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Towards the Flood, 1962–2016

Something changes in the 1960s and the storm starts to take on a new kind of significance. The psychological metaphor that developed so swiftly in the early part of the century still dominated stage productions. In parallel, the storm's presence starts to be regarded as more than just a psychological metaphor. It is not immediately *literally* meaningful as a storm in the dramatic world, but it starts to signify more than just the internal complexity of a singular individual. This chapter focuses on several examples that together constitute a narrative of the storm's return to significance, from Peter Brook's landmark production in 1962 starring Paul Scofield, to the most recent production in Sydney, Australia, directed by Neil Armfield and starring Geoffrey Rush. At the same time, however, I will show how, despite attempts to emphasize the storm, there are still famous, widely viewed and critically acclaimed productions that use the storm to serve as a metaphor solely for Lear's internal complexity.

'A sort of chorus'

The cultural significance of *King Lear* shifted in the 1960s (Kott 1966). R. A. Foakes analysed this event in *Hamlet versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art* (1993):

King Lear changed its nature almost overnight: the main tradition of criticism up to the 1950s had interpreted the play as concerned with Lear's pilgrimage to redemption, as he finds himself and is 'saved' at the end, but in the 1960s the play became Shakespeare's bleakest and most despairing vision of suffering. (6)

Moreover, Foakes argues, at this time *Lear* supplanted *Hamlet* as Shakespeare's 'greatest' work. Although we are likely to be more sceptical of the idea of an artwork's essential greatness today, the general implication was that this particular play was suddenly recognized and championed by many as a superlative cultural object to which the latter half of the twentieth century was most affectively and politically attuned:

After 1960 ... *King Lear* has come to seem richly significant in political terms, in a world in which old men have held on to and abused power, often in corrupt and arbitrary ways; in the same period *Hamlet* has lost much of its political relevance, as liberal intellectuals have steadily been marginalised in Britain and in the United States. (1993: 6)

How theatre artists represented *Lear*'s newly bleak vision of human suffering on stage is equally important to understand.

Rather than being constructed as a triumphant hero, *Lear* began to be seen as forerunner to the anti-heroes of Samuel Beckett's drama. Peter Brook's 1962 and 1964¹ and Martin L. Platt's 1976² productions were described by reviewers as in some way embodying an existentialist philosophy and a particularly Beckettian aesthetic. Other productions, such as those of Trevor Nunn in 1968³ and 1977,⁴ did not specifically inspire comparison with Beckett, but were nonetheless performed on a bare stage with a grey and bleak setting. Brook also supplied the preface to Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964), which contains the essay '*King Lear* or *Endgame*', a surprising comparison between the two plays. Within these more ambiguous, less heroic visions of the *Lear* world, the representation and significance of the storm changes again. Focusing on Brook's version, this section explores how his staging produced a more sinister interpretation of the play, how the storm was represented and interpreted and to what extent this can be said to have captured the 'zeitgeist' of the early 1960s.

Brook's production was incredibly influential. His version of *Lear* premiered at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1962, then in 1964 toured to Eastern Europe and

¹ 'Drawing his inspiration from Samuel Beckett, Brook has superimposed the world of *Waiting for Godot* on that of *Lear*.' Robert Brustein, *New Republic*, in Babula, 142.

² 'The production reflects the Jan Kott–Peter Brook stark vision of the play.' C. Mc-Ginnis Kay, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, *ibid.*, 148.

³ 'Performed on a bare stage to lend universality to the production.' R. Speaight, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, *ibid.*, 143.

⁴ 'The stage [was] bare with a semicircular back wall intermittently pierced by doors.' J. S. Bost, *Educational Theatre Journal*, *ibid.*, 150.

