about the weather or the subway traffic?” Isherwood complained. He went on to concede that “...the company’s home base on the South Bank of the Thames, the emphasis has always been on bridging the distance between audience and performers, as a way of reaching back to the more intimate rapport that was said to prevail in Elizabethan times” - but Isherwood seems to yearn for a production in which that fourth wall is more firmly in place, with the actors as performers and the audience to be observers.

Treanor, the reviewer who so ardently declared the production as a “King Lear for our time,” nearly becomes apoplectic about this breach of the fourth wall:
“The actors come into the audience before the play and chit-chat with the patrons... And here is Goneril – she who is sharper than the serpent’s tooth – playing the accordion! It is not Goneril, of course, but (actress Gwendolen) Chatfield. The problem is that I don’t want to see Chatfield; I don’t want to see actors; I want to see the play” (Treanor, 2014, italics by the author).

Treanor has not come to participate; Treanor has come to bear witness. Treanor wants the Lear he expects, and at arm’s length. However, as Buckhurst explained in our phone interview, a fundamental quality of the Globe Theatre experience is a blurred line between the actors and the audience. As a result, the fourth wall is far more fluid and dynamic than in a traditional theater space:

“The thing about the Globe is - it’s the three A’s: the actor, the architecture, and the audience. So you’ve got this triumvirate, these three elements working together. What you don’t get, obviously, in a more contemporary indoor theater, is the disappearance of the fourth wall so readily as you do at the Globe. So the audience really does feel very involved, very much a part of it” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 130, italics mine).

Buckhurst’s determination to create a dynamic and fluid fourth wall, and thereby a greater level of interplay between stage and the audience, echoes in his decision to double-cast Cordelia/The Fool. Breaking the fourth wall creates a greater dynamic between the group on stage, the actors, and the group observing the actors, the audience. Similarly, breaking the fourth wall by double-casting Cordelia/The Fool extends this shared consciousness, splitting the audience’s perception between the characters on stage and the actors on stage, as well as creating an indelible bond between Cordelia/The Fool, making them inseparable in a fundamental way.

Part of inviting the audience into the production - to be part of the performance, in a way, more so than simply observers of it - is tied into the production’s small and spare set. This deliberate blurring changes the dynamic of the fourth wall from a metaphorical brick wall into a porous, two-way veil that allows for interplay and free exchange
between the stage players and the audience. Reviewer John Farrell, writing for The Los Angeles Daily News, described the production as:

“A traveling company (on) a stage re-created from period etchings of theatrical touring companies... with period music and costumes that are effective and feature both Elizabethan and contemporary elements... done on a two-story wooden platform with eight actors taking on all the roles, mixing with the audience before the performance... Costume changes are done on stage, and there are special effects — lightning, thunder — and music in the intervals” (Farrell, 2014).

Much of Farrell’s recorded experience here can be traced back to 1606, when the play was first performed (AS Lear, 5): period etchings, music, and costumes; Elizabethan elements; a simple, two-story wooden platform with multiple actors performing all the roles. Another key element in the production, he notes, is the production’s lighting, which is not solely focused on the stage, but on the audience as well:

“...they leave the house lights on so (the actors) can see the audience’s reactions. There are no lighting tricks, everything is delivered as it might have been 400 years ago...and it’s both fascinating and effective to see the ancient techniques used with success to communicate to a modern audience” (Farrell, 2014, italics mine).

Indeed, as Buckhurst explained, that key element of lighting both the audience and the players, created a shared, lit space for both groups, is true to the Globe. At the Globe Theatre,

“...lights get put on the audience and the stage... it’s the same light. So everyone (in the Globe Theatre) is lit by a similar light: the actor can see the audience, and the audience can see the actor, and the audience can see the audience. So it becomes a very, very communal experience” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 131).

While Buckhurst acknowledges that this dynamic can be jarring for modern audiences, some of whom (like Treanor) might prefer to experience Lear from a detached, analytical perspective, this production of Lear was different from its inception:
“...this touring production, which began at the Globe, was all about stripping away, and basic, pure storytelling, I suppose: done simply on as close a design set as we could get, in terms of research done on original touring productions in Shakespeare’s day and afterwards, shows which would travel to Europe - literally “two planks and a passion,” as they say... (and) at the very beginning of the show, we used planks as simple furniture and props. And we had that inscribed, actually, on two planks, that this literally was about taking the play back to its element. So the idea is welcoming the audience into a space that is a shared space, which is lit by the same light on the actors on stage, and is about breaking down the fourth wall completely” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 131, italics mine).

Ironically, by going back to the play’s roots and creating a production steeped in the history of stage performance, Buckhurst created a production that was far more contemporary in practice, one that challenged audiences and critics to not merely observe the play, but to share more closely in its telling. Buckhurst sympathized with those members of the audience who might have felt that choice to be jarring:

“It can be a weird thing. Experiencing that kind of storytelling in an indoor space which doesn’t normally work like (that sort of staging)... in a few places, sometimes you plunk (our smaller set) on a massive stage, throw the lights on in the auditorium, and it can be weird for an audience. They might think, ‘Oh, this is a bit odd, I feel quite exposed here.’ It can be quite exposing” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 133, emphasis by the speaker).

Yet, Buckhurst argued that such a simple and dynamic production allows something unique: an opportunity to truly connect with the performers on stage, to be part of the play in a way that most performances cannot provide:

“What it offers... is this relationship between the actor and the audience, especially where they can really look into the eyes of every single audience member, can really connect their thoughts to the audience, as you do at the Globe. Which, more of than not, gives a more visceral experience to the audience and a more involved relationship between the audience and the actor” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 132, italics mine).

The blurred lines between performers and audience that reviewers such as Farrell,
Treanor, and Isherwood experienced were therefore quite deliberate: it was simply that
t heir perception of that blurred line as disquieting, something to rebel against or diminish,
was a rejection of the intimate, shared experience offered by the Globe Theatre. This
phenomenon is mirrored in the production’s double-casting Cordelia and The Fool,
creating a dynamic of meta-theatricality. By blurring the lines between actors and
audience and the delineation between Cordelia/The Fool, Buckhurst created a production
in which all boundaries are permeable: between the actor and her character(s), and
between actors and the audience.

In rejecting a truly traditional production of Shakespeare’s great tragedy, the
reviewers passed on an opportunity to consider the play as a shared experience - one with
different implications and connotations than a contemporary production, with a fourth
wall that is rarely or never challenged. In an article titled “Laughing as Your Heart
Breaks,” penned for the online presence of The Shakespeare Newsletter, Kim Paffenroth
provides her own experience of the touring production:

“Almost nothing I saw on stage was how I would have imagined it, or how I
would have presented it myself, if I were director. This is neither praise nor
blame, just surprise… (but) the particular juxtaposition I saw achieved on stage in
November helped me understand the play, and human sin, better than I had
before. What more I could expect from a performance, I cannot imagine”
(Paffenroth, 2015).

Despite her expectations being challenged, Paffenroth comes away from the
theatrical experience with a deeper understanding of King Lear, and of humanity’s
darkness, than she had before. It is this kind of new perception, of personal understanding
and enlightenment, that Buckhurst described when discussing the interactive nature of the
production, and the impact that had upon the audience’s perception of the play:

“The reason why that’s really important is because you have that leap of
imagination there… (The audience) has to use (its) imagination. We’re not going
to spoon-feed you; this will take a bit of work from you. It’s going to be worth it, because you’re going to hear every single word and you’re going to be completely involved in the storytelling, but you are going to have to suspend disbelief a certain amount of the way” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 134).

In fact, establishing that dynamic early - to encourage the audience to think of the actors not merely as characters on the stage, but as *performers*, individuals who were part of the local community and the audience’s daily life - was a defining part of his decision to have the actors interact with audiences before the play began. It established, from the start, a dynamic that Buckhurst described as a ‘relationship’:

“That was really important for this production of ours. (Just before) the very beginning of the play, the actors are milling around as themselves, preparing the stage, tuning their instruments. We didn’t depict that as anything other than actors preparing to work. So *there was no sense of pretense: it was all very open, raw, and honest, that relationship...* Wherever I went to see it, people really loved it, that they were complicit in this relationship and this conceit. They had met the actors before the show started - OK, great, so they already had a relationship with these people - and they are, in a way, they’re already on our side at the beginning. Because we’re saying, *we’re not pretending to be anything other than what we are, which is a bunch of actors who are going to tell a story*” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 135, italics mine).

To quote Reinette Poisson from the television series *Doctor Who* (“The Girl in the Fireplace,” 2006): “A door, once opened, may be stepped through in either direction.”

This shared dynamic allows a more direct, fluid, and intimate connection to flourish, both from the actors to the audience, and from the audience to the actors, than would exist in a more formal, rigid, and binary production. Once established - once the audience members can, as Buckhurst says, “suspend disbelief and just go with it” - a new interplay and overlap emerges. The actors speak to each other, but they also speak to us; they play with each other, but they also play with us; they perform their roles as characters, but they *are*, also, us. This dynamic might be amusing or comforting when experienced in Shakespeare’s comedies, such as *Much Ado About Nothing* or *Twelfth Night*, where
disguise operates as a scheme to bring loved ones together in a happy reunion. But in *King Lear*, these double-, triple-, and quadruple-castings show how intertwined we are with one another; how devastatingly tangled, and how tenuously fragile, those bonds can be.

Interestingly, the highlight of the play for Paffenroth, who “leaned in” to the tensions and challenges of Buckhurst’s production, was the double-casting of Cordelia and the Fool, performed by actress Bethan Cullinane. Paffenroth describes it as:

“...the high point of the production. I’ve discussed this casting many times when teaching the play, but had never experienced the effect of seeing it on stage, and it is stunning, especially in the person of such an actor: of all the cast, Ms. Cullinane … (was) brilliant, and especially so was Ms. Cullinane’s ability to go between the retiring Cordelia of the first scene; to the manic, bawdy Fool… to the militant, transformed Cordelia of Act IV (perhaps the one scene that would contradict how I began my review – Cordelia as Queen of France, striding forward like an Antigone or a Joan of Arc, was exactly how I’d always imagined her)” (Paffenroth, 2015).

As we see here, when a reviewer leans in to the double-casting experience, she finds it to be the greatest accomplishment of the production. Even someone who teaches the text, who is an expert in the play, has found “stunning” revelations in the double-casting of Cordelia/The Fool. Most importantly, Paffenroth indicates that the double-cast strengthened and supported the two characters in a way she seems not to have expected: it is not only Cullinane’s talent as a multifaceted performer, but the fact that she is visible as young Cordelia, then as the “manic bawdy Fool,” then as the Queen of France “striding forward… how I’d always imagined her” that is vital and illuminating to Paffenroth.

Buckhurst added that part of the motivation in double-casting multiple actors was to ease the audience into accepting the Cordelia/Fool double-casting:

“(The doubling) in that first scene, when Cornwall and Gloucester go off and
(come back as) the Duke and the King of France, generally, that would get a laugh: people would say, “Oh, OK, I see what’s going on here, this is how they’re going to do this...” And they went with it. The reason I bring this up is that when it comes to doubling Cordelia and the Fool, you’ve already set up this conceit and this style of performing: a stripped-back journey of imagination. Which allows that double to happen more readily” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 135, italics mine).

Indeed, this thesis was prompted in part by Ms. Cullinane’s performance, which I witnessed in Boston in 2014. As detailed in the previous chapter, the potential casting connection between Cordelia and Lear’s Fool is long-established; yet, like Paffenroth, it was the first time I had witnessed it on stage, in performance. For Cullinane, the experience performing both roles over two years was profound:

“Playing both (Cordelia and the Fool), obviously, I pretty much spend the entire play on stage with Lear… both (of us), we had only small chunks (of time) where we were onstage without the other person. And you build up an amazing connection. Joseph Marcell, who played the role of Lear, he and I became so close because of it” (Cullinane, Appendix A, 144).

When asked whether that closeness with the actor playing Lear extended to or impacted her performance on stage, Cullinane said it did - and often not only for herself or Marcell, but for the audience as well: “It’s so much more heartbreaking because you’ve seen this relationship develop on stage. Even if it’s two different characters, you’ve seen the same actors go on a journey together, and I feel like that has a much bigger impact in many ways” (Cullinane, Appendix A, 146).

In discussing similarities between Cordelia and the Fool, Cullinane discussed two aspects in particular: truth-telling, and love for Lear. In discussing the former, she noted that her understanding of the Fool evolved very strongly in performance:

“On first reading, the Fool is saying all sorts of stuff that (I didn’t understand). And then I started to figure out, through rehearsal and performance, he says pretty much exactly what Cordelia says, all the time. He tells Lear “You have nothing, you’ve given everything away” - he tells him as it is, but he has to disguise it in
jokes, in jest. Which is how he manages to stay around King Lear for so long…” (Cullinane, Appendix A, 142)

Cullinane added that while “no one is as honest with the King as the Fool is,” Cordelia’s banishment is doubly cruel, as it both invalidates her (ultimately accurate) point of view and exiles her for speaking truth to power - a fate that the Fool escapes.

“That was really interesting to me: (in) the first scene, (as Cordelia) you’re very honest, and you get punished for it. And then, although it’s a different character, (as the Fool), it’s almost as if you learn that you have to disguise the honesty in a joke for it to be heard, and for it to be tolerated. Even that doesn’t get through to Lear: he doesn’t hear it until towards the end, really. It was… realizing that I’m being as honest as Cordelia. I’m probably being worse, I’m probably saying more. But because I’m disguising it in a joke, I can get away with it. So that was a huge thing, realizing that they’re kind of saying the same thing. They have the same belief and the same moral code” (Cullinane, Appendix A, 144, italics mine).

In discussing the second similarity she observed between Cordelia and the Fool, the profound love that they have for Lear, Cullinane said she felt both characters had an “unconditional love” toward the king:

“I feel like those two parts (Cordelia and the Fool) have a lot to do with love and the channels of love and honesty… But Lear is able to shift (his) affection (for Cordelia) onto the Fool. And when you’re playing both (the Fool and Cordelia), you have this amazing connection. And by the time Cordelia comes in dead in his arms, and he says “My poor fool is hanged” - you could think (that) the Fool is hanged, but in our production, we felt it was about Cordelia… obviously, when you’re playing both, the audience gets it. They say, ‘Oh, it’s the same actor,’ so there’s that double reference” (Cullinane, Appendix A, 146, italics mine).

In addition to being the actor who performed both roles on stage, Cullinane confirmed a powerful visual cue connected Cordelia and the Fool: the dress that Cordelia wears in the first scene. “I’m literally wearing the same top (as the Fool) as my dress (as Cordelia). I don’t think people expect it. In terms of character doubles, they’re very different characters, so you wouldn’t expect to see that” (Cullinane, Appendix A, 146; images provided in Appendix B). She explained that the decision was not made for
expediency’s sake, to allow her to quickly put on another costume, but to drive home the connection between Cordelia and the Fool:

“That’s something that (Director) Bill (Buckhurst) wanted… and it’s a brilliant idea. I was wearing a dress at the beginning (as Cordelia). And as the Fool, I put on big trousers with shoulder braces (suspenders) over the top, and a balaclava with little horns that only showed my face. But it meant that (my) top half… was the same print of the dress, (just) tucked… into the (Fool’s) trousers. So it was the same pattern that Cordelia was wearing in the first scene and that she wears throughout the play, in our production, anyway. So there was that motif that they are pretty much - there’s an item of clothing that stays exactly the same on both characters” (Cullinane, Appendix A, 147, italics mine).

For Buckhurst, taking a major part of Cordelia’s costume and integrating it into the Fool’s costume spoke volumes about the profound connection between the two characters:

“...her change (from Cordelia into the Fool) was simply pulling a large pair of trousers over Cordelia’s dress, so there was always an element of Cordelia there. We weren’t trying to pretend it wasn’t her... especially people who knew the play, I have to say - they saw it and they were familiar with (the double-casting theory) already… People loved the fact that we were showing a bit of Cordelia there, that she was still there underneath - and for me as a director, that satisfied my feeling that they were kindred spirits, that Lear had a connection to them both in a similar way, that there was always a bit of Cordelia bleeding through” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 138, italics mine).

In discussing Cordelia and the Fool, Buckhurst noted not only the parallels between the characters, the timing of their entrances and exits that allowed for double-casting the parts. To his mind, it is more than just coincidence. In double-casting parts, he said,

“...sometimes you have to think outside the box, because it simply doesn’t work because of practicality: you can’t get Actor A on time to do that, or this change needs to be a quicker change because they’re not going to make it... With this
double, it’s just - it’s uncanny... they fit this double scheme so neatly” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 136, italics mine).

And yet, Buckhurst notes, that uncanny similarity of timing extends further still:

“...it made wonderful sense that these two characters are played by the same actor. Because in some ways, they are shadows of each other... they’re not afraid to tell Lear, in their own way, the truth... it’s almost like they are kindred spirits, in a weird sort of way... (and) although (the Fool) has license to wrap up what he feels and to tell Lear how it really is, to wrap it all up in wordplay - there’s still a certain tension between them, until Lear hits the heath, and then he’s calling for the Fool all the time. He wants the Fool with him to help him, to protect him. The Fool becomes the Mother, the Nurturer, the Protector for Lear, when he’s at his most vulnerable. He takes on the role of Cordelia in that scene, I think. So I thought that was a neat reason for the doubling” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 136-137).

For Buckhurst, the Fool is not only an extension of Cordelia’s love and truth-telling, but the Fool’s relationship to Lear becomes an inversion of the parent-child relationship, devolving from: (Lear the Father > Cordelia the daughter) to: (The Fool the Mother > Lear the child). For Cullinane, that latter relationship is complicated, as, in her words, the Fool serves almost as a “surrogate child” for Lear:

“...(Lear) gets a surrogate child in the Fool. It’s almost like the Fool does replace Cordelia in many ways: a lot of Lear’s love goes into the Fool. In the storm scene, when Lear says “Blow winds and crack your cheeks” (Act III, scene ii, line 1), he’s completely in another world, and yet he manages to turn to the Fool at the end and say, “Poor fool and knave; there’s one part in my heart that is sorry yet for thee” (Act III, scene ii, lines 72-73). In all of the mayhem, he turns to the Fool and says, “Actually, I’m sorry for you, I’m sorry that you’re here.” He still has that fraction of his brain that is able to empathize, but only for that one other character. He can’t see that Regan and Goneril might have a point, he can’t see that Cordelia had a point. But he can see that the Fool is sticking by his side, and that he’s sorry for him” (Cullinane, Appendix A, 145, italics mine).

Yet she later adds:

“...I think for the Fool that dimension has to do with the unconditional love: that sort of bond that father, mother, and child have, whether they like each other or not” (Cullinane, Appendix A, 147).
While Cullinane and Buckhurst are not entirely in sync on the child-parent dynamic between the three characters - whether the Fool in this scene is acting as a mother to Lear, or whether Lear in this scene is perceiving the Fool as his own child - both interpretations speak to a profound familial connection between the characters, that “unconditional love” between parent and child, mirroring the connection Lear has to Cordelia, and she to him. Yet Cullinane and Buckhurst both firmly agree that Cordelia and the Fool are neither the same nor interchangeable, but critically different in how they approach, and interact with, Lear. Buckhurst explains:

“...despite what I’m saying about their similarities between (Cordelia and the Fool), they’re also massively different. They’re sort of polar opposites, both in terms of their places in court and their personalities. Cordelia is incredibly smart, but she’s not driven by wordplay and wit in the same way that the Fool is… Cordelia is a character who has great courage. She’s fearless. She’s prepared to say the things that other people aren’t. I don’t think there’s an ounce of foolishness about her. I think she’s brave and bold and to put her head above the parapet, and I really admire her for that. The Fool isn’t really able to do that, he wraps everything up in wordplay” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 137).

Asked about the line that connects Cordelia and The Fool most directly - Lear’s line, “And my poor fool is hanged” (Act V, scene iii, line 320) spoken over Cordelia’s body - Buckhurst definitively answers, “I think that the Fool has to die to allow a way for Cordelia to die,” continuing:

“...Lear’s line, “My poor fool is hanged.” I find that point even more poignant the fact that he’s holding the actor who played the Fool, and he says the word “fool,” and she’s died - it’s an incredible coincidence that he used that word… making a deep connection like that between two characters brings a more significant end to the play than there is (otherwise) in a more traditional telling of the tale. I think it is more. I think it is more poignant. I hadn’t thought about it until you asked me about it, but people always ask, “What happened to the Fool? Why does he suddenly disappear?” I think that wraps (that question) up very neatly… maybe Cordelia and the Fool are so interlinked in personality, in the energy they offer to
Lear, in their hopes for Lear, in their love for Lear, that *when one is gone, the other has to follow*” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 140, italics mine).

Buckhurst also, however, allows for experiences like that of Tim Treanor, the reviewer who wanted to see “the play” and not “the actors” (Treanor, 2014). Buckhurst confirmed that “plenty of people who saw (the play)” may have “absolutely hated it because they’ve seen something different”: productions where “it’s an old Fool, and the sense that he’s been with Lear since the beginning of his days, and that offers a different layer” to the production (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 140):

“...but I think doubling the role offers another level, another depth, something unexpected, actually: *a level of poignancy that you can’t achieve without that double*. I thought it was very successful… from the performances I saw, every time there were people wiping tears away at the end. And you feel - well, that means they’ve been affected, so the doubling hasn’t been a problem for them. Perhaps it’s been a successful thing” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 140).

Yet being open - to be willing to be surprised, as Paffenroth was in her experience of the production - may yield enormous results for audience members, even those who might not recognize the actress performing both roles during the performance:

“I had people equally who saw the show and didn’t know until afterwards that the same actor played both parts. Now that’s just phenomenal. People who hadn’t seen the play before, when I informed them - *they were just completely blown away. And that’s brilliant too*. If people haven’t seen a double before, it works for them in a traditional way, but for people who did get it, I think it might add something more poignant and different than a traditional role” (Buckhurst, Appendix A, 140).