New York before returning to London. Brook then produced a film based on the play in 1971. Brook's assistant director Charles Marowitz lamented the show's success: 'The show had become not an imaginative, brilliantly executed, somewhat flawed and erratic Shakespearean production, but a "milestone"' (Marowitz 1963: 121). While it seems prudent to follow Foakes and view Brook's *Lear* as the effect of a larger cultural process, not the primary cause of the radical shift in the cultural perspective on the play in the hands of one brilliant director (Foakes 1993: 59–65),⁵ something happened at the level of performance to provoke such changes.

Harsh, bleak and cold are useful adjectives to describe the overall design and mood. Characters were clad in simple but suggestive costumes made of thick and heavy materials like leather; the walls of the castle were unadorned but towered over the characters. In contrast to John Gielgud, who aimed to produce a sympathetic old Lear, troubled by madness and outcast by his daughters, with Paul Scofield in the title role Brook's production conjured Lear as a much darker, less sympathetic figure. Recalling the experience of watching the opening night in Stratford-upon-Avon, Alexander Leggatt described the audience as having experienced 'culture shock' (42) with some feeling as though they had witnessed the 'true' meaning of the text and others 'angry' at the new interpretation.⁶

One of the other key aspects of Brook's production was the ending. He laboured to ensure that the play was an 'endgame' that could not incidentally be interpreted as a story about redemption and renewal. Indeed, the overarching aim of the production might be understood as an exercise in overturning earlier interpretations of the play. As we have seen, Shakespeare's rewriting of *King Lear* was ambiguous: in the folk tales, the histories and the anonymous play (as also in Tate's version), the king's position is ultimately validated by his restoration to the throne and/or reunion with his good daughter. In Shakespeare's play, Lear's experience with the non-responsive storm, the brevity and strangeness of his reunion with Cordelia and his death

⁵ For an article that takes Marowitz's lamentation further and criticizes Brook's production as a misreading of the play, see L. Lieblien, 'Jan Kott, Peter Brook, and *King Lear*', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 1 (2) (1987): 39–49.

⁶ Alexander Leggatt attended the opening night of this production in Stratford-upon-Avon and recounts the experience, describing the production and reception in great detail, in *King Lear* for the 'Shakespeare in Production' series.

from grief all undermine this certainty. Such uncertainty might cause one to reflect upon Lear's errors and consider the king as the agent of his own destruction. But equally and more frequently, his isolation, 'pelican daughters,' exposure to the storm and fantasies of spending his remaining years in prison with his youngest daughter might make us sympathize with Lear and give rise to a stronger critique of, for example, the actions of Goneril, Regan, Cornwall or Edmund. Our longing for Lear's restoration is potentially more fervent because it is withheld. Such is the lure of catharsis.

Thus, something more significant had to take place on stage finally to thwart a cathartic resolution. Marowitz explains how his idea was implemented:

At the end of the play ... I suggested that, instead of the silence and repose, another storm – a greater storm – was on the way. Once the final lines had been spoken the thunder could clamour greater than ever before. Brook seconded the idea, but instead of an overpowering storm, preferred a faint, dull rumbling which would suggest something more ominous and less explicit. (1963: 113–14)

They also enacted some strategic cuts to the text, such as the servants' display of sympathy for Gloucester during the blinding scene. The rumbles of thunder at the end in particular refuse an easy interpretation that Lear is vindicated by Albany and Edgar's survival. As indicators of future strife, not of peace and calm, the storm undermines any suggestion that, by obeying the 'weight of this sad time,' Albany and Edgar will learn from Lear's mistakes. If anything the second storm suggests historical repetition: they will make the same mistakes as Lear again, or else that cruelty is an essential, not a contingent, aspect of the human condition.⁷

At the centre of Brook's creation of an endlessly cruel Lear world was also the 'first' storm, which functioned as a complex social and political metaphor. Large sheets of rusty metal flown into view from above symbolized and produced the thunder, while flashes of electric light supplied lightning. The bodies of Lear and the Fool indicated the wind's presence, with Lear's body poised as if walking headlong into a gale, and the Fool flitting about behind him 'like a leaf' (Leggatt 2004: 47). The storm sheets were shaken during the scenes and made loud sounds as well as adding to the bleak modernist design of the set. The technology used to create the thunder was actually similar to