Is it better to recognize the actor? I believe, and Buckhurst seems to agree, that the answer is yes - whether that recognition arrives in the moment or once the play has concluded. The fact that audience members who only realized after the play’s end that the two characters before them were played by the same actor were “blown away” speaks to
the power of such casting. If there were no insight to be taken by the double-casting, there would be no “aha” moment - but Buckhurst clearly indicates that such a moment existed. It is true that some audience members might simply appreciate the choice as a casting ‘stunt,’ or perhaps be impressed by the quick costume-change timing required; but given the deliberate choices to connect the characters of Cordelia/The Fool, this revelation of double-casting exponentially builds layers of importance and symbolism between Cordelia and The Fool, whether audience members choose to “lean in” to that dynamic or not.

For Cullinane, the experience of playing both Cordelia and the Fool netted great rewards, but also gave her a greater appreciation for how profoundly Lear’s madness and his de-evolution affects Cordelia and the Fool:

“...(from) an acting point of view, it was an amazing challenge to switch from two very different characterizations but a relatively similar character at the heart of it… (it) really made me realize how similar the Fool and Cordelia are. Having the privilege of spending Lear’s journey with him through the entire thing is amazing: doing both (roles), you are the only one who goes start to finish with him. Kent comes close… but I think the Fool is really affected by (Lear’s madness) and Cordelia is really impacted by it as well. *They’re both not just observers, they’re both really involved in the action*” (Cullinane, Appendix A, 152).

And so it is for the audience. Part of what makes the double-casting of Cordelia and the Fool so heartbreaking is precisely what Cullinane describes: that she is on stage with Lear the entire time, trying to help him, trying to guide him, trying to make him see sense… and not until both Cordelia and the Fool are gone is Lear able to see it. The king’s rejection of his daughter’s wisdom allows her to return again, in a different form, as his Fool, wiser by far than the old king. But Lear cannot hear this loved one’s wisdom, either; he is too blinded by ego, by humiliation, by rage. It is only when the Fool departs
that Lear, now deposed of everything, can learn humility and return to his daughter, who is now able to receive him. Interestingly, Cullinane believes the Fool leaves because “he couldn’t help anymore, he didn’t have a function anymore. His way of talking to Lear, his jokes… He almost didn’t have a job anymore. And the sad part is, what is a Fool if he’s not a Fool?” (Cullinane, Appendix A, 151). He is exactly what he has been from the beginning: an actor, a changeling, a wise daughter, a lost Fool. One of us and yet not one of us; on the stage, yet dwelling alongside us and within us, too. An individual who stands on the light in the stage, sharing the same light with us in the audience watching her, who bows at the end, walks off the stage, and back into the community.

In the close of our interview, Cullinane offered these thoughts on her double-casting and the double consciousness - both as an audience watching characters in a story, and as audience members recognizing one of the characters as a member of your current community - that is implied:

“...if you recognize the actor, although you’re aware it’s a different character, you bring that emotion from the first scene with you into that character. And that adds an extra dimension to the (new) character, to the Fool, that otherwise potentially wouldn’t be there. I think that if you see the same actor, that carries through… because you’ve seen another character have this relationship (with Lear), when the Fool comes in, I think it’s very easy to imagine that they have also had a relationship previously. Because you have subconsciously seen those actors at the same time talking to each other, and you believe they know each other, I suppose, in a way. And it certainly feels like that as an actor, as well: you believe you know that person like the back of your hand, because in another role, they’re also playing your Dad” (Cullinane, Appendix A, 146-147).

Father, daughter, mother, child. All eloquently and beautifully interwoven in a play about hubris, and power, and grace. The choice to double-cast the roles of Cordelia and the Fool, far from being simply a choice made for convenience’s sake, elevates the “uncanny” nature of the play, to use the director’s term. It drives the incredible power of
the final scene with the deaths of Lear and Cordelia, and warns us against the folly of abdicating responsibility. It reminds us that women are cast out for speaking truth to power, particularly when daughters refuse to pander to fathers; it reminds us that fools are celebrated for speaking the same truth in layers of meaning. It reminds us that only a child, surrogate or not, will follow a mad and maddening parent through the wilderness, loving them in spite of everything. Double-casting the roles of Cordelia and the Fool only drives home this child-association further, letting the child-parent conflict between Lear and Cordelia and the innocent-wise wordplay between the Fool and Lear overlap and intertwine with one another, creating a powerful and vibrant tapestry of the interplay between fathers and daughters, between parents and children. It reminds us that the words we say to our child carry greater weight than we can imagine, and when parental cruelty is casual, it can destroy us all.
Chapter IV

New Works

Desdemona, 2011

Four hundred years after Shakespeare penned his characters, Desdemona and Cordelia are enjoying a 21st-century resurgence of popularity and relevance. In 2011, Nobel- and Pulitzer-Prize winning author Toni Morrison found Desdemona so compelling and contemporary that she was inspired to write a play about Desdemona and other female characters from Shakespeare’s play. In 2016, the 1623 Theatre Company in London premiered “a double-bill of Shakespeare and new writing” (1623 Lear/Cordelia), reframing the relationship between Lear and Cordelia as a modern conflict exacerbated by Lear’s struggle with dementia. In examining the texts of these plays, reviews, and personal interviews with the playwrights and directors, this chapter shows why these characters reverberate so strongly across history, and why modern playwrights feel Shakespeare’s female characters deserve more time upon the stage to tell their sides of the story.

Morrison’s play, Desdemona, is just 44 pages long - far shorter than Shakespeare’s work. Admitting that “no one can compete with Shakespeare” on language (Winn, 2011), Morrison chose instead to interweave spoken dialogue with music. Described as a “literary and musical collaboration” (Morrison 7) by director Peter Sellars,
Desdemona gives voice to multiple female characters in a sort of performative afterlife, some of which are only alluded to in Shakespeare’s text. We hear from Desdemona and Emilia, but also from the African nurse (“Barbary”) who taught Desdemona the “Willow Song” (Othello, Act IV, scene iii), Desdemona’s mother, and Othello’s mother. While Othello appears and talks with Desdemona in Morrison’s play, Iago is conspicuously absent: Shakespeare’s villain has no place in this sacred, female space.

Morrison decided to tackle the play after a disagreement with Sellars, who “was chatting with the novelist Toni Morrison when the subject of Shakespeare's Othello came up. Sellars told her he would never stage the play” because the play was “too thin.” (Winn, 2011). Morrison vehemently disagreed, insisting the play was “‘very complicated.’ The problem, in her view, had to do with productions that presented Desdemona as ‘this frail white girl’ and her jealous husband, Othello, as ‘this big heroic black guy. She succumbs. He's stupid and easily enraged. And everything else is about Iago’” (SFGate, 2011). Morrison’s response is a work that is “part play, part concert… an interactive narrative of words, music and song about Shakespeare’s doomed heroine, who speaks to the audience from the grave about the traumas of race, class, gender, war — and the transformative power of love” (Sciolino, 2011).

The play opens with Desdemona ruminating on the significance of her name, and the perilous oppression that women of her time faced. She both claims her name and rejects the “ill-fated” symbolism of it.

“The word, Desdemona, means misery… it means doomed. Perhaps my parents believed or imagined or knew my fortune at the moment of my birth… certainly that was the standard, no, the obligation of females in Venice when I was a girl… they were wrong. They knew the system, but they did not know me.” (Morrison, 13, italics mine).
Declaring herself “in between, now: between being killed and being un-dead, between life on earth and life beyond it” (Morrison 14), Desdemona is free to reflect upon her own life, and to assess it on her own terms:

“Is your final summation of me that I was a foolish naïf who surrendered to her husband’s brutality because she had no choice? Nothing could be more false… my earth life held sorrow. Yet none of it, not one moment was ‘misery.’ Difficulty, yes. Confusion, yes. Error in judgment, yes. Murder, yes. But it was my life and, right or wrong, my life was shaped by my own choices and it was mine” (Morrison, 14).

If Desdemona seems defiant, she has reason to be, as she is often still dismissed as a weak or ineffective character. Consider the one-sentence description of her character in an eight-paragraph article in The Guardian, reviewing the National Theatre’s 2013 production of *Othello*: “Olivia Vinall’s frail and eager Desdemona is a leaf blown about on the gusts of testosterone” (Clapp, 2013). Aside from one sentence describing Lyndsey Marshal’s Emilia as a “passionate squabbie,” the review dedicates more than seven paragraphs to Adrian Lester’s Othello and Rory Kinnear’s Iago. Another review of the same show, published in the Telegraph, claims that “Any production of *Othello* stands or falls with the actors playing Othello and Iago” (Telegraph, 2013). It is notable that the same review focuses almost exclusively on Othello and Iago, only mentioning Desdemona to the second-to-last sentence. Adding insult to injury, that sentence describes her as “a little girl lost in a world where innocence cannot survive” (Spencer, 2013). Small wonder that Morrison’s Desdemona must protest against being cast as a victim when the male characters of Shakespeare’s play dominate in the staging, in reviews, and in scholarship. Morrison makes Desdemona’s words defiant precisely because she is continually infantilized - the aforementioned description of her as a “little girl lost” is a perfect example - and robbed of the agency she has struggled, her whole
life, to claim. It is not only Othello who steals her life, but productions of *Othello* that minimize and marginalize her character.

After speaking so strongly of herself, the first woman Desdemona speaks of is her own mother, whose absence in Shakespeare’s play is never mentioned. In Morrison’s work, mother and daughter do not interact: instead, Desdemona shares a memory of her. She describes her mother as “a lady of virtue” (17) who valued decorum and reserve, particularly in a daughter: “Constraint was the theme of behavior. Duty was its plot” (17). Desdemona recalls a moment from her childhood when her mother discovered her splashing barefoot in a pond on the family’s estate, and remembers that her mother took her shoes away for ten days, forcing her to go barefoot the entire time: “It meant my desires, my imagination must remain hidden. It was as though a dark heavy curtain enclosed me. Yet wrapping that curtain over my willfulness served to strengthen it” (17).

In the same scene, Desdemona remembers her nurse, “Barbary,” who taught her the Willow Song featured in *Othello*. Only her African nurse, Desdemona said, “encouraged a slit” in the curtain Desdemona’s mother wanted to wrap around her: “Barbary alone conspired with me to let my imagination run free… (of places) where nature is not a crafted, pretty thing, but wild, sacred and instructive” (18). Speaking of her beloved nurse, Desdemona says, “she was more alive than anyone I knew and more loving. She attended me as though she were my birth mother… Her heart, so wide, seemed to hold the entire world in awe and to savor its every delight” (18). Desdemona’s memories of her nurse and mother echo Juliet’s experience of her own nurse and mother in *Romeo and Juliet*: one liberates her, the other confines her; one embraces her, the other is detached. Yet the nurse’s “wide,” open heart is also her downfall. Desdemona shares
that “when I needed her most, she stumbled under the spell of her lover,” who “forsook her and turned her ecstasy into ash” (18). It is a moment seared into Desdemona’s memory, as evidenced by her recollection of the Willow Song. It also highlights how being abandoned by her lover led to Barbary’s death (“Her spacious heart drained and sere, Barbary died,” p. 20).

The death of the nurse she loved so unconditionally reminds Desdemona of her own death: “Were we women so frail in the wake of men who swore they cherished us? Was a lover’s betrayal more lethal than a betrayal of one’s self?” (20). She adds that her nurse’s death made her “determined to be otherwise… to search most carefully for the truth of a lover before committing my own fidelity” (20), alluding to her refusal to marry one of “the wealthy curlèd darlings” of Venice that Brabantio mentions (Othello Act I, scene ii, lines 86-87). Desdemona refers to those suitors as materialistic, focused on her inheritance and title over herself: “They came into my father’s house with empty ornate boxes designed to hold coins of dowry gold, or deeds of property. They glanced at me and locked their glistening eyes on my father’s” (Morrison, 21, italics mine).

Morrison’s descriptive language of men bearing empty vessels to be filled, and women viewed as property instead of souls, is supported by Garber. In her Harvard course titled “Shakespeare After All,” Garber explores themes of honor in Othello. She notes the different types of honor available to men and women in Shakespeare’s society, and how similar that is to our society today. Speaking of ‘honor killings,’ such as the 2016 murder of Qandeel Baloch by her brother (Khan, 2016), Garber explains: “‘honor killings’ …are all about the supposed sexual violation of a woman who is thought of as the property of a man. This (is a) question of honor as the physical sign of virginity:
women have physical honor, and men have spiritual honor” (Shakespeare After All, Lecture 4, 5:35). Like Desdemona, Garber and Morrison both realize that while Desdemona may seek to find “the truth of a lover” (Morrison 20), the reality is that most men will view her through a lens of property, title, and status. As she watches her suitors, Desdemona realizes that the beauty she is praised for in Othello is irrelevant: “were (I) a giantess, a miniature or a horse-faced shrew, suitors cruising for a bride would have sought my hand. Those already wealthy ranked me with other virgins on a menu. Those in desperate straits needed no evaluation” (Morrison 21).

Refusing one suitor after another, Desdemona senses her father’s embarrassment at her unmarried state: “a single female of a certain age… burdened by an eating mouth, tied to a poor unseeded womb, disconnected from the chain that the clan pays out to increase its length and profit” (21-22). Here, Morrison shines a light on the expectations laid upon women: marry, produce an heir, and continue the family line. Everything else is window dressing. In Morrison’s Desdemona, the title character realizes her only worth, as far as society and her father are concerned, is in her ability to continue “the clan.” Small wonder that she rejects it, or that her father disowns her for her impudence.

In the fourth scene of the play, “not yet recovered from Barbary’s death,” Desdemona encounters Othello for the first time: “Among those huddled around (Brabantio’s) chair was this mass of a man. Tree tall. Glittering in metal and red wool. A commander’s helmet under his arm” (Morrison 23). As Desdemona approaches, she sees “a glint in his eyes identical to the light in Barbary’s eyes… I looked away, but not before his smile summoned my own” (23). Desdemona’s love of Barbary, then, connects her to Othello in the moment they meet. When Othello asks her to dance, “we danced together,
our bodies moving in such harmony it was though we had known each other all our lives” (23). As her father’s hall fades into an exchange between Desdemona and Othello (the first dialogue in the play), Othello invites Desdemona to experience a sensual genesis: “Here on this bed let us make a new world… turn away old world, while my love and I make a new one” (25). Morrison’s play gives us a glimpse of the electric and sexual dynamic between Desdemona and Othello.

Yet it is worth noting that, in Shakespeare’s play, Othello and Desdemona do not remember their courtship the same way. Othello claims that she “She loved me for the dangers I had passed / And I loved her that she did pity them” (Act I, scene iii, lines 193-194). As Garber observes, this says more about Othello in Shakespeare’s play than it does about Desdemona: “Othello (thinks he) needs to be the hero in order to be the person (Desdemona) loves…when it turns out he has weaknesses and vulnerabilities… he thinks she can’t love that. He (thinks he) has to be the hero of a romance” in order for Desdemona to love him (Shakespeare After All, Lecture 4, 50:45). But Shakespeare’s Desdemona sees beyond Othello’s need for hero-worship: “I saw Othello's visage in his mind, And to his honour and his valiant parts did I my soul and fortunes consecrate” (Act I, scene iii, lines 287-289). Desdemona comprehends how Othello sees himself, and devotes herself to the good that lives in him, rather than simply falling in love with him because of his adventurous stories and challenging life.

This key difference highlights two very different interpretations of Desdemona. One depicts her as a lovestruck girl who is incapable of understanding the complexities of her husband’s experiences; she is naive and innocent, and does not see the man who will murder her for who he really is. This interpretation follows her father’s logic: Brabantio
does not see the insightful, clever, and brave person that is his daughter. The second interpretation holds Desdemona to be a woman, neither naive nor innocent, who has actively listened to the experiences that shaped Othello and understood them. Far from being a naive, innocent girl, this interpretation presents Desdemona as Othello’s equal and empowers her as a full partner in their relationship, one who keenly understands her partner’s background. The former interpretation holds that Desdemona did not know her husband as well as she thought, and it was that romanticized ignorance that led to her death. The latter interpretation holds that Desdemona’s understanding of her husband is not flawed; it is his flawed understanding of her, his estimation of her as someone who would betray him in the span of a few days, that leads to her unjust death.

Discretely deciding to make their “new world” off-stage, Morrison writes the first stage directions in her play: “Two women approach each other. One is dressed in simple cloth, the other wears a sumptuous gown. They both have white hair and carry a torch” (26). These are the mothers of Othello and Desdemona. Othello’s mother is given the name “Soun,” while Desdemona’s mother receives the more formal “M. (Madame) Brabantio.” Morrison chooses to place the mothers onstage together, facing one another rather than giving them time with their children. While the previous scene was a form of a flashback to the courtship of Othello and Desdemona, the scene between two mothers is shrouded in grief, as both women mourn the deaths of their children.

Soun: We have much to share. Clever, violent Othello.
M. Brabantio: Headstrong, passionate Desdemona.
Soun: Both died in and for love. (Morrison 27)

But did they? Can one be in love if one murders the person that is allegedly the love of his or her life? Does murdering one’s spouse not retroactively invalidate any such claim of love? The next scene of Morrison’s play shows that she believes - or at the very
least, that Desdemona believes - the answer, even in spiritual hindsight, is no: “Who could have thought a military commander, trained to let blood, would be more, could be more, than a brutal arm educated solely to kill? I knew. How did I know?” (30).

Saying she “remember(s) well the softness in his eyes” (30) Othello begins to tell the story of his life. Orphaned, he was captured “by the slavers. I lived with the camels and oxen and was treated the same. I ate what I could find. It was a happy day for me to be sold into an army where food was regular and clothes respectable” (31). In military service, Othello finds a hunger for “violent encounters” that will prove near insatiable: “Only as a soldier could I excel and turn the loneliness inside into exhilaration” (31).

After spinning colorful, fantastic tales of “tunnels in the sea… enter and a corridor of light shines in front of you, a hallway as dry as the Sahara, cool as the Himalayas” (32), “island(s) in an ocean of lavender” (33), and Amazons who stain their hair red with the blood of men (34), Othello shares his darkest confession with Desdemona: his rape, with Iago, of two elderly women.

“Aroused by bloodletting, Iago and I entered a stable searching for food and drink. What we found were two women cowering. After a first glance they never looked at us again. They lowered their eyes and whimpered. They were old, so old. Fingers gnarled by years of brutal work; teeth random and softly withering flesh. No matter. We took turns slaking the thirst of our loins rather than our throats… Once sated, we heard a noise behind us coming from a heap of hay. We turned to see a child, a boy, staring wild-eyed at a scene that must have seemed to him a grotesque dream. Except for the women’s whimpering, silence fell.” (Morrison 37-38)

Desdemona for the first time realizes why, in Shakespeare’s play, Othello believes Iago: “My husband knew Iago was lying, manipulating, sabotaging. So why did he act on obvious deceit? Brotherhood. The quiet approval beamed from one male eye to another” (Morrison 37, italics mine). Desdemona realizes that for Othello, the bond between men, soldiers, rapists, and war criminals - and rape is a war crime, as determined

Desdemona pleads with Othello to say that he and Iago did not assault the boy. When Othello says they did not, Desdemona responds, “then mercy triumphed” (38). Othello, however, says the truth is much worse:

“Before our decision to do no more harm our eyes met, Iago’s and mine, in an exchange of secrecy… The look between us was not to acknowledge shame, but mutual pleasure. Pleasure in the degradation we had caused; more pleasure in leaving a witness to it. We were not only refusing to kill our own memory, but insisting on its life in another.” (38)

Rightly condemning Othello’s rape as “obscene, monstrous” (39), Othello poses a question: “a vital one. Can you forgive me?” No, Desdemona says, she cannot. In a New York Times article about the play, Morrison shared her reasons for making the rape part of the story: “I wanted to show that rape is not about sex or seductive at all. Those women were not winking at him, and their dresses were not too short” (Sciolino, 2011).

In Morrison’s script, despite being unable to forgive Othello, Desdemona says their love will endure:

Desdemona: I can love you and remain committed to you.
Othello: In spite of what I have described?
Desdemona: In addition to what you have described. (Morrison 39)

This scene demands a re-examination of one’s understanding of love; as it is used here, it is beyond the reach of some readers. However, Garber notes that in Othello, “(Shakespeare) is constantly substituting war for love” in a form of *coitus interruptus* (Shakespeare After All, Lecture 4, 39:45), citing the interruption of the couple’s wedding night (Act I, scene iii), and the second interruption on Cyprus (Act II, scene iii). In contrast, Morrison’s *Desdemona* serves as a venn diagram of Shakespeare’s themes, forcing violence, love, and sexual violence to interact and overlap. Desdemona continues:
“Did you think loving another was a profit-driven harvest: choosing the ripe and discarding the rot?... Honest love does not flinch at the first roll of thunder; nor does it flinch when faced with the lightning flash of human sin... my error was in believing that you were more than the visage of your mind” (Morrison 39).

Desdemona’s last sentence recalls her words from Shakespeare’s play: “I saw Othello's visage in his mind, And to his honour and his valiant parts did I my soul and fortunes consecrate” (Act I, scene iii, lines 287-289). In Morrison’s play, Desdemona stakes her marriage and her life on the hope that Othello is more than that dark visage; that her love has helped him evolve beyond the isolation of his childhood and his violent rape of an elderly woman. It never did.

While Morrison’s attempts to broaden our understanding of Othello are laudable, his confession of brutal rape and subsequent enjoyment in immortalizing the act in the eyes of a child are horrific. It beggars belief that Desdemona would find this confession an encouragement to marry Othello; this is not an act to view with pity, but a red flag to send her running for the hills. However, Morrison’s description of Othello’s rape also helps us to understand the shocking and instantaneous rage we witness when Othello believes Desdemona has been unfaithful to him: “I had been happy, if the general camp, Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body, So I had nothing known” (Act III, scene iii, lines 348-350).

If Othello views women as binary - either as sacred, as in Othello’s mother or wife, or as vessel to be used as a man desires, as in the old women Morrison describes - then we can understand how quickly Desdemona would fall from grace in his eyes. It is this binary vision that makes every woman either sacrosanct or a body upon which violence may be perpetrated. Yet Desdemona falls from the former to the latter in
Othello’s eyes precisely because his vision is flawed. Not only is she innocent, but even if she were not, his behavior would still be inexcusable. Desdemona confronts Othello:

Desdemona: ...you believed a lie. You broke my hymen one day and thought I was unfaithful the next day? Me?
Othello: I don’t know. I did suspect. Actually I don’t care. (51)

This is Morrison’s ultimate condemnation of Othello: he suspected he was wrong, and he did it anyway. He particularly didn’t care whether his murder of Desdemona his actions were justified or not, the same as his rape of the elderly women with Iago. Even as he apologized to the wife he murdered - “I am beyond sorry. It is shame that strafes me” (54) - he admits that “I murdered myself and you to stop the drama… my love for you was mind deep” (54). Desdemona responds:

“My mistake was believing that you hated war as much as I did. You believed I loved Othello the warrior. I did not. I was the empire you had already conquered… the earth is not quiet or waiting. In the screech of color and the whisper of the lightless depths of the sea, it boils, breaks or slumbers. And in this restless rest human life is as unlimited and miraculous as love” (54-55).

In one of the final scenes of Morrison’s play, Desdemona encounters the woman whose name was evoked at the beginning: Desdemona’s nurse, Barbary. Overjoyed to see her in this afterlife, Desdemona is shocked when her nurse turns away:

“...you don’t even know my name. Barbary? Barbary is what you call Africa. Barbary is the geography of the foreigner, the savage… the sly, vicious enemy who must be put down at any price; held down for the conqueror’s pleasure” (45).

Stunned at this response, Desdemona asks her nurse for her name (Sa’ran), and then declares her to be “my best friend.” But Sa’ran will not hear her, responding, “I was your slave” (45):

Desdemona: You blame?
Sa’ran: I clarify!
Desdemona: Sa’ran. We are women. I had no more control over my life than you had. My prison was unlike yours but it was prison still. (48)
Acknowledging that Desdemona “never hurt or abused me,” Sa’ran begins to find a mournful similarity with the child she cared for: “Who did?... You know who did. (But) no more ‘willow.’ My song is new” (48).

In the afterlife that Morrison depicts, white women and black women can find sisterhood free of class and race, bonded by the respect and love they have for one another, and by the injustices they have experienced at the hands of men. As the scene closes, Desdemona states: “We will never die again” (49). The worst that can happen has already happened; now, finally, they are reunited with one another. In the final spoken line of the play, Desdemona states “We will be judged by how well we love” (56). The words ‘well’ and ‘love’ evoke Othello’s line from Shakespeare’s play, just before Othello’s suicide, in which he calls to the witnesses to speak of him as “one that loved not wisely, but too well” (Act V, scene ii, line 342).

Morrison’s play stands in stark contrast to other plays that imagine Desdemona’s inner life, such as Paula Vogel’s A Play About a Handkerchief, which imagines Desdemona as having an affair not with Cassio, but with multiple other men; Vogel’s vision explores “what it means to be a woman in a man’s world” (Andersont, 2012). But in positioning Othello as the sole man in a world of women, Morrison flips the script. In Morrison’s play, Desdemona proves her love for Othello in word and deed; in both Morrison’s play and Shakespeare’s play, Othello is incapable of proving his love for Desdemona at all. Morrison’s re-imagining of Shakespeare’s characters gives voice to a multitude of women that exist in the past and in the background of Shakespeare’s play, but whose shadows linger. They capture the imagination of a young girl, encourage a
young woman to make her own path, and finally reunite her with the surrogate mother she loved.
In 2016, the 1623 Theatre Company developed the play *Lear/Cordelia*, a modern “double-bill of Shakespeare and new writing” that presents Lear’s madness as dementia (1623, *Lear/Cordelia*). The experimental project is a two-act production featuring two very different voices. The first act, *Lear*, is told from Lear’s point of view. Adapted from Shakespeare’s *King Lear* by dramaturg and director Ben Spiller, *Lear* is told from Lear’s point of view, reworking lines and exchanges to shed new light on the mad king’s relationships with his three daughters.

The second act, *Cordelia*, features modern language and new dialogue. Written by playwright Farrah Chaudhry, it is “a new play... from the perspective of Lear’s youngest daughter” (1623, *Lear/Cordelia*). Based on a “research and development project that explored *King Lear* in the context of dementia through participatory research” (1623, *Lear/Cordelia*), part of the company’s stated mission for the project rings similar to what Morrison hoped to achieve with her play, *Desdemona*: “to give (Cordelia,) this marginalised female character, a strong voice to tell her untold story” (1623, *Lear/Cordelia*, italics mine). The complete script for both acts, generously provided by Ben Spiller and Farrah Chaudhry for this thesis, are included in Appendix C. Spiller and
Chaudhry also agreed to be interviewed for this thesis, and transcripts of those interviews, quoted in this chapter, can be found in Appendix A.

As with Morrison’s play, *Desdemona*, the first question in considering works that reimagine and reframe Shakespeare’s text is to ask why such modern interpretations are needed. Why adapt Shakespeare’s work, rather than writing a new play with new characters? In an interview conducted with Spiller, he explained:

“It’s to explore our common humanity through Shakespeare… We want to really focus in on issues that relate to the world around us today, and how Shakespeare dramatized those all those centuries ago - but also to shed light on how those issues can be understood in our world, today.” (Spiller, Appendix A, 176)

Later in the interview, Spiller also said that it is Shakespeare’s lasting, comprehensive understanding of humanity, good and bad, that keeps his work relevant to our modern lives:

“...all of life is in (Shakespeare’s) body of work: every emotion, every difficult issue, every family issue, political, familial, spiritual, it’s all there. It’s a microcosm. It’s such a rich body of work that I think it helps us to look at our world through the lens of Shakespeare. And in addition, we bring our understanding, our feelings, and our thoughts to Shakespeare. It’s very much a two-way experience.” (Spiller, Appendix A, 185)

*Cordelia* playwright Farrah Chaudhry agreed, adding that it was important to deepen the story and conversation that Shakespeare began in King Lear:

I love Shakespeare. I think he does challenge the norm… (he) layers so many things into his plays and his characters. He packs his characters and plays full of things to un-pack... And it is important that we talk about women more, and it is important that we show Shakespeare - that we show his characters in a different light. (Chaudhry, Appendix A, 173)

Spiller and Chaudhry’s responses recall Marjorie Garber’s statement in *Shakespeare After All* that Shakespeare’s works are “living works of art” (Garber 18) and that he is “part of our common culture… part of our cultural shorthand” (Garber 29).
Garber’s words are intellectual theory, while the modern works of Morrison, Spiller, and Chaudhry put that theory into practice. Broadening, deepening, and building upon the works of Shakespeare does not indicate that Shakespeare’s works are insufficient; rather, such actions indicate the power and relevance that his plays still hold, and a hunger to know even more about his characters, particularly those whose voices may not have received as much attention as others.

Indeed, Garber’s theory was proven in part through the experience 1623 had in workshopping this project. Initially, Spiller said, the play grew from a “public participation project to explore King Lear in the context of dementia and dementia care” (Spiller, Appendix A, 173) - in other words, to delve into Lear’s madness with modern scientific understanding. In addition to presenting medical experts with specific quotes from the play, and requesting both a medical diagnosis and care recommendations, the 1623 team also visited “care homes” - what would be termed “assisted living facilities” in the U.S. - to better understand what it means to live with dementia today. As the team worked with small groups in the care homes and began to develop the script, performing the Lear script before audiences of carers and care home workers, Spiller said audience members wanted to know more about Lear’s care provider, Cordelia:

“It was something I’d not really thought about much in the workshop, but looking back at it now, I can really understand it now… what is her story? What makes her come back when she decides to come back, knowing her father doesn’t really want to see her? How does she cope in France with the full knowledge that her father is ill (overseas) and her sisters are not making a great job of his care plan?” (Spiller, Appendix A, 179)

Spiller’s questions also speak to Chaudhry’s view that part of the reason for building upon Shakespeare’s work is to bring in more diverse voices, and to share the stories of other characters:
“...it’s great that I can go away to talk about Cordelia and create a whole new world for her (and) for audiences. It’s important for us to do that. I’ve seen *Hamlet* a million times: I want to see something new. The text can be the same, fine, but do something different. How are you going to challenge me? If I’m going to pay forty pounds for a theatre ticket, how are you going to challenge me?” (Chaudhry, Appendix A, 172).

Chaudhry’s point that Shakespeare’s work is both continuously relevant, as well as exhaustively produced, is an excellent one: culturally, there is always more to learn from new productions of Shakespeare, but we can also experience a form of ‘Shakespeare fatigue.’ Infusing modern productions with Shakespeare’s words and characters gives us a new lens through which to experience and understand his works, deepening our understanding and appreciation for the text while also “seeing something new.”

The script for *Lear/Cordelia* begins with an exchange between Lear and Cordelia in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*: Act IV, scene vii, as Cordelia returns from France and finds her father. As they rise and walk together, Spiller’s text jumps ahead to Lear’s line, “We two alone will sing like birds in a cage” (Act V, scene iii, line 10) before jumping back to the song presented in Act III, scene ii, line 78; “The rain, it raineth every day.” In Spiller’s text, Lear and Cordelia sing this song together (Appendix C, 43); in Shakespeare’s text, the song is sung by none other than King Lear’s Fool. Spiller explains:

“(In that moment, Cordelia and Lear) sing the song… we fade, and we then hear him carrying on with the singing: ‘the wind and the rain, the rain, the rain, the rain’ - and then we hear rain, and we hear wind, and he’s in his shower (in the care home, showering while fully dressed) - and he’s remembering being in the storm. He has his “come, winds, and crack your cheeks” speech in the shower... and through projection mapping - projections onto the set and onto the actor, as the speech continues and develops - (the audience sees) he’s (mentally) on the heath with the Fool.” (Spiller, Appendix A, 181)
Spiller’s choice to unite Cordelia, Lear, and the Fool - the latter in spirit, as the Fool does not appear in Spiller’s production - connects Cordelia and the Fool in a very real way through Lear’s memory and his imagination. (In an interesting side note, this song is also featured in Shakespeare’s play *Twelfth Night*, where it is also sung by a Fool. [*Twelfth Night*, Act V, scene i, lines 383-402.]) Lear is conflating both characters in his memory, something Spiller says in common in how people with dementia interact and communicate:

“...what we found (working) in care homes and (with) experts.. is that the last part of your brain to die (is your) imagination. So (even) if you don’t have dementia, you can enter the world of someone with it, because you both have an imagination. It’s art and creativity that connects us... so it’s the song of the Fool, it’s the Fool’s song, that brings Lear and Cordelia together.” (Spiller, Appendix A, 185)

Spiller’s choice to unite Lear and Cordelia through the Fool’s song belies the critical, and similar, roles that Cordelia and the Fool play. Even when omitting the Fool from the 2016 production, the Fool still echoes into the modern era, and it is no coincidence that the Fool does so in a scene involving Cordelia. They are linked, in Shakespeare’s play, through their love of Lear, their care for him, and their refusal to abandon him. Even in his madness - or in modern terms, his dementia - they are still connected to him through imagination and through love.

*Cordelia*, the second act of *Lear/Cordelia*, explores the tension and the love between Lear and Cordelia. As Chaudhry explains, part of her mission in writing the script for Cordelia was to enable Cordelia to “come out on top... I wanted her to come out more powerful than we see her at the beginning of the play” (Chaudhry, Appendix A, 165). Commissioned by Spiller to “tell Cordelia’s story,” Chaudhry said it was an opportunity to present Cordelia as “strong... Being a woman myself, I love strong female
leads in plays or films, so I wanted to make her a strong character” (Chaudhry, Appendix A, 165).

Chaudhry’s decision to depict Cordelia as strong or even victorious should not be seen as an indication that Shakespeare wrote her character as weak or passive. Spiller agrees that a defining characteristic of Cordelia is her courage, both in Shakespeare’s text and in Chaudhry’s play. In developing the project, Spiller said:

“What came to the fore is how courageous (Cordelia) is. She’s intelligent, she’s wise, she’s very much her father’s daughter - she doesn’t suffer fools - but she’s very direct, she says what she feels, as her father does. And in reading the script, I found such intellectual rigor in (Chaudhry’s) play. There’s a scene where the two of them are sitting down that the kitchen table, and she says, ‘Right, we’ve got to have this out, we have to clear the air.’ And goodness, she does, she tells him what’s what” (Spiller, Appendix A, 183).

Spiller and Chaudhry’s commitment to depicting Cordelia as strong, courageous, direct, and honest resonate with the character Shakespeare depicts in his play. But by focusing both on Lear’s spiraling descent into madness and how those who love him experience his madness, Spiller and Chaudhry deepen and broaden our experience of Lear and his beloved daughter.

Chaudhry’s script abandons Shakespeare’s text, moving Lear and his daughter into modern times while focusing on the journey of Cordelia, rather than her father. The two-sentence synopsis from the play, provided on the title page, reads: “Cordelia is trapped. She must free herself” (Appendix C, 239). The act begins with both Cordelia and Lear packing: Cordelia is returning to France, where she is a doctor helping with war victims, while Lear is moving into a care home, as he needs more intensive care (and neither Goneril or Regan will provide it). As the synopsis suggests, Lear repeatedly attempts to “trap” Cordelia, both literally and figuratively. He locks the front door so she can’t leave (Appendix C, Cordelia, 244); he uses guilt to attempt to manipulate her into
staying and providing full-time care for him (“This home…this house could be the thing that brings us all together again,” Appendix C, 245); he physically tries to restrain her (Appendix C, 274). Chaudhry’s version of Lear is, she admits, different from Shakespeare’s: “Throughout my play, you want Lear to give her his blessing - and he just doesn’t. In Shakespeare’s version, he’s redeemed: he’s reunited with Cordelia, and he realizes he made a mistake. In my play, that doesn’t happen” (Chaudhry, Appendix A, 169). Part of Chaudhry’s motivation for the shift away from Lear’s redemption, she said, is rooted in giving Cordelia the opportunity to choose herself, rather than choosing her father:

“... it was important for me for her to be free. I don’t think she was free in Shakespeare’s play. (Lear) banished her, she went off, she came back to be with her Dad, and she’s killed! So it was important for me to tell what kind of person she is, and coming out at the end different… I wanted to do something radical to make people think” (Chaudhry, Appendix A, 169)

Chaudhry’s words resonate in part because female characters are still so often marginalized - in stage performance, on TV, and in film. Part of Chaudhry’s motivation as a playwright is to challenge that marginalization, to reclaim women as unapologetic, fully-developed characters with their own ambitions, dreams, and callings:

“We live in a society - in a world - where everything is male-dominated, it’s very patriarchal. If you look at Hollywood films, you rarely get any film with a female lead… it’s very rare. In plays, I personally like to write about strong women on a personal level. Not because I’m a feminist; I just don’t think there are enough strong women characters out there, on our TVs or in our cinemas. There just aren’t, you know? And there needs to be.” (Chaudhry, Appendix A, 171, emphasis by Chaudhry)

Chaudhry also referenced the 2013 film Gravity, starring Sandra Bullock and George Clooney, as an example of this subtle but pervasive patriarchy:
“...it’s a great example: Sandra Bullock takes the lead. And I love Sandra Bullock, but in the end, George Clooney saves her! She can’t do it without him! And it’s a great film, why the hell do we need a bloke to save her? Leave it as it is!... (but) in the end, she can’t do the job without the bloke. And I don’t like seeing that, because I don’t think real life is like that.” (Chaudhry, Appendix A, 171, emphasis by Chaudhry)

Chaudhry’s frustration, channeled into her work as a playwright, brings her Cordelia center stage and empowers her to speak for herself in ways Shakespeare’s Cordelia did not. Chaudhry’s decision to have a Lear who is not redeemed - who does not learn humility, kindness, or empathy - also has a profound impact on her play. At the act’s close, Lear tears Cordelia’s luggage from her hands and scatters her things across the floor in a violent attempt to mark his territory, Cordelia’s childhood home, with her things. Chaudhry’s script describes the moment as follows:

“CORDELIA: Nothing here means anything to me anymore. These things…You can neatly pack them into boxes and take care of them, or you can throw them out. It’s entirely up to you.

LEAR: They’re…they’re your things…you need to pick them up. (...) Where are you going?

CORDELIA: Nothing will come of nothing. I’m going home, dad. For good this time.

She takes the keys from the cabinet, unlocks the door and walks out with just one rucksack on her shoulder, leaving Lear alone with his party hat on.”
(Appendix C, Cordelia, 282)

Chaudhry’s decision to have Cordelia leave Lear is powerful. In that moment, Cordelia claims all of her agency and responsibility for herself, and rejects the father who tried to manipulate and control her for so many years. There is no redemption for Lear in this moment. If Cordelia’s decision seems cold or unkind, one must only consider
whether we would ascribe the same qualities to a son - a son who had still returned to ensure long-term care for a father who exiled, rejected, and manipulated him.

Like Morrison’s Desdemona, Chaudhry’s Cordelia gives voice to a woman who is treated unjustly by the men in her life, and provides her character with an opportunity to express herself more fully than Shakespeare’s text allows. In doing so, the modern female playwrights elevate the conversation about Shakespeare’s female characters, inviting us to consider their points of view rather than those of the male protagonists. The playwrights’ stories help to broaden and deepen the lives of Shakespeare’s characters, giving them space and time beyond Shakespeare’s pages, celebrating their stories and validating their identities as individuals with their own hopes and dreams, well beyond simply being someone’s daughter, mother, or wife.
Chapter V

Conclusion

Shakespeare’s plays hold a unique, and uniquely relevant, place in our cultural lexicon. Today, we continue to find new insights in his plays, even though they were written more than 400 years ago. As slavery in the Americas changed our understanding of Othello, and the Holocaust changed our perception of Shylock, so are modern audiences, actors, and directors viewing Shakespeare’s female characters with new eyes. Performers and playwrights are advocating - and audiences are demanding - greater attention on female characters such as Desdemona and Cordelia, even advancing them beyond the pantheon of Shakespeare’s work.

Part of that new vision - of seeing old characters with new eyes - is in recognizing the honorable and admirable qualities of characters such as Desdemona and Cordelia, characters who choose their own path regardless of the plans of their fathers. Indeed, Desdemona and Cordelia are remarkably similar in many ways: their determination to speak truth to power; their willingness to leave the safe, well-known path for the unknown; and their inherent goodness all speak to the quality of their character. These characteristics were not invented by feminist scholars, but rather have been present for centuries. It is only recently that we are beginning to consider their worth and well-being, as much as have considered that of Othello and Lear. It is well past time to do so.
The changing cultural appreciation of Desdemona and Cordelia is most easily observed in performance: in Wilson Milam’s production of Othello at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, where his Desdemona fought desperately against her murderous husband, and in Bill Buckhurst’s production of King Lear at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, where Cordelia’s role as a truth-telling daughter was notably expanded by double-casting her as the king’s Fool. Approaching these characters as human beings with their own depth, agency, and importance in Shakespeare’s canon - and in our daily lives - helps to further establish them as visible and vital characters whose lives matter, and whose stories deserve to be told.

Modern playwrights such as Toni Morrison and Farrah Chaudhry have picked up the baton, deepening our understanding of the characters with new and reimagined texts, taking Shakespeare’s characters and making them their own. In doing so, they invite audiences to view these female characters on their own, individually, as protagonists worthy of their own story. Despite The world’s changing cultural landscape is beginning to validate the importance of women’s stories and ambitions; as a result, environments are developing that demand those stories, in which they can be shared and celebrated. These stories build upon the noble and honorable characters already present in Shakespeare’s plays, underscoring their worth and guiding them to the center of the stage: ready for their own play, their own marquee, and their own close-up.
Appendix A

Interviews


III. Wilson Milam, Director of *Othello* at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre.

IV. Farrah Chaudhry, Playwright for *Cordelia* by 1623 Theatre Company.

V. Ben Spiller, Dramaturg and Director of *Lear* by 1623 Theatre Company.
I. Interview with Bill Buckhurst, Director, *King Lear*

Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre (2013) and World Tour (2014)

Interview conducted by phone and recorded

Harvard University to London, UK; July 25, 2016 3:15PM

(1:30 minutes)

Q: Why did you decide to double-cast Cordelia and the Fool in this production?

A: The show was devised at the Globe and designed for the Globe. It was designed specifically for open-air (performance). That had quite a big bearing on the whole production, and also the touring element was really important, because what I knew before starting the show was that I would have eight actors. I knew the set... I knew we’d be working on an Elizabethan-style booth stage, which, as you saw, was small. It was designed to be outdoors and indoors, but in the UK it was primarily indoors. The whole concept was about being the Globe everywhere we went.

(3:05)

(The Globe)’s a very unique space. The thing about the Globe is - it’s the three A’s: the actor, the architecture, and the audience. So (in the Globe) you’ve got this triumvirate, these three elements working together. What you don’t get, obviously, in a more contemporary indoor theater, is the disappearance of the fourth wall, so readily as you do
at the Globe. So the audience really does feel very involved, very much a part of it. And there’s a shared light element which binds the audience and the actors and the architecture together.