⁷ Thanks to Greg Garrard for the latter point about the second storm.

that used in eighteenth and nineteenth century productions, but here the metal sheets were visible to the audience and thus, in the manner of Brecht, the design reveals the artifice of the effects thus alienating the audience from the spectacle. The rusty thunder sheets also were a significant part of the built environment of the Lear world by virtue of their aesthetic coherence with the rest of the set. Alexander Leggatt recalls how ‘the storm scene worked not just because it abandoned the realism that was bound to fail in any case, but because it treated Lear’s encounter with the storm not as an exercise in special effects but as a dialogue’ (2004: 38). At the same time as suggesting that a literal interpretation was an inevitable failure and so still not meaningful as weather in itself, Leggatt shows how this ‘storm’ was nonetheless deeply embedded within the architecture of the play as a social and political metaphor.

Despite the emphasis on symbolism, the overall effect was very different to that of the other metaphoric storms from earlier in the twentieth century. In the prompt copy, thunder and lightning effects consistently punctuated Lear’s lines; clearly they were designed as a dialogue. In this regard, the storm was neither a reflection in the macrocosm of trouble in the microcosm, nor was it a spectacularization of Lear’s mind, but a response from some other kind of force. Perhaps it could be imagined as part of Lear or the human world, or else as the entropic energies of his past decisions ricocheting throughout the infrastructures of the kingdom, for example. Brook’s particular staging of the storm has been read in two main ways. Bratton argues that Lear’s speeches in the storm are deeply psychological: he was able to compete with the storm because the power of the storm was within him (Bratton 1987: 30). In contrast, Jeffrey Kahan hypothesizes that ‘Brook used the storm as a sort of chorus to Lear’ (Kahan 2008: 70). Like Leggatt but contra Bratton, the storm *as chorus* ultimately awards the atmosphere around the play a significant dramatic function.

As a ‘sort of chorus’ in a dialogic relationship with Lear, this version reinforces a distinction between what the storm is in itself and what it means for Lear and the other characters. Given that one of the central challenges in reading ‘through’ the event of the storm is the potential to confuse and conflate what the storm means for the individual characters, especially Lear, and what the storm does in the play overall, the device of the chorus provides a useful way to characterize its functional presence in the dramatic world that does not rely on a didactic appeal to its ultimate literalism.

In Greek drama the Chorus served the dual role of framing and commenting on the main action, a collective force of individuals that existed outside the central action, and yet shed light upon it. According to Nietzsche, 'the chorus is a living wall against encroaching reality because it ... depicts existence more truly, more authentically, more completely than the man of culture who sees himself as the sole reality' (2003: 41). What is useful for us in Nietzsche's analysis of the chorus is that as a device it pushes back against human fantasies of individualism and control. Before the storm many of the characters view themselves as the only reality, and yet the disruptive presence of 'storm' arguably troubles those senses and the constitution of that reality. Earlier productions that tried to equate the storm with Lear or to externalize the internal human conflict missed how the storm structurally, conceptually and materially gives rise to and radically limits Lear's fantasies of control. Here the idea of the storm as chorus does not go so far as to suggest that Nature itself has that function, but that a non-human collective force can communicate philosophical ideas by virtue of their entanglement within a human story.