(4:05)

Q: The shared light you’re talking about - is that the open-air dynamic?

Well, at the Globe, you’ve got no roof, obviously, as you know. But at every show, even at nighttime - this all may change with the new directorship there - but effectively, what you have, even at nighttime, all that happens is that lights get put on the audience and the stage, and it’s the same light. So everyone (in the Globe Theatre) is lit by a similar light: the actor can see the audience, and the audience can see the actor, and the audience can see the audience. So it becomes a very, very communal experience.

For a play like King Lear, that’s quite an unusual experience in the modern age. Because Lear lends itself to a particular mood which can be achieved very neatly with more contemporary theatre practice - with lighting and sound, etc. But for this touring production, which began at the Globe, this was all about stripping away, and basic, pure storytelling, I suppose: done simply on as close a design set as we could get, in terms of research done on original touring productions in Shakespeare’s day and afterwards, shows which would travel to Europe - literally “two planks and a passion,” as they say - and I don’t know if you remember, but at the very beginning of the show, we used planks as simple furniture and props. And we had that inscribed, actually, on two planks, that this literally was about taking the play back to its element. So the idea is welcoming the
audience into a space that is a shared space, which is lit by the same light on the actors on stage, and is about breaking down the fourth wall completely.

(6:10) So I knew the territory we were going to have to work in. And that requires quite a leap of faith and imagination from an indoor audience.

It can be a weird thing. Experiencing that kind of storytelling in an indoor space which doesn’t normally work like (that sort of staging)... in a few places, sometimes you plunk that set on a massive stage, throw the lights on in the auditorium, and it can be weird for an audience. They might think, “Oh, this is a bit odd, I feel quite exposed here.” It can be quite exposing. What is offers though, I feel, is this relationship between the actor and the audience, especially where they can really look into the eyes of every single audience member, can really connect their thoughts to the audience, as you do at the Globe. Which, more of than not, gives a more visceral experience to the audience and a more involved relationship between the audience and the actor.

(7:15)
The reason why that’s really important is because you have that leap of imagination there - the chorus of Henry V says “imagine if you will the court of France here on this stage.” (The audience) has to use your imagination. We’re not going to spoon-feed you; this will take a bit of work from you. It’s going to be worth it, because you’re going to hear every single word and you’re going to be completely involved in the storytelling, but you are going to have to suspend disbelief a certain amount of the way. Now, that was really important for this production of ours, because there were only eight actors portraying 25
parts. (Just before) the very beginning of the play, the actors are milling around as
themselves, preparing the stage, tuning their instruments. We didn’t depict that as
anything other than actors preparing to work. So there was no sense of pretense: it was all
very open, raw, and honest, that relationship. And some (audience members) go with that
and some don’t, particularly when you’re trying to bring that very Globe aesthetic into an
indoor space.

(8:45)

What I think that allows you to do is - if you go with us on this journey - you have to buy
into the fact that I can, just by putting a hat on my head, become the Duke of Burgundy
or the King of France, as we do in the very first scene. With eight actors on the stage in
the very first scene, we need someone to bring on the Duke of Burgundy and the King of
France - the only way to do that is to send two guys (who are on the stage) off, put on a
hat (backstage) and then come back on (as the Duke and the King). Now that simple,
bold, brazen choice - some might say not to their taste - has to be done, because you’ve
only got eight actors. But what that liberates you from is any concern that people aren’t
going to go with any other kind of doubling in the show. Because doubling is something
that people have to buy into. And with this mode of storytelling, which is very back-to-
basics, stripped-back - it’s all about the words and the clarity of storytelling - that you
have to just suspend your disbelief as an audience member and go with it. And I felt that,
wherever I went to see it, people really loved it, that they were complicit in this
relationship and this conceit. They had met the actors before the show started - OK, great,
so they already had a relationship with these people - and they are, in a way, they’re
already on our side at the beginning. Because we’re saying, we’re not pretending to be anything other than what we are, which is a bunch of actors who are going to tell a story.

(10:30)
(The doubling) in that first scene, when Cornwall and Gloucester go off and (come back as) the Duke and the King of France, generally, that would get a laugh: people would say, “Oh, OK, I see what’s going on here, this is how they’re going to do this” - and they went with it. The reason I bring this up is that when it comes to doubling Cordelia and the Fool, you’ve already set up this conceit and this style of performing: a stripped-back journey of imagination. Which allows that double to happen more readily.

(11:00)
The other thing about the doubling of Cordelia and the Fool is that it isn’t original, it’s been of course done plenty of times before. And I never investigated why, but it suddenly made sense to me that it should work as a double. I’m going back to basics here, but when you’re looking at a doubling scheme, you’re just desperately trying to work out paths and journeys for these actors. Sometimes you have to think outside the box, because it simply doesn’t work because of practicality, because you can’t get Actor A on time to do that. Or this change needs to be a quicker change because they’re not going to make it (back onstage). With this double, it’s just - it’s uncanny. I mean, the Fool appears on stage after Cordelia’s exit to France, and then the Fool disappears when Cordelia comes back from France… for me, that very coincidence that placed these two characters - that they fit this double scheme so neatly.

(13:00)
And on my first readings, it made wonderful sense that these two characters are played by the same actor. Because in some ways, they are shadows of each other, not least the fact that these are the closest people to Lear, on a very basic level. They’re not afraid to tell Lear - in their own way - the truth. That’s rather brilliant. In very different ways, they both tell him what they feel. And he’s surrounded by people who - most people around him don’t. That’s a really interesting thing. That similarity between those two, this lovely notion that the Fool brings with him on stage with his first entrance, of having pined for Cordelia: that he loves her, and he misses her. It’s almost like they are kindred spirits, in a weird sort of way. The thing I miss in this play is, wouldn’t it be wonderful to see a scene between Cordelia and the Fool. I suspect it would be really pure and beautiful, actually.

(14:30)
I always felt that with Lear and the Fool - although (the Fool) has license to wrap up what he feels and to tell Lear how it really is, to wrap it all up in wordplay - there’s still a certain tension between them, until Lear hits the heath, and then he’s calling for the Fool all the time. He wants the Fool with him to help him, to protect him. The Fool becomes the Mother, the Nurturer, the Protector for Lear, when he’s at his most vulnerable. He takes on the role of Cordelia in that scene, I think. So I thought that was a neat reason for the doubling.

(15:30)
On top of all that, you have to think about the person playing the part - you know, would this interest an actor? And I thought this really would interest an actor. Because despite
what I’m saying about their similarities between the two characters, they’re also massively different. They’re sort of polar opposites, both in terms of their places in court and their personalities.

Cordelia is incredibly smart, but she’s not driven by wordplay and wit in the same way that the Fool is: she’s a more serious character. Now I say that with very little evidence because we don’t see her for a long time: but we have so little time with her at the beginning. We make our assumptions of such a short scene, in which she shows such incredible mettle and courage. I know lots of people have different opinions about her, but for me, Cordelia is a character who has great courage: she’s fearless. She’s prepared to say the things that other people aren’t. I don’t think there’s an ounce of foolishness about her. I think she’s brave and bold and to put her head above the parapet, and I really admire her for that. The Fool isn’t really able to do that, he wraps everything up in wordplay.

(17:00)

So I thought it was interesting. I thought an actor might appreciate the similarities, but at the same time relish the chance to draw out the differences between them. And, you know, that doesn’t appeal to every single actor. There are certainly a lot of actors I met who just didn’t get it, who didn’t want to find (those similarities and differences). And then you have an actor like Bethan, who’s so fearless herself, as a performer, and bold and makes strong choices.
What I want to say about the nature of this production, the way we (doubled the role) was... I think her change was simply pulling a large pair of trousers over Cordelia’s dress, so there was always an element of Cordelia there. We weren’t trying to pretend it wasn’t her. We put a funny hat on her, but essentially… you asked what people made of it, if they knew it was her: it was really divided. I think a lot of people - especially people who knew the play, I have to say - they saw it and they were familiar with it already. And they loved it that we weren’t trying to be clever with it. We talked a bit about gender, but the Fool was sort of a non-gender character. Whether the Fool was a male or female didn’t seem particularly important. And some of that has to do with the style of storytelling: how far do you go with your characterization? So putting a beard on the Fool didn’t seem important. The fact that it’s a female actor portraying a traditionally male role, but that didn’t seem important. It really isn’t. We didn’t have thoughts or concerns about it.

(19:30)

So people loved the fact that we were showing a bit of Cordelia there - that she was still there underneath - and for me as a director, that satisfied my feeling that they were kindred spirits, that Lear had a connection to them both in a similar way, that there was always a bit of Cordelia bleeding through… but at the same time, it’s important for the clarity of storytelling, and also for the actor to delineate for themselves a strong enough line… you know, which is Cordelia?

(20:15)

So what (Bethan) stuck on (for portraying the Fool) was... a younger character, a bit more spritely. We talked at one point about it like a savant kind of thing, like a child who has
attention-deficit disorder. He’s so smart, he’s unbelievable bright. (The Fool’s) probably quite a young person who has no filter; he says everything that comes to mind. And he or she is unbelievably quick, that’s clear in the writing, but he’s unable to not say what he wants to say, which is rather brilliant. Because that also ties into (Cordelia’s) “nothing” (in the first scene). How clear can you be, in a public environment, about how you feel about what your father is doing? It’s a big deal to say nothing. She can’t help herself, she has to say nothing. She can’t help herself, much like the Fool can’t stop speaking.

So a lot of the decisions early on was driven by the nature of this storytelling… “This is us, we’re going to tell you a story, go with us if you want, use your imaginations if you want, we can only offer you a bare stage, which is small, and a small amount of props, but we can offer you some wonderful words and storytelling.”

(23:00)

Q: What impact did double-casting have on the audience’s reception of the play?  
A: It’s a tough call. For me, I don’t know if it was an element of the play that I was really conscious of once we were up and running. What I mean is that I bought into it, and I think I probably did because the other audience members I was watching it with bought into it too. In some ways, it’s a really successful double because of this uncanny sort of similarity. The two energies of these people: they love their King. They love this man. They want the best for him. They also can see through the game that’s being played by the other sisters and they see the potential disaster that’s about to appear. And I think by the end, Lear has realized this.
I think that the Fool has to die to allow a way for Cordelia to die. You asked about Lear’s line, “My poor fool is hanged.” I find that point even more poignant the fact that he’s holding the actor who played the Fool, and he says the word “fool,” and she’s died - it’s an incredible coincidence that he used that word, is what I’m saying. And I think that, certainly in a production with those limitations necessarily put on it - (using) eight actors and a very sparse set - I think that making a deep connection like that between two characters brings a more significant end to the play than there is (otherwise) in a more traditional telling of the tale. I think it is more: I think it is more poignant. I hadn’t thought about it until you asked me about it, but people always ask, “What happened to the Fool? Why does he suddenly disappear?” I think that wraps (that question) up very neatly. Maybe the Fool was never there, or the Fool is projection of his daughter. But maybe Cordelia and the Fool are so interlinked in personality, in the energy they offer to Lear, in their hopes for Lear, in their love for Lear, that when one is gone the other has to follow.

I think there are plenty of people who saw it and absolutely hated it because they’ve seen something different in the Fool. I’ve seen productions where it’s an old Fool, and the sense that he’s been with Lear since the beginning of his days, and that offers a different layer to the storytelling… but I think doubling the role offers another level, another depth, something unexpected, actually: a level of poignancy that you can’t achieve without that double. I thought it was very successful. I only know from the performances I saw, but every time there were people wiping tears away at the end. And you feel - well, that means they’ve been affected, so the doubling hasn’t been a problem for them. Perhaps it’s been a successful thing.
I had people equally who saw the show and didn’t know until afterwards that the same actor played both parts. Now that’s just phenomenal. People who hadn’t seen the play before, when I informed them - they were just completely blown away. And that’s brilliant too. If people haven’t seen a double before, it works for them in a traditional way, but for people who did get it, I think it might add something more poignant and different than a traditional role.

I’m pleased it worked for you and I’m delighted you’re writing about this whole idea. I have to say, having done that show… when you’re asked, as a director, to do a King Lear like this with eight actors, you think it could be a nightmare. But when you have those big challenges, you often discover much more than you thought you were going to. It’s been a while since I did the play, but it’s inspired me in other shows to be bold with my doubling. I think we’re living in an age where we’re desperate to see actors of both sexes play other sexes. To see what a female energy brings to male part and vice versa. That was a wonderful spirit that Bethan brought to the part, even just performed the Fool… but with (her also performing) as Cordelia as well, she brought it to another level.
Q: I want to start by asking if you can talk about your experience performing those two roles and what surprised you in the process.

A: I definitely agree with you that - the Fool and Cordelia - I don’t think it’s her in disguise. But I found, the more we got into it, that there wasn’t a huge difference. There are so many character traits that are similar between the two of them. For me, the biggest one was that they are truth-tellers. On first reading, the Fool is saying all sorts of stuff that (I didn’t understand). And then I started to figure out, through rehearsal and performance, he says pretty much exactly what Cordelia says, all the time. He tells Lear “You have nothing, you’ve given everything away” - he tells him as it is, but he has to disguise it in jokes, in jest. Which is how he manages to stay around King Lear for so long. Whereas Cordelia is a truth-teller as well, and tells the truth, and is instantly banished. But no one is as honest with the King as the Fool is, really. That was really interesting to me: (in) the first scene, (as Cordelia) you’re very honest, and you get punished for it. And then, although it’s a different character, (as the Fool), it’s almost as if you learn that you have to disguise the honesty in a joke for it to be heard, and for it to
be tolerated. Even that doesn’t get through to Lear: he doesn’t hear it until towards the end, really. It was… realizing that I’m being as honest as Cordelia. I’m probably being worse, I’m probably saying more. But because I’m disguising it in a joke, I can get away with it. So that was a huge thing, realizing that they’re kind of saying the same thing. They have the same belief and the same moral code, but the Fool has a job to do.

(3:15)
Playing both, obviously, I pretty much spend the entire play on stage with Lear. I have the prophecy only, without Lear, and Lear has - I think just after the Fool leaves, it’s just the Dover scene without either Cordelia or the Fool. So both actors, we had only small chunks (of time) where we were onstage without the other person. And you build up an amazing connection. Joseph Marcell, who played the role of Lear, he and I became so close because of it. We did absolutely everything together.

(3:55)
His mad scene - what’s so fascinating about the Dover scene as well, with Gloucester and Lear and Edgar - is that (Lear)’s without the Fool and he’s without Cordelia. And both those characters are kind of like a crutch for him, and as soon as one of them is gone, he falls completely into what we see is madness. So that’s a huge part of playing those roles together. I think it’s very hard to play Cordelia when you have just that first scene and then the last two scenes together with your Dad. How are you supposed to build up a relationship? It’s really difficult to build that connection. But if you play the Fool as well, who Lear treats as his child in many ways - he calls him “boy” - and especially in our production, I was very young.
If, like a lot of us think, the Fool and Cordelia are shared by the same actor, then it would have been a young boy as well. So it’s sort of like (Lear) gets a surrogate child in the Fool. It’s almost like the Fool does replace Cordelia in many ways: a lot of Lear’s love goes into the Fool. In the storm scene, when Lear says “Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks” - he’s completely in another world, and yet he manages to turn to the Fool at the end and say, “Poor fool and knave; there’s one part in my heart that is sorry yet for thee” - In all of the mayhem, he turns to the Fool and says, “Actually, I’m sorry for you, I’m sorry that you’re here.” He still has that fraction of his brain that is able to empathize, but only for that one other character. He can’t see that Regan and Goneril might have a point, he can’t see that Cordelia had a point. But he can see that the Fool is sticking by his side, and that he’s sorry for him.

I feel like those two parts have a lot to do with the love, and the channels of love and honesty… and unconditional love, in a way, that both those characters have (for each other) for different reasons. But Lear is able to shift that affection onto the Fool. And when you’re playing both (the Fool and Cordelia), you have this amazing connection. And by the time Cordelia comes in dead in his arms, and he says “My poor fool is hanged” - you could think (that) the Fool is hanged, but in our production, we felt it was about Cordelia… and obviously, when you’re playing both, the audience gets it. They say, “Oh, it’s the same actor,” so there’s that double reference. It’s so much more heartbreaking because you’ve seen this relationship develop on stage. Even if it’s two
different characters, you’ve seen the same actors go on a journey together, and I feel like that has a much bigger impact in many ways.

(...)

(7:45)

Q: In this production, did you ever walk out on stage for the first time as the Fool and feel recognition from the audience?

A: As the actress? I didn’t, I think because I had that balaclava on - I think it actually took people a while to figure (it) out. I had a couple of people sort of say, “God, I didn’t realize it was the same actor playing Cordelia until over halfway through the play!” Which is hilarious, because I’m literally wearing the same top (as the Fool) as my dress (as Cordelia). I don’t think people expect it. In terms of character doubles, they’re very different characters, so you wouldn’t expect to see that. (And) the Fool comes on with some strong energy, and with such strong intent... I never felt as if I was Cordelia.

Q: No, and this is a thin line I’m walking. But I feel like there is potential, when you double-cast the roles, that the audience recognizes not the Fool that’s being newly introduced, and not Cordelia, who’s just been exiled, but the performer. I’m interested in kind of the duality, this double consciousness of: ‘I’m engaged with a play and I’m locked into the reality of the play… and at the same time I’m also now aware that I’m an audience members and these are performers.’

A: Yeah.

Q: But it doesn’t sound like that was your experience…
A: Well, it’s funny… I think with our particular production, with all the doubling-changing, I think subconsciously, it was 100% there. Building the relationship with King Lear and feeling the love for him, actually… I think if I was just playing the Fool, maybe I wouldn’t have loved Lear as much as I did playing both characters. So I feel like that’s definitely there. And I think you’re right: for an audience, if you recognize the actor, although you’re aware it’s a different character, you bring that emotion from the first scene with you into that character, and that adds an extra dimension to the character, to the Fool, that otherwise potentially wouldn’t be there. And I think for the Fool that dimension has to do with the unconditional love: that sort of bond that father, mother, and child have, whether they like each other or not. I think that if you see the same actor, that carries through… and I think you can also imagine a history between the characters because of it. It would be a different history: you’re not thinking the Fool is his son. But because you’ve seen another character have this relationship, when the Fool comes in, I think it’s very easy to imagine that they have also had a relationship previously. Because you have subconsciously seen those actors at the same time talking to each other, and you believe they know each other, I suppose, in a way. And it certainly feels like that as an actor, as well: you believe you know that person like the back of your hand, because in another role, they’re also playing your Dad.

(11:30)

Q: That’s a really lovely blurring of the lines in a way, and yet keeping both (characters) separate. It’s a fascinating, Venn-diagram kind of line to walk. But I think you just mentioned you were surprised some audience members didn’t recognize you, because part of your costume was the same in transition from Cordelia to the Fool?
A: That’s something that (Director) Bill (Buckhurst) wanted, and the design, and it’s a brilliant idea. I was wearing a dress at the beginning (as Cordelia). And as the Fool, I put on big trousers with shoulder braces (suspenders) over the top, and a balaclava with little horns that only showed my face. But it meant that the top half of me - oh, I put on a little waistcoat - but the top half of me was the dress. It was the same print of the dress, because it was the dress, and I tucked the dress into the (Fool’s) trousers. So you could see the same flowery pattern - it was the same pattern that Cordelia was wearing in the first scene and that she wears throughout the play, in our production, anyway. So there was that motif that they are pretty much - there’s an item of clothing that stays exactly the same on both characters. It’s covered with a little waistcoat and trousers, but you can (still) see the front of it and you can see the sleeves of it. It ties that link, which is why I was surprised, because I’m wearing the same costume, just covered with some trousers.

(13:10)

Q: That’s a visual cue of sorts that reinforces them in a really interesting way.

A: There were two different productions, so one I’m in a yellow dress and one I’m in a pink dress.

Q: So how long did you play these two years, between performing at the Globe and being on the world tour?

A: I think it was 2013 when we started, and including the month of rehearsals, that was six months. Then we had a couple months’ break, and then we started again in I think it was in April the following year, which is when we came to America with it. So then we did another 7-8 months then. So it spanned over two years, but it meant I was working on that show for six months in 2013 and 6-8 months in 2014.
Q: I have some questions about some specific lines, and it’s moments when the Fool is doing asides to the audience: the first is “she that laughs at me now, shall not be a maid long, unless things be cut shorter”?
A: Right! We cut that one, so I can’t say much about that one.
Q: OK. How did you guys approach the prophecy? The Fool seems to be going into some interdimensional stuff there. I don’t know quite what’s happening there. How did you interpret that?
A: I feel that throughout the play, the Fool has been telling Lear, “If you do this, shit’s gonna be fucked up.” He says it in so many different ways… so I feel like the prophecy is - it’s twisty-turny, as the Fool is. But I feel like what he’s saying… (laughs)... “this is exactly what I said was going to happen, and this happens every time.” This idea of history repeating itself and coming full circle. In that speech, he starts off with things that do happen: “brewers mar their malt with water,” and “priests being more in word than matter,” when they talk more than they do - these are things that do happen nowadays. But then he goes on to say, “usurers till their gold in the field, cutpurses in the throng” - these are things that happen, but they’re wrong way round. They’re not likely to happen, it’s reversed.

I think he’s saying that this is stuff that does happen, and this stuff will happen, and when all of this happens, then the realm of Albion will come to great confusion. And all of it is happening now. It’s here and now. Then comes the line, “those who shall live to see it, the going shall be used with feet.” I think he’s saying that whoever is alive to see this time, in this weird other world, they’ll walk around on their feet. Well, that’s happening now. It’s grim, and said, and one of the straightest things he says, actually. I feel that it’s
simpler than it reads. And Lear goes off and the Fool sort of says this thing: all of this stuff is happening, this is everything I said was going to happen, and it’s like - like dun-dun-dun, it’s going to get worse. And this happens every time sort of thing.

There’s a production at the RSC now and they’ve moved that scene to after the mock trial scene. They’ve moved it so that it’s the Fool’s last words, rather than “we’ll go to bed at noon.” And I think that’s really clever, because it’s like he’s saying, this is how it is - but it also gives you an idea of why he leaves: that he (realizes) he can’t fix anything.

Q: What explanation did you develop for why the Fool leaves and never returns?
A: For me, it was about realizing that he couldn’t help anymore and he didn’t have a function anymore. His way of talking to Lear, his jokes… (with) Lear slipping into madness, he realized that his time was up. He almost didn’t have a job anymore. And the sad part is, what is a Fool if he’s not a Fool? I also think he’s really interesting that he leaves at the point when Edgar comes in as Poor Tom. I feel like Edgar kind of takes over the Fool’s role in the way that he talks to (Lear), in the fascination that Lear has with him in the mock trial scene, and Edgar takes over completely, the Fool hardly says anything. And the Fool’s trying: he’s trying to get his jokes out, he’s trying - but it’s like, “Fuck, I’ve been usurped, and I don’t have a role anymore, and I can’t help anymore.” I feel it’s about realizing that. And you can also think - he hears that Lear’s going to Dover, to Cordelia, and that’s the best place for him. But I think the Fool has a crisis of confidence and life: what is he if he isn’t a Fool? And the King doesn’t need a Fool anymore because he’s become one. So I think he had become pointless and the king didn’t need the Fool
anymore, because he had other people looking out for him… or, you could say, because he has to go because he needs to do a costume change into Cordelia!

Q: That’s my theory, but I was curious what a person in that role would say. I was reading in your rehearsal post that you found the end particularly powerful, even though you have to play dead… did your production use any of the items Lear calls for in that scene, in particular the mirror and the feather?
A: No, that was still in Lear’s head, those moments, we didn’t have any of those props. It’s interesting, the production they’re doing here at the RSC now, they’re talking about the mirror maybe being a reflection in a ring, and the feather maybe being - either he imagines it or it’s her hair. For Joe, he’d gone back into that stage of delirium because of the grief, that overwhelming grief - he’s imagining things because he wants her to be alive.

(24:10)
Q: My closing question is… what was the big takeaway for you in performing both roles?
A: Looking at it from sort of an acting point of view, it was an amazing challenge to switch from two very different characterizations but a relatively similar character at the heart of it. And just working on it for so long, the sort of ease that came out of it that really made me realize how similar the Fool and Cordelia are. Having the privilege of spending Lear’s journey with him through the entire thing is amazing: doing both (roles), you are the only one who goes start to finish with him. Kent comes close, but he isn’t around at the end. Kent is another one who watches from the sidelines, but I think the Fool is really affected by it and Cordelia is really impacted by it as well. They’re both not
just observers, they’re both really involved in the action. If I ever play Lear, if they ever
do a female Lear - you know Glenda Jackson is playing Lear here - that won’t be for a
long time, and it’s unlikely that’s going to happen. So just being able to watch that
journey, to watch the actor playing that character go through the whole thing and have the
privilege of doing that with him, was an amazing thing.
Q: How did you come to direct this production?
A: I had never worked at the Globe before, and it was indeed my first Shakespeare (play). They asked, “Do you want to do Othello?” It was Elizabethan, and that seemed right. I tried to do the entire text. I cut out a few of the jokes when they first arrived in Cyprus - not the jostling between Desdemona and Iago, but the others, because they were sort of dense and not understandable. So I cut those out, but not the exchange with Desdemona, because that was key.

Q: Why did you feel that was key?
A: He - he was angry. Iago is a shit-stirrer. He’s always going to be testing the waters, he’s gonna always be pushing for weaknesses, probing and pushing and gathering information. I guess it goes back to - they’ve been in Venice nearly a year, if memory serves. How long has Othello been going to dinner at Desdemona’s father’s (house)?

Q: I don’t recall off the top of my head...
A: For some reason, I’m thinking a year. During that time - we had a mixed-race Emilia, so we took the race card out of the equation a bit. So it was an interesting reaction from the audience when they saw her. You kind of go, “Well, all right, this clearly isn’t - this is something more than, other than, or along with race.” Alongside of that, we were shown a picture of Venice at the time - we set it during the invasion of Cyprus, in the 1550s, because we knew Shakespeare had access to histories that showed - that talked about that period. As part of that, we actually did a lot of research on who these people were, what kind of warriors they were - pirates and state-commissioned pirates (privateers).

But when you look at Venice (at that time), it was the most cosmopolitan city in the world. So as part of that, (in our production) I think it was for the most part, almost entirely - the rich upper-class of Venice elite of Venice, they were caucasian, they were the white folks. And after that, we went around the houses: everyone was african, mixed-race, asian, maltesian, corsican… so it was a seaport, polyglot town.

And along with that… there’s a line in the Folio that’s eliminated in later editions, interestingly enough, that says Iago had fought in many countries, many lands, (that were) “christian-ed and heathen.” Not “christian” and heathen, as they were in later editions, but “christianed,” lands that had been forced to christianity.

Q: So you were saying that because you said you took the “race card” out of the equation, was everyone else white?
A: No, only the rich Venetians were white.
Q: You mentioned the audience was taken aback by that?

A: Yes. When Emilia first walks out and you see Iago is married to a person of color, they had to recalibrate very quickly. They’d come to see a play about overt racism, and you kind of go, “That’s not going to be part of it.”

Because you have to remember, Othello’s been having dinner with Brabantio for a year. He’s the (Colin) Powell of his (time). I mean, in many ways, he’s the most important person in Venice. He’s the person who’s been keeping Venice safe. And Venice was in a really tricky situation in those days… if (Othello) had waited, the exclusivity on (Venetian society) was not due to - it wasn’t due to race, that we could find out. He could have joined (that elite society), but you have to give it a period of time. But this is an impetuous marriage.

(7:15)

You walk out on the stage at the Globe, and that’s two-thirds of an education for Shakespeare: you immediately get it. We had a whole set design with a designer I’d worked with several times, but once we got out there and started working on it, on Elizabethan drama, we realized (a set) was completely superfluous. I think we had a bed, and a table, and we set most of it at the seaport… when we got to the fifth act, we were in the castle.

(8:00)

We had a fourth woman, the bartender - an asian woman that ran the bar. So we also had a fourth woman up there that was also very strong. She was a bartender. At one point, the
guys started harassing her, and I just said, “Kick ‘em.” I told everybody, “I’m authorizing her to hit or kick you anytime, and you can’t fight back.” This is a woman who runs and owns this bar, she’s part of your lives, you’d never misbehave. You just wouldn’t do it. But actors get cheeky.

(8:45)

Q: Did you get any sense of Desdemona’s character during that scene with Iago?
A: She held her ground, certainly. She did not truckle, ever. He would probe and she would probe right back… Emilia has this speech, she stands up for herself there. We had a strong Emilia. We had a strong Bianca, who was black.

(10:00)

See the thing is, this man had been a guest had been at, essentially, the Prime Minister’s house every night for a year, telling stories. He was an accepted part of Venetian society, he was the person that was keeping himself. He was Eisenhower, he was Patton, he was whoever was the most diplomatic person that they listened to, enraptured. He’s the man who had experience. He kept the fleet safe. I mean, this was The Guy. And everybody recognizes him as The Guy. He’s clearly of noble bearing - he was a very noble, elegant man.

(11:00)

Q: What was your impression of Desdemona, and what were your goals for Desdemona in particular?
A: She’s clearly a very strong-willed woman. (In our production), in the very first scene, when Brabantio answers Iago’s summons, he is joined in the window by a courtesan, which was hugely common at the time. A man of Brabantio’s stature probably had four or five courtesans who were his regulars. But a daughter who is raised by her father in a household that would have these courtesans, and who had not married for a fairly advanced age, given the life expectancy at that time… for whatever reason, the men weren’t matching up! I mean, (her) Dad was a very powerful, very erudite, worldly figure… he would have been the Ford or DuPont (of the time). He had the biggest fleet, he ran Venice. And she would have grown up at dinner parties with these men treating her with courtesy, if for no other reason than (the stature of) her Dad, if for no other reason… but everything indicates that she was very intelligent and charming herself, and so… I just wanted strength.

(12:45)

On a personal note, I go back to the screwball comedies and the film noirs of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, like Rosalind Russell and Barbara Stanwyck. Back in those days, the women gave as good as the men tried to get, and they usually won. It started switching in the late 50s, when men became more dominant, but back then they wrote women who were absolutely as smart, and (the films) were fun… so I wanted strength. This woman had made this choice, the father apparently honored it, they had these dinner parties, everybody was a part of this...

(14:05)
The real problem in this story is the manner in which it was done and the haste. No father wants to find out from an aide-de-campe that his daughter has had gone off and married somebody else. It’s impolitic. Talking about Iago, he and Othello had spent the last 20 years as each other’s right-hand-men (sic) in battle, in dangerous situations, all over north Africa and the Mediterranean basin, this is a deep, deep friendship. For the last year, Iago had been shut out from Othello’s company, as he was dining with the elite of the elite, the one percent of the one percent - power, money, all of it. So his feeling shut out is very understandable. These men had been inseparable. Twenty years is an enormous amount of time. (...) I mean, they were close.

(15:40)
So A, Iago being all of a sudden not part of Othello’s life, and not being invited to these dinner parties, and B, being passed up for Cassio, who, everything they say about him is true. He may have been top of his class, he might have been really good material, (but) he wasn’t battle-tested. He was a rich, white, Venetian. Who, You know, his Dad got him into West Point. So we sort of took the view that Iago had definite grounds for feeling slighted, and then we started to imagine the relationships between them. And Emilia had been part of that friendship, all those years.

(16:30)
We did a lot of historical research on this. We visited the boat they would have traveled on, we learned about privateers. I mean, Iago and Othello are basically privateers. When they want to be pressed into service to defend the city, absolutely. The citizens of Venice
were issued longbows. Everybody in Venice is essentially part of a militia, and when you were attacked, you went out into the streets.

(...)

(19:00)

Q: (Can you talk about) Desdemona’s absolution of Othello (in the murder scene?)

A: She doesn’t blame him. Whether it’s growing up in a motherless household, growing up with men all her life, no mother… she knew… it’s a deep love. I mean, they talk about it as a pure love. I think someone even refers to it as purity. To the end, she knows that he was weak in a way that men can be weak, and she defended their true love. When you’re casting, we had our Othello first, and then we wanted… it’s so hard, casting for the stage, to try and find people you will believe as a couple. It’s not hard, it just takes time. And I believed them as a couple… they riffed, they acted with each other. Rephrase the question again?

Q: If they are soul mates at the beginning of the play, do you feel that Othello’s murder of her retroactively invalidates that? Or do you feel like they are just doomed, just ill-fated?

A: It’s more like Othello had a disease. It wasn’t him. He was beset upon by information he wasn’t capable of dealing with. He didn’t really have a language, or that kind of mileage… I mean, in a funny way - no, it’s not a funny way at all - he is thrown into a level of society… he’s used to sleeping on a battlefield. He’s used to sleeping on a boat. He’s used to… and all of a sudden, you’re in the very pinnacle of society every night, and then people start telling you things…
I have to say, I couldn’t have had a better experience with a first Shakespeare. It was at the Globe, we were sold out every night, the Globe holds 3,000 (people)... A lot of directors, a lot of designers. will build out into the pit to get a new angle on things. But we didn’t. We had (our actors) enter through the pit, but they just had to bully their way through it. We had them enter through the groundlings at all four entrances. We had all those city paths. It was as if you had all those little streets and alleys of a sea port, of a Venice… they all converge at this place. And when they went through at night, with lighted torches, it was gorgeous. It’s such a special place to work.

We did almost the entire script. We were three hours on the button. Patsy Rosenberg came and helped us with the speech, and there’s nobody better. She was great. She’s erudite, she’s seen it all - she gives you tricks. We were running at three and a half hours, but she talked to us about Elizabethan and Jacobean speech, and here’s what you do… and our guys just toughened up. They cut it to three hours.

Q: Let’s go back to (the murder scene)... we were talking about (Desdemona) not telling Emilia that Othello had just tried to strangle her. Is there any significance for you in that Desdemona revives from that first attack, that she is able to cry for help, essentially? I
always found it strange that Othello is this massive warrior who should be able to kill her at the drop of a hat, and he can’t quite do it in the first go.

A: Biologically, anatomically, that’s a difficult moment, that she can come back to utter those speeches which clearly the playwright needs, at that moment, to advance the action. We wrestled with that, and eventually we just did it. It’s a beautiful moment, when you hear her voice, and you think, “Oh, my God”... I mean, it’s beautiful writing: could she come back? We talked to doctors and found... it’s hard to strangle somebody.

(27:20)

I have seen a lot of productions since, where Othello puts his hands on her neck and she dies. But our Desdemona was a fighter first, psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually. That’s why we allowed her to - we didn’t allow her - the three of us talked about it a lot and I said, you know, “Just get away. Be wary. Make distance.” Once you realize something’s up... when she actually gets off the bed, when she realizes that there is something amiss, she gets off the bed, she starts to try to flee, and he’s stalking her around the room... you will see him in a huge arch, a semi-circle (walk) around the whole stage, with the bed at the center...

(28:20)

Q: Do you think that Othello can’t quite bring himself to kill her, or do you think that she’s kind of too strong to go out that easily, or do you think the action has to continue, and that’s what happens?

A: I had not thought, I admit, that he was... I think he thought he killed her, and that her coming back was almost a moment of hope, and then she comes back, and then she dies,
and it’s … it’s like torture for him. But that’s an interesting thing, and if we were still in rehearsal, we’d talk about it for three hours… I took it as a dramaturgical moment. that would be so welcome for Othello at that point. He’s just a man wrestling with emotions, he didn’t know… that were too much, ultimately. Perhaps - let me just open up the page… “You heard her say herself, it ‘twas not I”: he says it himself, you see, that it wasn’t him, the Othello they know as the ultimate soldier, the savior of the nation, the lover of Desdemona… was it… he’s the Devil, look at his cloven feet. He was possessed, speaking of Iago after he’s gone mute. I don’t - I probably, at the end of the day, won’t be able to give you a precise, intellectual (explanation).

(31:10)

Q: You wrote (in a previous email) that there were some strong audience responses -
A: There was one gentleman one night who just yelled, “No, no, stop!” There was so much pain in his voice, and he was in the front row, so the back of her head was two feet away from him, and it was just wrenching. The way we did it, it was protracted. Everyone knows what’s going to happen, but it took so long, it just ratcheted up the tension of the inevitable death.

Q: I’d read about people rushing the stage or screaming out, historically… but it never occurred to me that it would still happen in this century.
A: Well, Othello (Eamonn Walker) was in such pain. He didn’t want to be doing this. It was so clear he did not want to be doing this, but he had to be doing it, but why did he have to be doing it - he couldn’t answer that either.
Q: How important was Desdemona to your play as a whole?

A: Oh, extremely.
Ben (Spiller from 1623 Theatre Company, the director of Lear/Cordelia,) commissioned me a while ago. He came to me with the proposition that he wanted to tell Cordelia’s story. Cordelia, In King Lear, doesn’t really have much of an appearance in the play. Her father banishes her, she goes off, she comes back at the end and they have a reunion at the end, and that’s it. We don’t really hear her story, and he was really keen for me to tell her story. So that was my remit, and that’s why I was brought in, to really talk about her story.

For me, it was important to get through her struggle and her motivations - her fears, her desires - and exactly the things that are missing, maybe, from Shakespeare’s play. Things that we don’t - we don’t really know Cordelia or what’s happened to her - she’s gone away, what things she’s seen. So for me it was really important to talk about her… and
also her relationship with her Dad, and how it’s developed while she’s been away, what’s changed, what hasn’t changed.

(2:30)
In my play, she comes back, and that’s where the play starts, with their reunion. My piece is 45 minutes in length, and it’s actually completely closed-time and closed-space. So the whole of the 45 minutes is in real time, in one room. And it’s their discussion about why she went, what she’s been doing, why she’s back… and it’s really a massive altercation and a bit of a power - bit of an ego struggle in parts.

(3:00)
We learn about the relationship, and we learn about why - the truth behind why she actually left, and why she’s actually come home. We learn about her childhood fears and that sort of thing. And really, I wanted to make - I wanted to tell her story. I wanted to do it in a way that was strong. Being a woman myself, I love strong female leads in plays or films or wherever. I wanted to make her a strong character.

(3:30)
And I wanted… At the end of the play, I wanted her to come out on top. Whatever that was, you know, however you interpret that, I wanted her to come out more powerful than we see her at the beginning of the play. And that’s it, really. That’s how my process works.
Q: What kind of qualities of Cordelia jumped out at you from Shakespeare’s text?

A: I don’t know if you can call them qualities, but I find… for one thing, she’s courageous. I think Cordelia is courageous. The fact that she has no desire for worldly things, she doesn’t care that her father is going to deprive her of her inheritance. And the fact that her love - her love cannot be confined to words. And that’s a courageous thing to - and back in those days as well, you can imagine that speaking out like that to your father would be something that you wouldn’t do. It isn’t the norm. So that is a courageous thing.

(5:00)

So for me, the word ‘courage’ is the one word that I’ve taken into my piece, and I’m showing that she’s got courage. And we don’t really know much about her in Shakespeare’s work. Shakespeare’s Cordelia, she says ‘I’m not going to tell you how much I love you,’ and she just goes. And that’s really it. We don’t really know where that comes from, why she’s said it, what has given her that confidence, that courage, that grace. In my play, we explore that.

(5:30)

Q: Do you dive into what prompts Lear to divide his kingdom?

A: It’s set in modern day, and although I have used Lear and Cordelia as the same characters, the context is different. Lear is, in my play, an ex-cabinet member, so he’s ex-government, very right-wing, a little bit Donald-Trump kind of thing. He hates all things that are not familiar to him.
Cordelia is the absolute opposite of him. She’s completely left-wing. She wants to go out and help people, and he is - we talk, certainly, about his arrogance. And in my version, he doesn’t send her - he doesn’t banish her, he gives her an ultimatum. And she chooses to go. She says, “I’m going to leave.” So my version is a bit different.

She’s a doctor, and that’s the career path that she wants to follow. And he says to her, ‘You can’t be a doctor, you need to be a politician like me, like your sisters’ - the other two - and she says ‘Well, I want to be a doctor, that’s what I want to do.’ And he says, ‘Well, if you want to be a doctor, you can’t stay here. You’re not my daughter.’ And that’s why leaves. So it’s a bit of an ultimatum kind of thing. We talk about that, about why he does that, why he’s ‘dividing his kingdom,’ ‘you’re not my daughter any more’ - we talk about that, yes.

Q: My understanding is that the first act is from Lear’s point of view, and the second act is from Cordelia’s point of view?
A: Yes, it’s a double-bill. The first 45 minutes is called Lear. What’s done with that is that he’s taken extracts from King Lear and he’s sort of radicalized them, he’s done some brilliant things with them. And the context is going to be modern-day care homes. The same Lear as in my play - he’s an ex-cabinet member, Tory, right-wing. We see his reunion with Cordelia, and his interactions with the other sisters as well. So we see things from his point of view: his struggles, his dementia, his mental illness. And as he’s getting
older, his interactions with his daughters - he’s becoming a bit more - is getting worse, his dementia is getting worse. So we see his point of view in the first half.

(9:00)
When my half begins, the language changes. Straight away, the audience knows this is different; it feels different. And there might be an interval in the middle, an intermission or something, to say - and that will tell the audience we’re in the same world, but it’s a different point of view. And then we see Cordelia’s story. We see her talk about her reunion and what she’s doing there. So it’s two halves of the same coin, but we’re going to interlink them.

(10:00)
Q: Was there something in the writing process that surprised you?
A: I’ve just completed the first draft, which has gone to the team. So what happens next is that there’s a reading, we’re going to read through the play.

(11:00)
Q: You mentioned courage as one of the primary things that jumped out for you… tell me why it was important for you to have her end up ‘on top’?
A: It’s tragic when (Cordelia dies) in Shakespeare’s play, and that’s what their reunion is made of. For me, I wanted some sort of redemption. In my play, she talks about why she’s been absent. And in my play, she talks about why she’s been absent. She’s a very, very good person: she’s ethical, she’s moral, she’s selfless. And for me, it was important for her struggle not to be in vain.
(12:30)
(In my play,) the reason she’s come home in the first place is to get her father’s blessing. That’s why she’s come home. It’s in the guise of his being ill - he’s ill, and he’s called for her, and she’s come - she pretends that she’s there because he’s ill, but she’s actually there because she needs his blessing. He has this hold on her. He has this hold on her that she can’t free herself from. So she’s been away from him for God knows how many years, done some amazing work, helped some fantastic people… and she’s come back, and she’s still in this sort of… he’s got this grip on her. And she needs him to free her so she can go out there - she needs his blessing.

(13:00)
Throughout my play, you want Lear to give her his blessing - and he just doesn’t. He doesn’t give it to her! Because he doesn’t want her to go, and he’s still arrogant. In Shakespeare’s version, he’s redeemed - he’s reunited with Cordelia, and he realizes he made a mistake. In my play, that doesn’t happen: there’s a lot of conflict in the 45 minutes they’re together.