Although Brook avoided literally representing the weather in the play, the way in which he presented his cruel Lear world in cinema was very different. Unlike his earlier attempt at filming the play in 1953 – a surprisingly horrible television version with Orson Welles in the title role using a walking stick to indicate his age (he was only in his late thirties at the time) and punctuate his emotions – his 1971 film engaged the camera in storytelling, shot on location instead of set and, at the same time, conjured a similarly bleak interpretation to the stage production.⁸ The script was heavily cut and the subplot virtually excised, so much so that Roger Ebert suggested it might as well have been called *Peter Brook's King Lear*. Where there were traditional difficulties in staging, Ebert claimed Brook 'substituted his own cinematic decorations.' (Ebert 2012 [1971]). While the play and the film are evidently separate artistic

⁸ Like the stage production, the film avoids catharsis. The deaths of all three daughters, who die offstage in the play, are shown on screen. Goneril's end is triggered by the death of Edmund; after receiving the news of Edmund's death, all hope of another life seems to vanish for Goneril and she kills her sister by violently pushing her to the ground, then kills herself by smashing her head against a large rock. Then, in a short, semi-close-up shot and with a neck-snapping sound effect, we see Cordelia's execution. The final lines, delivered by Edgar, are not reverentially delivered over Lear's dead body but rather interspersed with shots of Lear slowly falling to the ground dying. On Brook's cinematic strategies, see R. B. Parker, 'The Use of *Mise-en-Scene* in Three Films of *King Lear*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1) (1991): 75–90.

phenomena, when thinking about the broader cultural phenomena of *King Lear* storm, the two should be viewed together as part of a large-scale decade-long *Lear* project that was an integral part of the broad cultural redefinition of this story.

Although there were similarities in the tone of the play and film, the means by which Brook evoked the mood were strikingly different. His film was based on a series of exercises on the relationship between *King Lear* and Artaud's 'Theater of Cruelty'.⁹ According to Artaud:

Everybody will at once take (cruelty) to mean 'blood'. But 'theater of cruelty' means a theater difficult and cruel for myself first of all. And, on the level of performance, it is not the cruelty we can exercise upon each other by hacking at each other's bodies, carving up personal anatomies, or, like Assyrian emperors, sending parcels of human ears, noses, or neatly detached nostrils through the mail, but the much more terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us. We are not free. And the sky can still fall in on our heads. And the theater has been created to teach us that first of all. (1958: 79)

By 'cruelty' he means the impact of non-human things upon the human body; it is this non-human cruelty Artaud wants to activate in his vision for the theatre. Cruelty is the terror inflicted by the non-human world upon the human body: the sensory invasion of tastes, smells and vibrations, and the physical threat posed by volcanoes, earthquakes and, of course, storms. Artaud calls for our senses to be attacked by forces beyond our control and for us to remake ourselves in the face of their onslaught. In Brook's film version of *King Lear* the world itself is employed to express this concept.

Brook set the film in winter, on a bleak, icy, and windswept landscape, shooting it on location on the North Jutland Peninsula in Denmark (Davies 1990: 17). The atmosphere is frozen, light is grey and dull, and characters are dressed in thick furs. The sky looms low above their heads, threatening at any moment to fall. Brook described why he chose to set it on such a landscape:

⁹ Lear is often conceived of as a 'theatre of cruelty'; see for example, P. Brook, 'Lear – Can it be Staged?' in *The Shifting Point: Forty Years of Theatrical Exploration 1946–1987* (London: Methuen Drama, 1988) and E. Sun, *Succeeding King Lear: Literature, Exposure and the Possibility of Politics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010). Although he does not make the explicit link with Artaud, Kott refers to the 'cruelty' of the Lear world as well; see 'King Lear, or Endgame' in J. Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1967), 104.

The most realistic elements of the film version of *Lear* were taken from the life of the Eskimos and the Lapps ... because [their life] is still controlled by the basic natural conditions, by the contrast between heat and cold ... [W]e realized that we could take the visual aspect of the film from a society whose principal problem and principal function is to manage to survive under the specific climactic conditions. (Brook 1994 [1988]: 204)

Brook does not suggest that the Inuit and Sàmi are innately cruel people. Rather by situating the cruel *Lear* story within such an environment, Brook explores how the environment shapes the story. By shooting on location, the background subsequently comes to function as a rich psycho-social metonymy, wherein the pitilessness of the weather is an aspect of the brutality of the *polis*.