(13:30)
It’s very radical, I’m afraid. I wanted to create a very strong opening, a very strong first impression of what he’s doing to her, mentally. He’s trapped her. The whole idea of her being trapped, staging-wise, you want to do something with that theme, the theme of being entrapped (like) an animal in the cage. And Lear’s got all the power. You see him,
having all the power, and really flaunting it. The audience is immediately rooting for her.
You do gain a bit of sympathy through the play, about his insecurities.

(14:30)
But in the end, it was important for me for her to be free. I don’t think she was free in Shakespeare’s play. He banished her, she went off, she came back to be with her Dad, and she’s killed! So it was important for me to tell what kind of person she is, and coming out at the end different, to show how it is for her to be in that chair, trapped.

(15:30)
It was important for me to do that. I didn’t want to do another - you know, she’s dead, or she’s still in the chair, trapped. I wanted to do something radical to make people think.

(17:00)
Q: Why do you think modern playwrights find Shakespeare’s women so intriguing?
A: We live in a society, in a world, where everything is male-dominated, it's very patriarchal. Here in the UK, we’re so forward-thinking, as is the US, but still, patriarchy is everywhere. If you look at Hollywood films, you rarely get any film with a female lead, and if there is… it’s very rare. In plays, I personally, I like to write about strong women on a personal level. Not because I’m a feminist. I just don’t think there are enough strong women characters out there, on our TVs or in our cinemas. There just aren’t, you know? And there needs to be. (emphasis speaker)

(17:30)
And our fight for equality, for diversity… I’m Asian as well, and there aren’t enough Asian characters or people on film or TV. If I wrote (a play) about an Asian woman, I don’t think Hollywood would buy it. I don’t think anyone would buy it, because… where’s the white male lead? Where’s the white male counterpart who’s going to save her? When she’s in trouble, he’s going to go save her. She can be alone, but it’s like the film *Gravity*, it’s a great example: Sandra Bullock takes the lead - and I love Sandra Bullock, but in the end, George Clooney saves her! She can’t do it without him! And it’s a great film, why the hell do we need a bloke to save her? Leave it as it is!... (but) in the end, she can’t do the job without the bloke. And I don’t like seeing that, because I don’t think real life is like that. (emphasis by the speaker)

(18:30)

I’m fiercely independent. I can do what I want. I’m successful; I have a good life. I don’t need a man. It’s great to have a guy: it’s great to have women-male friends, counterparts, family. But it’s our innate necessity, our innate belief that women are nothing without men. I think that in society, everyone thinks or feels that to a degree: a woman is nothing unless she’s married or unless she has kids. I hate these ideas of what a woman should be or what she shouldn’t be…

(19:40)

For me, it’s definitely this thing about… women are as powerful as men. I think there’s a surge or writers and people coming together to say, look, our theaters, TV, film, are not diverse enough. And we need women to be at the forefront to show how great we are, because we are, and why are we not telling our stories?
(20:00)
I think it’s great that you’re doing this, thank you for talking to me. I love Shakespeare, I think he does open - I think he does challenge the norm. With this play, what’s important to me - you mentioned the word ‘layers’ at the start, and I think with this play… We talk about so many different things: their relationship, politics, the world in which we live, bigotry, identity, belonging, race, dementia, mental illness. We pack a lot into this play, and the reason we do that is because Shakespeare layers so many things into his plays and his characters. He packs his characters and plays full of things to un-pick, and that’s what we’ve done with this play. We’ve thought about what inspires us, and we’ve gone with that, with courage or whatever - and it is important that we talk about women more, and it is important that we show Shakespeare - that we show his characters in a different light.

(22:00)
I don’t think Shakespeare’s plays, any of them, were written just to be performed (in that theatre). I think they were written for people to talk about. Sort of a challenge. And I think it’s great that I can go away to talk about Cordelia and create a whole new world for her (and) for audiences. It’s important for us to do that.

(22:30)
I like things to be a bit different. I’ve seen Hamlet a million times: I don’t want to see another Hamlet. I want to see something new. The text can be the same, fine, but do something different. How are you going to challenge me? If I’m going to pay forty pounds for a theatre ticket, how are you going to challenge me?
V. Ben Spiller, Dramaturg and Director, *Lear*

1623 Theatre Company (2016)

Phone Interview conducted August 23, 2016 10AM

From Harvard University, Cambridge, MA to Derby, England

(00:00:30)

Q: How did this play come to be?

A: In 2013, 1623 Theatre company took part in three public participation projects to explore King Lear in the context of dementia and dementia care… we took one small quotation from the play, “Let me not be mad.” We asked social media users and subscribers to create a digital response to that one short quote so we could create a response of what that means to people, what ‘mad’ means to people living in the 21st century, and how similarly and differently people interpret that word compared to Shakespeare’s time and now. We various responses: we had photographs, audio files, drawings, animations, songs, poems… some people related it directly to King Lear, and some put it out of context. There was no right or wrong, it was just finding out what the common words, colors, sounds, textures were in response to that word. Then we created an artist to create a digital animation that brought together all those forms… it was just trying to experiment digitally, how ways we can share an experience of what we
understand madness to be today, before we start looking specifically at dementia as an interpretation of that.

The focus of the second phase of the public participatory research - we had four short extracts from Shakespeare’s text, and we selected those four extracts to share Lear’s journey, his psychological and emotional and moral journey through the text. We had medical experts - people who might not have had a huge amount exposure to literature or theater. We approached a group of dementia experts, and we asked them the same question for each of the four extracts, which were: does Lear display any signs of having dementia at this point in the play? If yes, what do you base that diagnosis on; what does he do or seem to do that led you to that? And what is your recommended care plan for him and his family, at this point in the play? If no… does he seem to have another illness, and then what would be your suggestion for his care?...

One of the most interesting things about this project is that we were asking very scientific people to take an imaginative leap with us… I was a little bit unsure if that was going to work, but they did. They made that imaginative leap to diagnose a fictional character from 400 or so years ago with us. And this is a way for our team to find out more about dementia, about the various forms and stages of it… we really wanted to engage those (modern) medical practitioners with Shakespeare.

Q: So the mission of 1623 Theatre company is bringing Shakespeare… off the stage and into the general public (sphere). Is part of the drive to make Shakespeare relevant in the moment every day?
A: Yes. It’s to explore our common humanity through Shakespeare. We don’t want to produce full-blown productions of Shakespeare; that already exists. We want to really focus in on issues that relate to the world around us today, and how Shakespeare dramatized those all those centuries ago - but also to shed light on how those issues can be understood in our world, today.

Q/Doody: It’s almost like you want to look at life through the lens of Shakespeare.
A/Spiller: Yes, that’s it. That’s a nice phrase. I might have to use that.
Q/Doody: Please, feel free to steal it. Please do.

Q: How did Cordelia come into the production?
A: Well, just to go back to the research… I think that will shed some light on how Cordelia came to be a focus (of the project). What we had so far was a digital animation that explored Lear’s fear of the way his mind is changing. We also had the information about the different forms of dementia and Lear’s diagnosis, bearing in mind that eight out of nine experts agreed that Shakespeare was writing about someone with dementia. Then the third strand was that we went into care homes - people living with dementia - and workshopped moments of the play, images from the play, we brought props - visual and tactile ways of exploring the world of King Lear with people who were living with dementia, as well as with their professional carers and family members.

When we met the family members of people living with dementia - there were moments in the care homes when we were told by family members, “Oh, you won’t get anything out of her today, she won’t speak, she won’t engage.” But we found that through
creativity and art space activities, people were communicating in a really lucid way, it
just wasn’t verbally. It was really interesting, that relationship between the people living
with dementia and their family members - and looking also, in the play, the different
ways the three sisters respond to their father’s changing behavior, and how they cope
with that, if indeed they do.

Then we had a week of workshops with actors, and we brought together all the stories we
had from the care homes, all the research we’d done into dementia, and the digital work,
and we shared a work-in-progress performance… then we had an evaluative feedback
session with the audience, which was full of people who we had worked with on all three
strands of that research, as well as artists, directors, and actors.

(00:11:00)
And from that feedback... we started to put together our plans for Lear/Cordelia. We
didn’t know it was going to be Lear/Cordelia back then. That emerged… but in that
week, when we did the workshop, we had two actors: one playing Lear, and one actor
playing all three daughters. And a professional caregiver from a contemporary care home
- something we realized that with dementia, was how people project different
personalities onto the same person through a memory trick. There was a moment in the
care home when a woman was stroking my arm, and she was talking to me as if I was her
husband. I didn’t know that at the time; her daughter came to the second workshop and
she told me. Anyway, the mother was telling me (my arm) was dirty, it needed to be
cleaned. She was telling me off for not washing properly. And then she looked at me,
one-on-one contact, and she said, “But I do love you, you know.” And she said it to a male member of staff, as well. Apparently, she does it quite often.

But (at the second workshop) her daughter told us that her father very nearly died one day: he had been a miner, and he had nearly died in an explosion. He’d walked down the garden path the day of the explosion, he was covered in dirt, and her mother had met him on the path and said, “Tsk, look at you, you’re so dirty, we’re going to have to clean you up.” And then she leaned in and said, “But I do love you, you know.” And that was the only time (the daughter) could remember her mother ever saying that to her father, because it was such a near-death experience. And (the mother’s reaction) was in response, (in the workshop, of) Cordelia’s ship going off to France. She was talking about journeys, and she picked up (the picture of a ship) and turned it upside down and said it looked like a miner’s hat. That triggered off that memory.

(00:13:15)
So what we were doing in the workshop with the actors was looking at things from Lear’s perspective: if a carer came into his room to perform a task like shaving, how he would then project onto that person significant people from his past. So that (person then) became Goneril, Regan, and other important people from different points his life. So some of the feedback we got from the audience was… “what about her? What about them? What about the women, what’s their story? What about their story? This is missing.” When we saw that our audiences identified that… we don’t really get the three daughters’ story.
Q: Was that surprising to you, that they wanted to know about Cordelia or the caregiver?

A: It was something I’d not really thought about much in the workshop, but looking back at it now, I can really understand it now. Because Cordelia is absent for most of the play. And, you know, what is her story? What makes her come back when she decides to come back, knowing her father doesn’t really want to see her? How does she cope in France with the full knowledge that her father is ill abroad and her sisters are not making a great job of his care plan?

Q: Yes, not a great job.

A: Yes, they’re struggling, aren’t they? When he announces “I’m going to stay with you for a month” and then “I’m going to stay with you for a month,” and I’ll keep doing that until I die, now that Cordelia’s gone… Goneril is very busy! She’s got to run half the country and she’s not getting any sleep! So these rowdy knights need to be stopped or at least they need to behave themselves a bit more.

But yes, Goneril and Regan do dreadful things as the play goes on, and I think sometimes what we tend to do is we project onto those character scenes in the earlier scenes what they do later on later scenes. But if we take each moment, A leads to B leads to C leads to D, when they profess their love to their dad in that first scene… is because, is it just because they want his land and power? Or are they pressured? They’re not even prepared for this question! They’re all there to find out what Cordelia’s going to do, who she’s going to marry. So we really wanted to explore the impact of Lear’s behavior on the
daughters, and there have been other pieces of work that have studied Goneril’s and Regan’s story in quite a bit of depth…

(18:10)
… but Cordelia always seems to be the one that’s in the background. In Shakespeare’s play, she seems to have wandered in from a medieval morality play, because she embodies an abstract… courage and truth… we wanted to find the human being there. Where’s the grit? Where’s the woman? Who is she, and why has she come back? We felt that Shakespeare treats her a little bit like an embodiment.

(...)
(00:20:15)
A: There is that theory isn’t there, in Shakespeare… (in the King’s Men) the actor who played Cordelia probably played the Fool as well?...

(00:21:45)
…they perform a similar role, don’t they, as truth-tellers? Cordelia’s very direct and the Fool meanders with his riddles, but both point out his stupidity.

(00:23:15)
If we do look at that moment (Cordelia’s death) from a 21st-century perspective, it might possibly be that he’s projecting like the woman in the care home… that he’s projecting part of the Fool onto her and part of her onto the Fool, and he sees the two personalities
embodied in that person. Maybe by the end of the play those two people fuse together for him.

The first half of the play is a radical re-working of Shakespeare’s play. It’s all of Shakespeare’s language, but it’s restructured to reflect the experiences of someone with dementia today. It treads that fine line between then and now, and Shakespeare’s writing and new ways of looking at it. We start with the reunion between Lear and Cordelia, in his room in the care home... and then we move on to different triggers that ‘trigger off’ different memories (for Lear). He says “we’re going to sing together like two birds in a cage in prison,” and the song I decided to give them to sing is “The Wind and the Rain” from the Fool.

... so (Cordelia and Lear) sing the song, and we fade, and we then hear him carrying on with the singing: the wind and the rain, the rain, the rain, the rain - and then we hear rain, and we hear wind, and he’s in his shower (in the care home) - and he’s remembering being in the storm. He has his “come, winds, and crack your cheeks” speech in the shower, and that’s where it begins. And then through projection mapping - so projections onto the set and onto the actor, as the speech continues and develops, he’s on the heath with the Fool. That’s his reality. So what I’m inviting audiences to do in the first half is to experience what Lear’s experiencing, which is to sing a song which prompts him to get into the shower, which prompts him to remember and then relive a moment, which is what happened many years ago when he was in that storm, that’s real to him right now.

Q: Is the Fool present in the scene?
A: Only in terms of the song. I don’t think we’ll have the actor in terms of the song. You and I will pick up on that, but I think not everybody will. (...) But I think it’s important that the trigger is clear, that it’s the Fool’s song… I’m thinking that maybe Lear might be fully clothed in the shower as well.

Q: Oh, that’s beautiful, because he undresses himself on the Heath.
A: Yes, so I think we should have that. And I think it’s one of those moments when, as an audience member, you’re seeing someone on stage fully clothed in the shower, getting absolutely soaked… so it’s absolutely clear this man has dementia. He doesn’t remember he needs to take his clothes off (in the shower). It’s also an opportunity to let him strip, as he does on the Heath, when he talks about how base and animal we all are.

(...)  
(00:31:30)

Q: As you were approaching Cordelia… you had a lot of room to work (with).
A: It was pretty much… write a play from Cordelia’s point of view, off you go. (...) It’s a brand-new play, it’s a response to Shakespeare… it’s very much about Cordelia as her own person, free from the Shakespeare play but related to it. So there’s not a specific moment in Shakespeare’s play where Farrah’s play begins. We had a script development workshop (with the actors), and they… they read it out loud, and it was the first time that we heard human beings speak the words. There’s a real sense of collaboration between us all that we’re going to have a script that we feel all comfortable and confident with, that we can then share with an audience down the line.
Q: As you were reading the script for the first time (out loud), what qualities jumped out at you about Cordelia specifically? Was there something that surprised you?
A: What came to the fore is how courageous she is. She’s intelligent, she’s wise, she’s very much her father’s daughter - she doesn’t suffer fools - but she’s very direct, she says what she feels, as her father does. And in reading the script, I found such intellectual rigor in (Chaudhry’s) play. There’s a scene where the two of them are sitting down that the kitchen table, and she says, “Right, we’ve got to have this out, we have to clear the air.” And goodness, she does, she tells him what’s what.

What we found in the read-through and the timeline is that we feel that Cordelia’s play is going to take place slightly before she visits her father in the care home. So it’s going to begin with them both packing their clothes, set in the family home, so… can you imagine as an audience member, you experience from Lear’s point of view (in the first half), and then there’s an intermission and you come back… and you see the two of them packing. Maybe you think, “Oh, they’re going away (on vacation)!” But as the text continues and the dialogue develops, we realize that she’s packing to return to France, and she’s helping her father pack to go to the care home. He’s been found in the park, in the storm, homeless... and she’s come to visit because he’s heard that he’s ill. She’s brought him back to the family home because it’s familiar to him, but she’s now taken the reins from Goneril and Regan, and she’s going to take him to the care home… we wanted to show how both Cordelia’s world and Lear’s world are becoming smaller and more concentrated.
(00:42:30)

...what we found from the research in the care homes and (from) the experts.. is that the last part of your brain to die in dementia is the frontal lobe, and that’s where your imagination is. So if you’ve got dementia, you cannot enter the world of someone without it... but if you don’t have dementia, you can enter the world of someone with it, because you both have an imagination.

If someone tells you that they’re on a heath, but you think you’re (both) in a carehome, you can go with the fact that you’re on a heath because of your imagination… it’s art and creativity that connects us. So it’s the song of the Fool, it’s the Fool’s song, that brings Lear and Cordelia together. Even when he can’t remember who she is, they both remember that song, and they sing it both together, like two birds in a cage.

(00:44:00)

Q: Why is it important to revisit Shakespeare and to see daily life through the lens that he provides?

A: I think all of life is in (his) body of work: every emotion, every difficult issue, every family issue, political, familial, spiritual, it’s there. It’s a microcosm. Far from Shakespeare telling us what’s right or wrong, he just says: these things happen. (...) and it’s such a rich body of work that I think it helps us to look at our world through the lens of Shakespeare, but we also look at the world of Shakespeare through our own lens, what we bring to it. We bring our understanding, our feelings, and our thoughts to Shakespeare. It’s very much a two-way experience.
Q: What does it mean to give more of a voice to (Shakespeare’s) female characters like Cordelia? Why is that important?

A: Because traditionally, we often don’t have those female voices in the classical texts… I mean ancient texts right through the mid-20th century. And often, when we do, they’re written by men. It’s very important that female playwrights have opportunities to write plays with a female voice with a female director, and to really bring those to life. It’s about redressing the balance. It’s also about marginalized people in society, and to say, look, it’s time that we put those stories center stage. Pheobe in “As You Like It”… what’s her story? Why is she so obsessed with the way she looks? That’s a very modern issue, body image and feeling like we have to look a certain way. In “Pericles,” that’s a refugee issue, isn’t it? He’s a refugee himself. There’s a whole… there are all sorts of stories, such as Caliban, before and after Prospero. What’s his story? So that’s what I’m passionate about as an artist as a person: marginalized people who aren’t always able to take center stage and tell their story… but it’s in response to Shakespeare, not wanting to revise his work or play it down in any way whatsoever. It’s a rich, rich source material for new work, and it’s important that we invest in our living artists, who can develop an understanding of their own work and their own craft in relationship to Shakespeare.
Appendix B

Figures: Part 1

Benedict Cumberbatch wears a “This is What a Feminist Looks Like” T-shirts for Elle Magazine’s feminism issue (December, 2014).
Tom Hiddleston wears a “This is What a Feminist Looks Like” T-shirts for Elle Magazine’s feminism issue (December, 2014).
3. Actress Bethan Cullinane as Cordelia in the 2013-2014 Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre Production of *King Lear* (Act IV, scene iv). Returning as Queen Cordelia in Act IV, Cullinane wears the same dress she wore in Act I, both as Cordelia and as The Fool.
Appendix C

Script for Lear/Cordelia

1623 Theatre Company

Global Premiere 2016
Lear
Adapted from
King Lear
by Ben Spiller

Lear
is the first half of Lear/Cordelia
A double-bill that concludes with

Cordelia
by Farrah Chaudhry
SCENE 1 : FIRST VISIT

He is sitting in his chair.

Knock on the door. Pause.

Another knock. Pause.

The door opens. Enter Cordelia.

CORDELIA How do you, sir? How fare you?

LEAR You do me wrong to take me out of the grave:

You are a soul in bliss; but I am bound

Upon a wheel of fire, that my own tears

Do scald like molten lead.

CORDELIA Sir, do you know me?

LEAR You are a spirit, I know: when did you die?
Where have I been? Where am I? Fair daylight?

I am mightily abused. I should even die with pity,

To see another thus. I know not what to say.

I will not swear these are my hands: let's see;

I feel this pin prick. Would I were assured

Of my condition!

CORDELIA O, look upon me, sir.

LEAR Pray, do not mock me:

I am a very foolish fond old man,

Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;

And, to deal plainly,

I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
Methinks I should know you, and know this place;

Yet I am doubtful for I am mainly ignorant

What place this is; and all the skill I have

Remembers not these garments; nor I know not

Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;

For, as I am a man, I think this lady

To be my child Cordelia.

CORDELIA And so I am, I am.

LEAR Be your tears wet? Yes, in faith. I pray, weep not:

If you have poison for me, I will drink it.

I know you do not love me; for your sisters

Have, as I do remember, done me wrong:
You have some cause, they have not.

CORDELIA No cause, no cause.

LEAR Am I in France?

CORDELIA In England, sir.

LEAR Do not abuse me.

CORDELIA Will it please you to walk?

LEAR You must bear with me:

Pray you now, forget and forgive: I am old and foolish.

Lear and Cordelia walk together.

- 

We two alone will sing like birds in a cage. [Sings] La la la la, la-la-la-la-la-la

CORDELIA [Sings] La la la la la-la-la-la-la
LEAR [Sings] it raineth every day.

Fade.

2: STORM

Darkness.

LEAR [Sings] Every day.

Every day.

The rain it raineth every day.

The rain, the rain, the rain -

The sound of rain.

Every day,

Every day,

Every -
The sound of wind.

Hey ho, the wind and the rain

The wind and the rain

The wind, wind, winds -

*Flash of light, roll of thunder.*

*Lear is revealed in the shower. He is also in a raging tempest of wind, rain, thunder and lightning.*

LEAR Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow! You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout

Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks! You sulphurous and thought-executing fires, Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,

Singe my white head! And you, all-shaking thunder, Smite flat the thick rotundity of the world!

Crack nature's molds, and germens spill at once, That make ungrateful man!

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters: I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;

I never gave you fortune, called you children, You owe me no subscription: then let fall Your horrible pleasure: here I stand, your slave, A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man: But yet I call you servile ministers,

That have with two pernicious daughters joined Your high engendered battles against a head So old and white as this. O, O, tis foul!

I am a man more sinned against than sinning.

*Fade.*

3 : LOVE-TEST

Lear is alone, in his chair.