At the time reviewers were unsure precisely how to interpret the film and took it as both literal and metaphoric. In the *New York Times*, Vincent Canby was freed from the need to make comparison between Brook's stage and film adaptations: he 'missed the *King Lear* that was staged here seven years ago by Peter Brook' and 'happily unburdened of the need to make comparisons'. As such he was especially attuned to the environmental aspect of the play: 'mostly in the wintry dune country of Denmark's Jutland Peninsula, is set in a time where the sun seems to be receding not because of any seasonal course but because the entire universe is moving towards an exhausted end' (Brook 1994 [1988]: 205). Here the *Lear* story is a horrible entropic fantasy where the climate is heading toward an icy apocalypse. For Anthony Davies, charged with comparing the film to the play in a more direct sense, the weather is read as a metaphor: Brook constructs 'a landscape of the mind, a place dreamed by its inhabitants, one whose temperatures, textures and lights alter with moods, acts, speeches of the characters' (Davies 1990: 17). The landscape is read as a psychological metaphor to such an extent that the non-human itself was understood to 'have absorbed some of the life of the characters in them' (17).

But there is nothing very dream-like about the landscape; the landscape is brutally material. It has produced these characters and the characters have had to adjust to living in such a place. Like the stage play, in the film the characters wear heavy leathers and thick furs, and by virtue of their clothing and dwellings their drama is able to play out in the open despite the harshness of the climate. The wind howls throughout every scene in the play and the

clothes and hairs of the characters are blown about amplifying the significance of the exposure; when Kent's shoes are taken off and he is put in the stocks, the maliciousness of the act is compounded by the punishing weather. When Lear is not given lodging with his entourage, the ingratitude of the daughters and his stubborn attachment to the knights is, again, made all the more terrible on account of the cold. Given the ongoing harsh conditions the storm serves to make a bad situation worse. During the storm scenes the camera is literally caught up in the deluge, drops of water run down the lens and it is fogged up with condensation, the dialogue is very difficult to hear and the characters are at times almost impossible to see. Whether human nature's cruelty is simply reflected in or metaphorized by the play's setting or if the climatic conditions are deeply involved in producing the humans within this landscape depends on one's theoretical orientations. At the very least, in order to produce the same kind of brutal tone as he did on stage, Brook's film adaptation foregrounded the literal setting of *King Lear*, from the fact that Poor Tom might actually be bitterly cold when he is out in the weather in a loincloth to the materiality of the storm itself.

Going back to re-read the stage production now in light of the ecological turn in literary and cultural studies, the lack of reference to the literal meteors in the production, the changing significance *King Lear* in the 1960s, Brook's production and its widespread success in 1962, can in retrospect be seen as related to the publication of Carson's *Silent Spring* and the rise of modern environmentalism in the same year.¹⁰ Although Brook was not an environmentalist, and Foakes cast the new *Lear* as a product of post war and Cold War human politics rather than broader ecological concerns, we now know that the Cold War and knowledge of climate change are thoroughly entangled (Masco: 2012). Moreover, Cheryl Lousley argues 'that we can see in *Silent Spring* the first outline of the representational challenge that ecocriticism faces: not the *representation of nature*, but the *politicization of environment*; or, in other words, how to make complex socio-ecological interactions socially visible as political concerns?' (2013: 3). The flipside of a similar dilemma might be said to occur in this timely reshaping of *Lear*: not the representation of the human as part of nature, but how to make human hubris an

¹⁰ Alexander Leggatt notes that this is also the year the Beatles emerged from oblivion (1991: 33).

eco-political concern? Despite the obvious irony, the play had, since the late seventeenth century, been largely associated with the triumph of the human subject *over* illegitimate moral order and cruel forces of nature, often both women and storm. Thus although there is no overt ecological messaging in Brook's stage production and the storm is undoubtedly an anthropocentric symbol, we can retrospectively read into it the *zeitgeist* with regard to nascent mainstream awareness of environmental degradation by virtue of its timely criticism of the human hierarchies. Moreover, the weather in the film makes this cruelty more than just political metaphor, awarding the storm a role in shaping the human social order.