LEAR I am a man more sinned against than sinning.

More sinned against than sinning.
He looks through the items in his memory box and picks out a party hat in the shape of a crown. He puts it on his head.

Goneril, Regan and Cordelia appear. They wear similar hats. They are all at a party.

LEAR Can you tell why your nose stands in the middle of your face?

GONERIL No.

REGAN No.

CORDELIA No.

LEAR Why, to keep your eyes either side of your nose; that what a man cannot smell out, he may spy into.

GONERIL AND REGAN Ha ha ha!

LEAR Do you know why the seven stars are no more than seven?

GONERIL No.

REGAN No.
CORDELIA No.

LEAR Because they are not eight.

GONERIL AND REGAN Ha ha ha!

LEAR Ha ha ha!

Now, my daughters,

Let me express my darker purpose.

He reveals his will.

Know that I have divided In three my fortune:

In three - My fortune - My fortune - Divided -

My fortune divided

In three -

Three -
tis my fast intent To shake all cares and business from my age; Shake all cares -

All cares -

All - Cares - Shake.

Shake all cares,

Conferring them on younger strengths, while I Unburdened -

Unburdened -

While I unburdened crawl toward death. Tell me, my daughters,

Which of you does love me most? Love me most?

Love me? Love me. Tell me.

Tell me, my daughters,

Which of you does love me most, That I my largest bounty may extend

Where nature does with merit challenge? Goneril, My eldest-born,
Eldest-born - Eldest -

speak first.

Goneril -

Speak.

GONERIL Sir, I love you more than words

More than words

More than words

More than words

I love you more than words

More than words

Words

Words

I love you more than words can wield the matter;
Dearer than eye-sight, space, and liberty;

Beyond what can be valued.

I love you more than words.

Words,

Words,

Words,

Words.

LEAR From this line to this,

This to this,

I make you lady, Goneril -

Be this perpetual.

Per. Petual.
What says my second daughter,

My dearest Regan? Speak.

REGAN Sir, I am made

Of the self-same metal that my sister is,

And prize me at her worth.

Prize me.

Prize me.

Prize. Me.
Prize me at her worth.

Her worth -

Her worth?

I am made

Of the self-same metal that my sister is,

And prize me at her worth.

Only she comes too short:

I am alone felicitate

In my dear love.

Alone.

Alone felicitate -

Alone.
Alone

LEAR To you, to you, to you, Regan, to you

Remains this ample third of our fair fortune;

No less than that conferred on Goneril.

And now, our joy, our joy, our joy, our joy -

Although the last, not least; to whose young love

The land of France

of France, of Calais, France -

Strives to be interested; what can you say to draw

A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.

LEAR Nothing!
CORDELIA Nothing.

LEAR Nothing will come of nothing: speak again.

CORDELIA Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave

My heart into my mouth:

I cannot, I cannot -

I cannot heave

My heart into my mouth: I love you, father,

According to my bond; nor more nor less.

Nor more nor less.

No More. No Less.

No less. Less.

Less,
Less,

Less,

Nothing.

LEAR How, how, Cordelia! Mend your speech a little,

Mend it a little, mend it, mend your speech,

Lest it may mar your fortunes.

CORDELIA Good my father,

You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I

Return those duties back as are right fit,

Obey you, love you, and most honour you.

Why have my sisters husbands, if they say

They love you all?
They say, they say, they say they love you all.

Haply, when I shall wed,

That man whose hand must take my plight shall carry

Half my love with him, half my care and duty:

Half my love, my love, half, half, half half, half -

Half, half, half, half, half

Nothing.

LEAR But goes your heart with this?

CORDELIA Ay, good my lord.

LEAR So young, and so untender?

CORDELIA So young, my lord, and true.

LEAR Let it be so; your truth, then, be your fortune:
For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,

The mysteries of devils and the night;

By all the operation of the orbs

From whom we do exist, and cease to be;

Here I disclaim all my paternal care,

Propinquity and property of blood,

And as a stranger to my heart and me

Hold you, from this, forever.


I loved her most, and thought to set my rest

On her kind nursery. Goneril and Regan,

I do invest you jointly with my fortune.
Myself, by monthly course, shall my abode

Make with you by due turns.

CORDELIA  I beseech you -

LEAR  Better you

Had not been born than not to have pleased me better.

Go, get yourself to France, begone; for I

Have no such daughter, nor shall I ever see

That face of yours again. I say begone

Without my grace, my love, my blessing.

Fade.

4: SECOND VISIT

Lear is sitting up in bed, Cordelia by his side.
CORDELIA   Sir, do you know me?

LEAR   You are a spirit, I know: when did you die?

Where have I been? Where am I? Fair daylight?

I am mightily abused. I should even die with pity,

To see another thus. I know not what to say.

Would I were assured of my condition!

I am a very foolish fond old man,

Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;

And, to deal plainly,

I fear I am not in my perfect mind.

Methinks I should know you, and know this place;

Yet I am doubtful for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is; and all the skill I have

Remembers not these garments; nor I know not

Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;

For, as I am a man, I think this lady

To be

CORDELIA Your child, Cordelia.

LEAR And so you are, you are.

We two alone will sing like birds in a cage. [Sings] La la la la, la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la

CORDELIA [Sings]  LEAR [Sings]

Hey, ho

CORDELIA [Sings]  the wind and the rain.

La la la la, la-la-la-la-la
For the rain it raineth every day.

La la la la, la-la-la-la-la

LEAR [Sings], CORDELIA [Sings]  the wind and the rain.

La la la la, la-la-la-la-la

For the rain it raineth every day.

LEAR [Sings], CORDELIA [Sings]  raineth every day.

For the rain it -

Fade.

5: PARTY

Lear switches on his radio.

Music plays. It is the same tune as the wind and rain song.

Lear picks up his memory box, finds a blue rosette inside and wears it. He pours himself a whisky and drinks it.
He is transported to election night when his party won.

A genteel gathering with a few of his friends turns into a riotous celebration with lots of rowdy people, until -

LEAR Are you my daughter?

GONERIL Come, sir, I wish you would put away

These dispositions, that of late transform you

From what you rightly are.

LEAR Does anyone here know me? This is not Lear:

Does Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes?

Either his notion weakens, his discernings

Are lethargied - is not so.

Who is it that can tell me who I am?
GONERIL Lear's shadow.

LEAR Your name, fair gentlewoman?

GONERIL This admiration, sir, is much of the savour

Of your other new pranks. I do beseech you

To understand my purposes aright:

As you are old and reverend, you should be wise.

You should be wise. You should. You should be wise.

Here in my house you live and keep your friends;

Men so disordered, so debauched and bold,

That this my home, infected with their manners,

Shows like a riotous inn: epicurism and lust

Make it more like a tavern or a brothel.
The shame itself does speak

For instant remedy: be then desired

By me, that else will take the thing I beg,

A little to remove your friends.

LEAR Hear, nature, hear; dear goddess, hear!

Suspend your purpose, if you did intend

To make this creature fruitful!

Into her womb convey sterility!

Dry up in her the organs of increase;

And from her degenerate body never spring

A babe to honour her! If she must teem,

Create her child of spleen; that it may live,
And be a thwart disnatured torment to her!

Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth;

With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks;

Turn all her mother's pains and benefits

To laughter and contempt; that she may feel

How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is

To have a thankless child!

Life and death! I am ashamed

That you have power to shake my manhood thus;

That these hot tears, which break from me perforce,

Should make you worth them. Blasts and fogs upon you!

The untented woundings of a father's curse
Pierce every sense about you! Old fond eyes,

Beweep this cause again, I'll pluck ye out,

And cast you, with the waters that you lose,

To temper clay. Yea, it is come to this?

Let it be so: yet have I left a daughter,

Who, I am sure, is kind and comfortable:

When she shall hear this of you, with her nails

She'll flay your wolvish visage. You shall find

That I'll resume the shape which you did think

I have cast off for ever: you shall,

I warrant thee. Away, away, away!

_Goneril disappears._
LEAR I have another daughter. Regan?

Regan appears.

REGAN I am glad to see you, father.

LEAR Regan, I think you are; I know what reason

I have to think so: if you should not be glad,

I would divorce me from your mother s tomb,

Sepulchring an adultress. Beloved Regan,

Thy sister's naught: O Regan, she hath tied

Sharp-tooth'd unkindness, like a vulture, here:

With how depraved a quality - O Regan!

REGAN I pray you, sir, take patience: I have hope. I cannot think my sister in the least
Would fail her obligation: if, sir, perchance She has restrained the riots of your friends,

O such wholesome end, As clears her from all blame.

LEAR My curses on her!

REGAN O, sir, you are old.

Nature in you stands on the very verge

Of her confine: you should be ruled and led

By some discretion, that discerns your state

Better than you yourself. Therefore, I pray you,

That to my sister you do make return;

Say you have wronged her, sir.

LEAR Ask her forgiveness?

Do you but mark how this becomes the house: 'Dear daughter, I confess that I am old;
Age is unnecessary: on my knees I beg

That you'll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food.'

REGAN Good sir, no more; these are unsightly tricks:

Return you to my sister.

LEAR Never, Regan:

She hath abated me of my friends;

Looked evil at me; struck me with her tongue,

Most serpent-like, upon the very heart:

All the stored vengeances of heaven fall

On her ingrateful top! Strike her young bones,

You taking airs, with lameness!

REGAN O the blessed gods! So will you wish on me,
When the rash mood is on.

LEAR No, Regan, you shall never have my curse:

Your tender-hefted nature shall not give

You over to harshness: her eyes are fierce; but yours

Do comfort and not burn. 'Tis not in you

To grudge my pleasures, to cut off my friends

Goneril appears.


Are you not ashamed to look upon me?

GONERIL How have I offended?

REGAN I pray you, father,

If, till the expiration of the month,
You will return and stay with my sister,

Dismissing your friends, come then to me.

LEAR Dismiss my friends? I gave you all -

REGAN And in good time you gave it.

LEAR Made you my guardians -

REGAN You will return and stay with my sister.

LEAR Return to her, and my friends dismissed?

No, rather I abjure all roofs, and choose

To wage against the enmity of the air;

To be a comrade with the wolf and owl,

Necessity's sharp pinch! Return with her?

Persuade me rather to live with neither.
Neither, neither, I will live with neither.

GONERIL At your choice, sir.

REGAN Your choice.

GONERIL AND REGAN At your choice, sir.

LEAR You unnatural hags,

I will have such revenges on you both,

That all the world shall - I will do such things,

What they are, yet I know not: but they shall be

The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep:

No, I'll not weep:

I have full cause of weeping; but this heart

Shall break into a hundred thousand pieces,
Before I'll weep.

Goneril and Regan disappear.

- 

I I I

I am a man more sinned against than sinning.

*Fade.*

**8: DOGS**

Lear has turned his bed onto its side.

He sits on the floor with his back against the bed.

He is also sitting on the grass in a park.

A storm is gathering.

Three dogs appear.

LEAR Tray, Blanche, and Sweet-heart!
Unaccommodated men are no more but poor, bare animals as you are. Unaccommodated man is

Unaccommodated man, Unaccommodated. Unaccom

No accom  No accommo

No accommodation. No home.

No  Nothing.

The storm picks up.

Tray transforms into Goneril, Blanche into Regan and Sweet-heart into Cordelia.

CORDELIA Nothing!

GONERIL I love you more than words.

REGAN I am alone.

CORDELIA Nothing!
GONERIL I love you more than words.

REGAN I am alone.

LEAR Avaunt, you curs!

Make no noise, make no noise; draw the curtains:

Draw them, draw the curtains!

Avaunt! Avaunt! Avaunt!

Goneril, Regan and Cordelia transform back into the dogs.

Tray, Blanche, and Sweet-heart!

Sweet-heart, Sweet-heart.

Tray and Blanche disappear.

Sweet-heart, I loved you most.

You.
Sweet-heart.

*Sweet-heart transforms into Cordelia.*

*The storm passes.*

CORDELIA I love you, father,

I love you, father,

I love you,

I love you,

I love you father,

According to my bond;

My bond,

My bond.

I love you according to my bond;
Nor more, nor less.

Fade.

9 : THIRD VISIT

Lear is lying down in bed, Cordelia by his side.

CORDELIA  Sir, do you know me?

LEAR You are a spirit, I know: when did you die?

Where have I been? Where am I?

Where am I? France? England?

CORDELIA  In England, sir.

LEAR Methinks I should know you. I should know you.

I should.
I

But - We two alone will sing, we will sing,

Sing,

Sing like birds. Birds. In a In a

In a

CORDELIA In a cage?

LEAR A cage? A cage.

Are we in prison?

Forgive? Forget?

CORDELIA Forgive. Forget.

We two alone will sing like birds. We will sing.

[Sings] La la la la, la-la-la-la-la

LEAR [Sings], CORDELIA [Sings] the wind and the rain.

La la la la, la-la-la-la-la
For the rain it raineth every day.
La la la la la, la-la-la-la-la

LEAR [Sings] -

CORDELIA [Sings] the wind and the rain
La la la la -

CORDELIA AND LEAR [Sing] la-la-la-la-la

CORDELIA [Sings] For the rain it raineth every day.

Every day, the rain it raineth every day.

_Fade._
Cordelia

Written By

Farrah Chaudhry for 1623 Theatre Company LTD

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

Cordelia
Female, around 30
Junior Doctor, leftie

Lear
Male, around 80
Retired Tory Cabinet Member

STORY

Cordelia is trapped. She must free herself.
CORDELIA

A room, within it, open boxes and suitcases. An armchair, a small filing cabinet next to it, with keys hanging from the keyhole. Cordelia busily packs. Lear walks in with a shirt.

CORDELIA: We’re going to be late!

LEAR: I never did like this old thing.

CORDELIA: It’s already half past.

LEAR: Don’t worry, it’ll be half past again in an hour.

CORDELIA: Very funny(!)

LEAR: I’m not trying to be funny. I am trying to pack. Isn’t that the delightful activity we have before us today?!

CORDELIA: Well, the quicker you do it…

LEAR: Quick? There’s no quick about it! There are decades of things swimming around. I don’t know what to take, what to leave…

CORDELIA: You can take anything you want.
LEAR: Well…not anything. There are restrictions.

CORDELIA: No. None. You can take anything.

LEAR: Isn’t that a turn up for the books? Where’s my complete works of George Elliot(?)

CORDELIA: OK, so maybe not everything. You can come back for anything at any time. At least until arrangements are made for the house. All your RAF stuff is still in boxes in the attic.

LEAR: My what?

CORDELIA: Your RAF things. Your uniform and medals. You need to sort through that at some point. It’s all in the attic.

LEAR: Ah. Is it? I haven’t looked at those things in years.

CORDELIA: You can have them all moved across. You have a really, really big room there.

LEAR: A whole room? You’re spoiling me(!)

CORDELIA: Now, start folding.
LEAR: (Sighs) Folding. Is there anything on God’s planet more antagonising?

CORDELIA: Come on, I’ll help you. Let’s do it together.

LEAR: Ah – together… Such a strange word. Implies a joint effort – a partnership – but it also frees you of any obligation. We are all in it together until one of us decides that is no longer the case, therein freeing us from any duty. Freeing us from any loyalty. Then it’s eat or be eaten.

CORDELIA: You have a way of making everything sound so… barbaric. Some of us are not that self-obsessed. Some of us actually do want to help. And do things together.

*She picks up the shirt he came in with, folds it and puts it in his suitcase.*

LEAR: I see what you did there. Very clever(!)

*She picks up an empty box and leaves the room. Lear walks to the filing cabinet and takes the hanging keys. He walks to the front door and double locks it. As Cordelia reappears, he quickly puts the keys away in his pocket.*

CORDELIA: We have too many things.
LEAR: So, really, when you said I could take anything, what you meant was that I could take anything I wanted to take, providing it can be confined to this small thing?! My whole life. In this little bag.

CORDELIA: This is a time for new beginnings. Maybe the things you want to hold onto aren’t worth taking?

She directs him to a pile of clothes that need folding, whilst picking up a smaller bag and walking to the door to open it – but it’s locked, she tries again before giving up.

CORDELIA: (Cont.) Everything in this house seems to be falling apart.

LEAR: One more night.

CORDELIA: What?

LEAR: Your breakfast was just like it used to be. You make your eggs just the same. A little too runny for me but…palatable. Most of the time.

CORDELIA: You’ve never liked my eggs. Regan was the one who did your eggs to perfection. Beggars can’t be choosers, I guess?

LEAR: Just one more breakfast.
CORDELIA: Dad, we’ve already talked about this.

LEAR: About your eggs?


CORDELIA: This isn’t my home. Not anymore.

LEAR: It’s our home.

CORDELIA: It’s theirs. Just like everything else.

LEAR: They’re your sisters. Whatever’s happened, they do love you.

CORDELIA: I haven’t given them cause not to.

LEAR: We’re all still tied together. Even though we are all apart. This home…this house could be the thing that brings us all together again. Don’t you think?

CORDELIA: I see. And how long have you been cooking this up?

LEAR: It has to. This is where it all began.
CORDELIA: I’m sure they will come and see you…visit you. I’m sure they will. I’ll talk to them. We’ll need to find something to talk about.

LEAR: I’m not an animal at a zoo. I don’t need visiting.

CORDELIA: You need help, dad. We all agree you need help.

LEAR: Oh it’s a collective ‘we’ is it? Sending your father away has brought you three together, has it?

CORDELIA: I’ve only been talking to them about finalising things at Heathfield. That’s it. I have no other interest in either of them.

LEAR: You have really turned your back on everything, haven’t you?

CORDELIA: On the contrary, I have come back to the one place I always said I wouldn’t. And I will keep coming back. For you. You need to look to the future dad… and that starts today. Let’s get you settled in at Heathfield.

LEAR: Settled?! Hah. It’s not my first day at nursery. I am very capable of settling myself in, thank you very much.

*Cordelia tries to open the door again. She realises it’s locked.*
CORDELIA: Dad? Is this locked?

LEAR: ‘A locked door - no, no, an UNLOCKED door - means that sometimes – er…I mean occasionally, occasionally you might get a devil come in’. Yes that’s right… Some American said that.

CORDELIA: What are you talking about?

LEAR: Devils. The world is filled with them.

CORDELIA: Yes, I’d think the same if I spent most of my life in the Tory party.

LEAR: This country is what it is because of us.

CORDELIA: I know. That’s why I don’t live here!

LEAR: We are the most powerful country in the world. You’d do well to understand your roots. You’re so quick to judge and mock.

CORDELIA: I’m not getting into this with you. Not now.

LEAR: Why? What have you got against now?
CORDELIA: I am not here to discuss my life choices with you. Why I am the way that I am. Why I am not like Goneril or Regan. Why I went off and did my own thing. Where’re the keys?

LEAR: If not now then, when? When will you have some time for me?

CORDELIA: When I don’t have a flight to catch. We need to start loading the car so we can see what’s what.

LEAR: We will never see what’s what. Not from there. Once we step foot out of that door, that’s it.

CORDELIA: What’s ‘it’?

LEAR: I’m not prepared to let everything change. Just because of one… one stupid unlocked door.

CORDELIA: You’ve known this was coming for a while, dad.

LEAR: I don’t want to go.

CORDELIA: I need to go. If I don’t leave with my team, I’ll be stuck. They have all my paperwork. You of all people should know how bureaucratic the borders can be.
LEAR: Don’t they know whose daughter you are?!

CORDELIA: I am just me.

LEAR: That’s where you’re wrong. You will never be just you.

CORDELIA: We enter the world alone and we die alone.

LEAR: When did you become so cynical?

CORDELIA: I’m not. I am just telling you that we are all our own people. You wouldn’t understand.

LEAR: Enlighten me.

Beat.

CORDELIA: There…there really isn’t much to say. You wouldn’t understand.

LEAR: That’s twice you’ve said that now. Don’t patronise me.

CORDELIA: You think that we are all the same. You, me, Goneril, Regan…you think we all think the same, feel the same. But we don’t. You think that we should all just sing
and chirp in the same cage, together. Eat from the same dish, drink from the same water.

But we can’t. We can’t do that. What would happen if everyone did that?

LEAR: You feel trapped? You think you’re in a cage?

CORDELIA: No…I don’t. Definitely not. But that is what you want. You want us all to line up and be the same. Like an army.

LEAR: You’re full of analogies today!

CORDELIA: I told you, you wouldn’t understand.

LEAR: Oh I understand. I understand perfectly. You are nothing like the others. You made it your life’s work to get away. To be free. Free like a bird. Ah - I’ve given you one now!

CORDELIA: I didn’t make it my life’s work. I just followed my calling.

LEAR: Has it become that difficult to talk to me? To look at me?

CORDELIA: I can come back. But for now, I…need to get out of here.

LEAR: Go there or get out of here? They’re two different things, you know.
CORDELIA:  I will come back. I did this time didn’t I?

LEAR: We all know why you came back. And it wasn’t for me. It’s a strange thing. The conscience. Has the power to destroy any man. Or woman. Sorry. I know how funny you get about being PC.

CORDELIA:  I came back. For you. I stayed in this house. Even though you know how much I detest it. I did this…for you. I promised myself when I left, I would never come back to this place. And even then…I waited. All these years I waited for you. A phone call, a message, a sorry. Remorse. Love. Anything. I wanted for you to move towards me an inch…just an inch. I would have forgotten everything.

LEAR: Ah. This house. This room. A lot of darkness. A lot of lightness. Do you remember it? These walls… Remember we used to play hide and seek? Right here? You and me… your sisters used to run up and tell me where you’d hidden. Just to spoil it. But I still pretended I didn’t know. Walked around the house, in every room, knowing exactly where you were. Because I cared. You see? That’s the difference between us.

CORDELIA:  I cared. I still do.