Kott's idea that 'nature' in *Lear* resembles 'non-nature' in Beckett offers another way into thinking Brook's non-literal stage storm in ecocritical terms:

The scene of tragedy has mostly been a natural landscape. Raging nature witnessed man's downfall, or as in *King Lear* played an active part in the action. Modern grotesque usually takes place in the midst of civilization. Nature has evaporated from it almost completely. Man is confined to a room and surrounded by inanimate objects. But objects have now been raised to the status of symbols of human fate, or situation, and perform a similar function to that played in Shakespeare by forest, storm, or eclipse of the sun. (1964: 93)

The design of *Endgame* places the characters in a hermetically sealed room where they are obliged to climb a ladder in order to see the world outside through small windows.¹¹ The stage picture looks like a human skull with the windows as the eyes. By way of the austere design and the seemingly plotless play, Beckett at once represented human alienation from the more-than-human world and the business of living as waiting to die. Like *Lear*'s storm, Greg Garrard has shown us that the whole of *Endgame* is often read symbolically as a bleak allegory about the modern human condition (2012: 387). But Garrard recuperates the literal in *Endgame*: rather reading the play as an anti-ecological study of the exclusively human condition by hermetically sealing the characters off from nature, he argued that the play is 'literally ecological' (390) insofar as the play is a 'tragi-comic exploration of the end of nature *and* the fact that *we cannot see it*' (393, emphasis in original). What we

¹¹ On the stage aesthetics of Beckett, see L. Essif, *Empty Figure on an Empty Stage: The Theatre of Samuel Beckett and his Generation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); J. Kalb, *Beckett in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

might learn about *King Lear* from Beckett, or Garrard's flipping the logic of ecocritical literalism by way of his reading of *Endgame*, is the extent to which, paradoxically and simultaneously, this play represents the 'the end of nature' (Garrard 2012: 387) and the idea that 'there is no outside of nature' (Kirby 2011: x). There is no pastoral dream outside the skull or outside the kingdom; just different types of shelter and degrees of optic apprehension. Similarly, in Brook's staging of *King Lear* we discover that the storm does not necessarily have to be represented as literal weather to indicate to an audience that there are forces within the world that exceed and challenge the power of the human that are neither transcendent nor supernatural.

'An intergalactic Fourth of July'

In the 1980s and 1990s, parallel to the great acceleration in productions of *King Lear* within the ever-evolving mainstream traditions, after the Victorians, after-Granville Barker and now, after-Brook, contemporary auteur theatre directors began to use *King Lear* to rethink both establishment theatre craft, accepted cultural understandings of Shakespeare's plays and the literal limits of the *Lear* world itself. Erika Fischer-Lichte argues that such artists 'have all used *Lear* in search of proof that their various developed theatre aesthetics are capable of unfolding new aspects or even whole new interpretations of the tragedy' (Fischer-Lichte 1997: 201). There is nothing innately innovative about a theatre artist using their production to trying to unfold new aspects of the tragedy: from Garrick to Reinhardt and beyond, many artists use Shakespeare to define themselves as great innovators of the mainstream theatre. Moreover, because *King Lear* is about aging and mortality, if it is not a way of grounding one's early career, actors, directors and actor-managers may view it as their legacy production, as I illustrated in chapter four. But with particular regard to the late twentieth century new wave referred to by Fischer-Lichte, *King Lear* comes to function as a rite of passage to be undertaken by experimental theatre directors to prove their skill and originality within their particular set of new stylistic concerns. Among the directors taking on the tragedy were the American, Robert Wilson (1985–90) and the Australian, Barrie Kosky (1998). These directors have since become establishment figures in their own right,

largely due to their qualitatively different theatre craft and their provocative meddling with the theatrical canon.

Both artists are known for ‘authoring’ their own theatrical collages based around a particular concept, combining all the tools of the theatre to create grand cacophonous spectacles.¹² So for both Wilson and Kosky, staging ‘William Shakespeare’s’ *King Lear* was a departure from their usual theatre making practice because they directed an individual play authored by another writer, rather than a self-devised theatrical event. Wilson commented on his particular reason for presenting Shakespeare’s play:

I don’t have to make theatre with *Lear* ... Shakespeare already made the theatre. What I have to find is a way to put this theatre on a stage with enough room around those words so that people can hear them and think about them. I don’t believe in talking back to a masterpiece. I let it talk to me. (Quoted in Holmberg 1996: 30)

For Wilson, *Lear* was already a palimpsest of ideas and his job was to channel it. But both he and Kosky broke with conventional representations of the play by bringing to the text their experimental stagecraft and dramaturgy. They played with the play, in much the same way as they might otherwise explore a cultural trope or theme. Their ‘play’ was in the excessive cutting Shakespeare’s text, sampling other poetry and song, and drawing on a range of different theatrical technologies such as light, sound and video projection to create a chaotic and cinematic theatre world.

Their storms were neither literal nor metaphoric, which is to say neither of these storms ‘refer’ only to the weather, to the mind or the polis. As spectacular events, I will argue that they ‘propose’ new and chaotic modern cosmologies or entanglements between the physical and metaphysical. Thus, after describing the productions and their reception respectively, Isabelle Stengers’s idea of the ‘cosmopolitical proposal’ will frame an analysis of these spectacularly confusing theatrical events. Stengers’s cosmos ‘bears little relation to the world in which citizens of antiquity asserted themselves

¹² For reflections on the unconventional theatre practice of Wilson and Kosky see M. Robinson, ‘Robert Wilson, Nicolas Poussin, and Lohengrin’, in E. Fuchs and U. Chaudhuri (eds), *Land/Scape/Theater* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. 159–88; E. Sheer, ‘Barrie Kosky’s “The Lost Echo” Awaken the Gods’, *The Monthly*, October 2006, retrieved from <http://www.themonthly.com.au/theatre-edward-scheer-awaken-gods-barrie-kosky-s-lost-echo-295> (accessed 29 February 2012); J. McCallum and T. Hillard, ‘Shocking Audiences Modern and Ancient’, *Australasian Drama Studies* 56 (April 2010): 131–53.

everywhere on their home ground, nor to an Earth finally united, in which everyone is a citizen' (in Latour 2005: 994). This new cosmos is not an ordered whole. Instead, she continues, cosmos 'refers to the unknown constituted by ... multiple divergent worlds and to the articulations of which they could eventually be capable' (995). I argue that when considered in the context of the dramatic narrative of *King Lear*, the spectacular incoherence of the Wilson and Kosky storms can invite a contemporary rethinking of the entire dramatic world, bringing the messy materiality of the meteorological storm back onto the stage, so to speak, alongside the human and the political. Thus, in using Stengers to reconsider the Lear world as a 'cosmos', I do not suggest that these artists had a romantic vision for an the Lear world as an ordered whole, but rather used their ambitious productions of the stormy play to produce a new universe that is both open, unstable and contains forces beyond the human.

Robert Wilson's production of *King Lear* began with a workshop version staged in Hollywood in 1985 (Sullivan 1985); the complete production was slated to premiere in Hamburg in 1987, but did not officially premiere until 1990 in Frankfurt, with the German actress, Marianne Hoppe, in the role of Lear. Writing about the early workshops, long before Hoppe became involved, one reviewer highlighted Wilson's love of theatrical illusion: 'Wilson abhors the modern predilection for exposed lighting and technical elements. He is a showman, a stage magician, an illusionist.'¹³ As I described in the previous chapter, Victorian spectacular theatre demonstrated a certain desire for illusion, and harnessed contemporaneous technological capacity, to represent a reality as pictorial and dynamic as the world itself. So although Wilson's theatrical style could be conceived of as a return to the grand illusionism of the nineteenth century in terms of his drawing on a range of new and old technologies, he did not aim to replicate a naturalistic world on stage. He had digested too many modern methods to be capable of such retro pictorialism. Come the storm, he did not aim for meteorological verisimilitude, but the creation of a new kind of cosmo-meteorological spectacle.