LEAR: Why do you detest these walls of memories? That’s a very strong word for someone like you….a tree hugger.
CORDELIA: These rooms are like giants to a small girl. I never wanted any of it. I just wanted my dad.

LEAR: I am here. Now.

CORDELIA: Things are different now. I have my own life.

LEAR: I know you care about what you do and the difference you make out there. But you can do that here…with me. For me. I don’t need them. They will leave me to rot. Do what you do out there, so well, here. Care for me. Care for your father. Stay…

CORDELIA: Care for you?

LEAR: You’re already doing it. Just pick yourself up from that side of the world, and place yourself here, in front of me. So that I can see you…always. And you can mend me.

CORDELIA: No.

LEAR: What do you mean, no?!

CORDELIA: I can’t just drop everything, dad. I have commitments. You’re in safe hands here. The people out there – they are alone.
LEAR: You think I’m not alone?

CORDELIA: These places, they’re state of the art. You’ll get everything you need. You’ve got your pension... You’ll be taken care of.

LEAR: State of the art... what every old man wants(!)

CORDELIA: You’ll want for nothing.

LEAR: I want you. I need you.

CORDELIA: You’ve never needed anything apart from your ironed suits.

LEAR: You’re not yourself. Clearly whatever you’re involved with out there has affected you. Scarred you mentally.

CORDELIA: The only scars I have are from you.

LEAR: Nonsense! They’ve done this to you. You are not the way you were back then.

CORDELIA: What was I like back then?

LEAR: You... you were sweet. You were kind. Like you said... you... you wanted me. You wanted your father.
CORDELIA: Is that how you remember it? You remember my sweetness?

LEAR: I…of course I do.

CORDELIA: Is that why you’ve spent the last decade trying to make me come home(?) You had so many chances. But it is me, who came back for you, dad. I chose to come back for you. But don’t make me choose between my life out there and you. Not again. My life is in France.

LEAR: You are in control. That’s what this is all about. You like being in control.

She goes to open the door again. She is frustrated. She looks around for the keys.

CORDELIA: Where are the keys, dad? We’re going to be late.

LEAR: What’s a few more hours? What’s one more night? A week? You can leave later…

CORDELIA: People are relying on me.

LEAR: I am relying on you. This time don’t make the same mistake.

CORDELIA: Mistake? You think taking control of my life was a mistake?!
LEAR: No one is ever really in control. You do know that?

CORDELIA: Is that why you’re angry? Because you can’t control me anymore?

LEAR: I’m not angry. I’m passionate. There’s a difference.

CORDELIA: Then don’t fight me. This is my passion.

LEAR: You don’t understand what you need right now.

CORDELIA: You’re driving me mad!

LEAR: Don’t be mad. You have your whole life ahead of you. Don’t spoil it with madness.

CORDELIA: I’m not a little girl anymore. This isn’t my house anymore. You made sure of that, remember?

LEAR: I did no such thing.

CORDELIA: You just couldn’t handle it. Me, out there, actually helping people. Why help people when you can help yourself. Right?
LEAR: If you want to keep telling yourself that’s the real reason, be my guest. But we both know the real reason you left.

CORDELIA: I’m not like you. I don’t have a hidden agenda.

LEAR: Oh my dear - we all have a hidden agenda. We are walking, talking, well-dressed animals. We are driven by instinct, we just dress it up with lies and... and... false morality! None of us really say what we feel. We are consumed by expectation and pretence. We do what we think the world wants us to. We smile into the cameras and hide what’s fundamentally keeping our hearts beating. We hide what’s deep inside, the things that cripple us. The things that drive us to madness.

CORDELIA: I’m not you. I am not an animal. I don’t fill myself with poison. Everything here is poisoned.

LEAR: You mean I am poisoned?

CORDELIA: Don’t put words in my mouth.

LEAR: WELL THEN DON’T LIE! SAY WHAT YOU MEAN.

CORDELIA: I know that deep down you’re a good person.
LEAR: Ha! Deep deep down? That Lear, you have to dig for a century before you can find an ounce of good in him(!)

CORDELIA: I mean, you just hide it well. You just said so yourself. You pretend to be something you’re not.

LEAR: And what’s that?

CORDELIA: Cruel. You pretend to be cruel. Maybe it’s easier to be like that. Maybe it’s easier with the people you surround yourself with. Or maybe it’s those people that have made you like this.

LEAR: Maybe you are right. Maybe it is a façade. And really inside, I am a concoction of empathy, merry-go-rounds and all things warm. So what does that make you? What’s your façade? This…nobleness…charity…playing the good Samaritan…what are you hiding, child? What evil is there inside of you, that you’re keeping from us?

CORDELIA: I won’t validate that with a response.

LEAR: You just have!

He laughs.
LEAR: (Cont.) Your lack of response says it all my dear. Your ‘nothing’, your silence, your ingratitude, it all speaks volumes.

CORDELIA: I will always be grateful to you. For giving me everything that you have. But my silence does not say the things you think it does. I am not accountable for the way you feel. I will not be accountable for the way you feel.

LEAR: Are you trying to convince me or yourself?

Beat.

LEAR: (Cont.) So do you get to walk away scott-free?

CORDELIA: I am not walking away.

LEAR: So are you staying? Is that advantage point to me or to you?

CORDELIA: This is not a game. I’m going home, that doesn’t mean I’m walking away.

LEAR: Why are you so drawn to them? Is it their smell? Smell of war, smell of damp, smell of poverty. It’s disgusting isn’t it? Their smell. Like some of them don’t even know what water is.

CORDELIA: They don’t. They don’t have anything.
LEAR: Except you. They have you. And what did they do to deserve you? Did they feed you? Change you, bathe you. Did they educate you? Did they spend nights at your bedside when you were sick?

CORDELIA: Love isn’t conditional. Love those who need to be loved the most. That’s what you always said.

LEAR: I didn’t mean them! I meant me…us…this house. This us. If here is poisoned, stay and fix it.
CORDELIA: You’ve become selfish.

LEAR: I am me. Isn’t that what you said? We are what we are. I have always been me. And there is me inside of you. You just refuse to see it.

CORDELIA: I don’t have this darkness in me…like you have. This hatred of anything and anyone different.

LEAR: You think you got to where you are without me? I have made you.

CORDELIA: Yes, you have…and you did bathe me, and feed me and educate me…but for what? To lock me in this room? Just to get your way?
A moment of realisation. Lear looks for his keys but has forgotten where he put them, after a few moments of shuffling around for them, he finally finds them and places them onto the cabinet. He sits down on the chair. Cordelia goes to him and sits on the floor next to him, placing her hand on his.

LEAR: I was always going to let you out, there was no need for melodrama. I just wanted you to be still. Just for a moment. Before you went off again.

CORDELIA: Is there....anything you want me to take? Or have?

LEAR: You take what you want to take. You seem to want to leave most of it behind. So be it.

CORDELIA: You want me to remember my roots, don’t you? Why don’t you give me something so that I can remember you each time I look at it?

Lear shuffles through his things. He can’t find anything he wants to give to Cordelia. He is frustrated.

LEAR: What can I give to you? What do you want with my old things?!

LEAR: Like what?

CORDELIA: Like us playing hide and seek.

She takes out a diary and looks through it.

CORDELIA: (Cont.) I kept a diary of all of those moments. No matter how insignificant they seemed at the time. Right now - to me - they’re as big as the world.

Lear thinks of something he can give to Cordelia and excitedly searches for it. He digs out a neatly folded party hat and hands it to Cordelia. She pauses for a moment before taking it.

LEAR: Do you remember this hat? You made me wear it at my 69th. No... actually it was before that. Was it 2004 or 2005... It was the last party before you -

CORDELIA: (Interrupting) I remember it.

LEAR: That was a great party.

She nods uncomfortably and puts the hat down, reluctant to pack it.

LEAR: (Cont.) You miss being home.
CORDELIA: I do think of home. But I don’t miss it. I’ve moved on. I had no choice. You left me with no choice.

LEAR: Now’s your chance to start again. You do have the choice now.

CORDELIA: Now my hands are tied even more. I can’t stay here knowing what’s going on out there.

She packs away her diary neatly wrapping it within a sheet.

LEAR: Ah – I would give you one of my medals but I have no idea where my RAF box is. I’m sure it was here somewhere.

CORDELIA: It’s in the attic.

LEAR: Really? I haven’t seen those things in years. You used to make me present the medals to you. Pretend you were in the RAF.

CORDELIA: I don’t remember that. You’ve never told me that…

LEAR: There’s a lot you don’t know. You just remember the things you want to remember. I used to sit in this room. All by myself. Night after night. I’d watch the sun go down in that window. And some days, I’d even see the first rays of light in the morning. Just sit. Still.
CORDELIA: You don’t have to stay here. If you think there are too many memories, you could always move somewhere else. We could get you transferred somewhere.

Beat.

CORDELIA: (Cont.) Maybe to the sea! They have some great places by the sea. You don’t have anything holding you to this place.

LEAR: Hmph. You’re young, you think you can traipse around the world without anything leaving its mark on you. You have no sense of belonging. No sense of who you really are. THIS is who you really are! This house…it speaks to us. How can we leave it when we belong to it?

Lear takes out a small wallet from his suitcase and takes some photos out of it, he hands these to Cordelia, she looks through them.

LEAR: (Cont.) All of these things…all of these moments…they’re here. In your home.

CORDELIA: These are so old. Can’t believe you still have them. What other things are you holding so close to your heart that I can’t see?

Beat.
CORDELIA: (Cont.) This house is just bricks to me. I’ve stayed in places for less than a week that I would call home before this place. That’s what the world does to you. Puts everything into perspective. Don’t you want that? You don’t even have to leave the country to see the world. Leaving this town would be a start. Don’t you…don’t you want change?

LEAR: A new beginning? Maybe. Especially if you and I had another chance. A chance to make up for all of those years.

CORDELIA: You’re asking me to choose between you and doing what I have to do. I was born to do this.

LEAR: Oh stop it. You are not some sort of… of… you are not some sort of prophet. You’re my daughter. My only daughter. You were wrong - I don’t want the three of you all lined up in front of me. I only want you.

CORDELIA: No…you’re only saying this because they’ve left you.

LEAR: It doesn’t matter now because you’re here.

CORDELIA: Do you even know what goes on outside your bubble?

LEAR: There has been civil unrest since the start of time. It’s not your job to end it.
CORDELIA: You haven’t asked me about where I’ve been, what I’ve done, what I’ve seen.

LEAR: Yes, yes I know all about the Gulf war and the innocent people you’re having to treat.

CORDELIA: You’re getting confused again, dad. That was years ago.

LEAR: What was?

CORDELIA: The Gulf war.

LEAR: Of course it was. Do you think I’m stupid?

CORDELIA: Can’t you stand the fact that I’m making something of myself? Can’t you stand that I’m not just your shadow?

LEAR: You think because you treated a few foreigners in a hospital, that makes you something?

CORDELIA: I don’t claim to be anything. But I’ve seen things you couldn’t even see in your worst nightmares. I was strong when I left home. You throwing me out didn’t break me, in fact, it made me stronger. Made me more determined to prove you wrong. Sorry if that’s disappointed you, but it’s the truth. When we got to France, we couldn’t stop, we
just kept going. That determination inside us was enormous. From train to train, bus to bus. Something just kept us going. We knew we were needed. We knew it would be dangerous. But we just had to keep going. And you know, the other doctors I was with, they didn’t have to say anything. Neither did I. It was like we were reading each other’s minds. We stayed on the road until our French GCSEs couldn’t help us anymore. We stayed until all we could hear was the screams and the bombs.

*Lear is confused.*

**LEAR:** I thought you were placed in…. in France? YOU SAID YOU WERE ONLY AT THE CAMPS!

**CORDELIA:** I told you what you wanted to hear. I knew your small mind couldn’t take it.

**LEAR:** You? In a war zone? Of course I couldn’t take it!

**CORDELIA:** It made me feel alive. I’ve never felt that here.

**LEAR:** You lied to me. I wouldn’t have let you go if I’d known.

**CORDELIA:** You mean you wouldn’t have thrown me out?

**LEAR:** I didn’t throw you out!
CORDELIA: Well you made it perfectly clear that if I didn’t choose Politics like the others, I wouldn’t be a part of this family.

LEAR: You could have stayed.

CORDELIA: Under your control? Yeah, a great success I would have turned out to be(!) A mediocre right-wing Politian? Not believing a word coming out of her mouth? Responsible for killing all the poor?

LEAR: You would have been safe.

CORDELIA: Well, who cares who we kill as long as we’re safe(?) What if I don’t want to be? The whole world out there is being torn apart. Why should I be safe? People’s lives are being destroyed. If I’m not one of those people then I should be doing whatever I can to help. I’m a doctor. What use am I if I am ‘safe’?

LEAR: What use will you be dead? Blown up by those animals?

CORDELIA: The people I help are not animals. They are human. They are like you and me.

LEAR: Ha. They are nothing like us.
CORDELIA: They breathe, they hurt, they laugh, they cry, they protect, they bleed. Just like us. They are innocent. They are tortured. This one hospital I was placed at… I remember this boy being rushed in… his two older brothers brought him in. God only knows how, they couldn’t have been older than 10 themselves. Anyway, the youngest boy had been hurt badly when their street got bombed. His brothers were just walking around the ward looking for answers. I had to tell them both that their brother had died. I mean…I still don’t know how I managed to find the words, let alone speak them… how do you say something like that to two little boys? And then watch them as they hear those words… as they process what’s happened. Their little faces breaking, completely wet with tears. But they were quiet - quiet tears. They just walked over to their brother’s body… and kissed his forehead again and again. Gently… I suppose they didn’t want to hurt him. It was almost like they had been preparing for this for years. Then their mother walked in. She took her dead son in her arms and walked out with him... onto the street. Tight against her chest. His lifeless body just tightly against her chest. We all followed, urging her to bring him back. She said that she just needed a minute, she could ‘lift’ him again - she could wake him up. Imagine holding your dead son in your arms, just limbs and blood, convinced that he would wake up.

Beat.

LEAR: You shouldn’t have seen that.

CORDELIA: Why? What makes me so special?
LEAR: You have done more than your share.

CORDELIA: It’s not over yet. I could have saved him. I should have saved him.

LEAR: Why don’t you have this urgency for me? For this country? For our great nation? There are plenty of helpless people here.

CORDELIA: I’m sorry, I must have missed class when they taught doctors to tell children under 10 that their brother has died(!) I mustn’t have been in when they talked about how to deal with a bunch of kids who’d just been bombed(!)

LEAR: Looks like you’ve made up your mind.

CORDELIA: My mind was made up before I even came back. Staying was never an option. I came to help you sort things out. I have to leave…tonight.

LEAR: The longer I sit here, with you, the smaller I become. Like people that look like ants from up above. You are going higher and higher. And I am becoming smaller and smaller.

CORDELIA: How can you say that? I came back for you.

LEAR: Am I supposed to be grateful? You’re a glorified chaperone. Transporting me to my future and then washing your hands of it.
CORDELIA: You always knew I was never going to stay.

LEAR: Do you know how long ants live? About 20 years. No… not 20. Er… 15. Yes, that’s right. Ants live 15 years. Surprising isn’t it? What must they do for 15 long years? Mind you, they do walk around in armies don’t they?

He holds her face and brings it close to his.

LEAR: (Cont.) You don’t see me anymore do you?

CORDELIA: I see you everywhere I go. Your face in all those towns and villages. In all those people. No matter how far I go, I can’t leave your face behind.

LEAR: Well, I am sorry for any inconvenience caused(!)

CORDELIA: You should be. You owe me that at least.

Beat.

CORDELIA: (Cont.) You stole from me. I could have had everything.

LEAR: So stay. We can start again. I’d have another ten years in me at least if you were with me!
CORDELIA: You know you still haven’t apologised to me… you still haven’t said sorry for what you did.

LEAR: I have nothing to apologise for.

CORDELIA: Give me one inch… that’s all I want. Acceptance. Realisation. Regret.

LEAR: I don’t live in regret. That’s for the weak. I am not weak.

CORDELIA: I should know you. But I just don’t.

She shuts a suitcase, picks it up and drags it towards the door. Lear moves to stand in her way.

LEAR: Why did you come back?

CORDELIA: Dad, please. We need to go. I need to take you.

LEAR: Why? I need you to tell me why.

CORDELIA: You know why. You weren’t well, we needed to move you into your new home.
LEAR: We both know that’s not the real reason. I need you to say it to…you need to utter those words. To me. Now.

*He grabs her arms with urgency. She drops the suitcase. There’s a struggle between them.*

CORDELIA: LET ME GO! That’s why I came back. So that you could let me go.

He lets go of her. He takes her suitcase and puts it by the door. Lear is defeated.

LEAR: You were already free. You didn’t have to come back to rub salt to the wound.

CORDELIA: I was never free. Not inside…not really. All these years I’ve been trying to break free. Even at school…I was always the one getting expelled. Not the others…Me. All these years.

LEAR: You were getting expelled because you were an imbecile. Nothing do to with anything else.

CORDELIA: I had spirit. I have spirit.

LEAR: What will spirit do for you when your conscience catches up with you?

CORDELIA: My conscience is clear.
LEAR: Your conscience – my dear – is what’s trying to break free.

Cordelia ignores this and walks to the filing cabinet next to Leah’s chair and opens the top drawer, emptying its contents to pack, including some legal documents. She opens them up to look through them.

CORDELIA: What’s this?

LEAR: What?

CORDELIA: What are these papers?

She reads the documents.

CORDELIA: (Cont.) What have you done?

LEAR: That’s a rather peculiar question. Can you be more specific? A little nudge in the right direction wouldn’t go amiss(!)

CORDELIA: Goneril and Regan have power of attorney?

LEAR: Ah! That. Well I would have loved to have given it to you but you were sunning yourself miles and miles away(!)
CORDELIA: This isn’t funny.

LEAR: I’m not laughing.

CORDELIA: When did this happen?

LEAR: I… I don’t remember. It was a while ago. I… I had to. I just had to.

CORDELIA: They threw you out, dad… neither of them wanted you to live with them and they only want power of attorney because –

She bites her tongue.

LEAR: They have everything already. What difference does power of attorney make?!

CORDELIA: It makes all the difference… technically everything is still yours. But they can change that.

LEAR: Nothing is mine.

CORDELIA: No… everything is still yours, and that’s how it will stay. I will talk to them. I will make sure they do the right thing. They have to.
LEAR: Whether they take everything now or later, makes no difference to me. It’s just names on a piece of paper.

CORDELIA: How are you financing Heathfield?

LEAR: I beg your pardon?!

CORDELIA: How are you paying for it?

LEAR: I didn’t realise I was on trial.

CORDELIA: Dad?

LEAR: I have a handsome pension. God knows I’ve served this country long enough.

CORDELIA: How handsome? They don’t know about it do they?

LEAR: What do you mean, child? Of course they do. I can’t deal with these forms they make you fill in. They do all that from whichever ivory towers they reside.

CORDELIA: And what if – what if they take your pension off you?!

LEAR: (Interrupts) They’ll do no such thing!
CORDELIA: How can you be so naïve?

Lear spots an opportunity to convince her to stay.

LEAR: Well…if you’re so traumatised by it, why don’t we transfer power of attorney to you?

CORDELIA: We can’t…besides, even if we could, I don’t want that. I don’t want that power over your money.

LEAR: But you care enough to think of what might happen? There’s only one way to make sure that I am taken care of…

CORDELIA: No… I… they will take care of you. And if they don’t, we can look at the legalities then.

LEAR: I see. So clinically put.

*Lear goes through one of his boxes.*

LEAR: (Cont.) Funny how objects and things can live forever. You just tidily pack them away. Cover them up, years and years later, you uncover them and it’s as if they’re brand new.
CORDELIA: The things that suit you. And the things that don’t? They don’t last. Not in the end. Even now, after all these years you still -

LEAR: I still what?

CORDELIA: Wasn’t it enough that they had all your money? How can I…how can I go like this?

LEAR: I know why you left. You stopped knowing what it was to be my daughter. But you can learn again. We can make new memories.

CORDELIA: I have always been your daughter.

LEAR: How much?

CORDELIA: What?

LEAR: How much are you my daughter? How much of you is mine? How much of you is theirs?

CORDELIA: I don’t have to answer that!

He takes the party hat from the side and puts it on in a bid to make her smile. A moment of realisation for Cordelia. She stares at him – remembering the last time he wore it.
CORDELIA: (Cont.) You’ll never change, will you?

Beat.

CORDELIA: It was your 68th. 68 candles for 68 brave years. I remember you…sitting there with that stupid thing on. I don’t think you blinked the entire time. I wondered then if your eyes were made of stone. I should have let go of you then. Right when you let go of me.

LEAR: I… I am inside you. Why are you looking for reasons to make me smaller and smaller?

CORDELIA: Your memories might be slipping away, but why should they follow me around?

_Cordelia puts her rucksack over her shoulder and gathers her other bags together, this angers Lear. He walks to one of her suitcases and opens it, throwing all of the things out onto the floor. This doesn’t faze her, much to Lear’s surprise._

CORDELIA: Nothing here means anything to me anymore. These things…You can neatly pack them into boxes and take care of them, or you can throw them out. It’s entirely up to you.
LEAR: They’re…they’re your things…you need to pick them up. Take them…

CORDELIA: I never liked playing hide and seek. It scared me. In fact, I told my sisters to tell you where I was. Just so you could find me quicker. I bet you never knew that? I stopped knowing how to be your daughter then.

LEAR: Where are you going?

CORDELIA: Nothing will come of nothing. I’m going home, dad. For good this time.

She takes the keys from the cabinet, unlocks the door and walks out with just one rucksack on her shoulder, leaving Lear alone with his party hat on.

CURTAIN
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