Rather than being limited to the inflexible architecture of a conventional theatre, Wilson had almost total control over the staging. The production took place in Frankfurt's Bockenheimer Depot, a former streetcar repair warehouse

¹³ Reference unfortunately mislaid.

that was transformed into an enormous arts space. Within this cavernous and undefined space, Wilson's stage was purpose-built for the production. It had a large carpeted apron with centre stage marked by a painted lightning bolt and a thin line of shadow cast by a rod (Fischer-Lichte 1997: 202). Behind the stage was a large cyclorama at the back of the stage, illuminated by a rear projector. The screen carried motion picture images of storms during the scenes. According to one critic, 'The sense of depth that light creates behind the translucent rear projector ... [gave] the illusion of infinite space' (Holmberg 1996: 124). Like a Globe built for the New Atlantis, the stage mimicked the world. Instead of invoking closed spheres of the geocentric cosmos however, the cavernousness of the Depot's architecture implied an open, infinite and chaotic expanse.

The storm itself was a pastiche of different weather-related images and effects, from the metaphoric to the literal. Arthur Holmberg describes a few of them:

The sources of Wilson's images are manifold ... He liked the way Marianne Hoppe, exhausted, slumped her head over a wall to rest. It became part of *King Lear* ... He saw a tree ripped asunder by a storm in Frankfurt. It became part of *King Lear*. (86)

Wilson was also fond of grand apocalyptic images and according to Holmberg, his interest in the representation of the apocalypse fed into his vision for the storm:

A key image in Wilsonland is the apocalypse. Images of catastrophe – natural and manmade – haunt his work like the spectre of Armageddon ... In *King Lear*, the storm became a war of the worlds; suns, moons, and stars crashed into each other, bursting into an intergalactic Fourth of July. (117–18)

Elsewhere the storm illusion was described as 'cosmic fireworks ... on the blasted heath' (124). Wilson's stage illusion was similar to de Louthembourg's *Eidophusikon* – a painting with the added dimension of time – but in this case the painting was a hybrid-work of many styles, from Romanticism and Photo Realism to Cubism and Abstract Expressionism, all combined into one. Unconstrained by the need to replicate a particular vision of the natural world, Wilson constructed an explosive stormy stage picture where emotions, ideas, politics, history and weather were animate parts of the cosmos.

As well as the construction of a spectacular storm centrepiece, Wilson laboured to highlight particular themes in the Lear story: aging and death. The play began with Hoppe reciting the words of William Carlos Williams's 'The Last Words of My English Grandmother', a poem that tells the story of a grandmother's final trip in an ambulance. She has no wish to be in the ambulance, but neither does she want to be part of the world any longer.¹⁴ The character in the poem is like Lear: Lear is unwilling to accept death, but also wants no responsibilities in the world either. By casting a female in the role of Lear, Wilson universalized the experience of an isolated 'crawl toward death' in the play.¹⁵ But also, by casting a female in this role, he complicated the way the audience identified with the dramatic narrative, by referencing feminist performance of the 1960s and 1970s, and foregrounding the gender politics of the play: the father–daughter relationships and the related questions of burden, blame and responsibility. Thus, at the same time as universalizing the experience of dying, the act of cross casting also calls attention to the body of the protagonist in a new way and situates the production in a very particular historical moment where women can be cast in leading male roles, the reverse of the all-male early modern stage.

In 1998, Barrie Kosky directed a similarly unconventional, albeit very different, interpretation of the play at the Sydney Opera House, with Australia's most famous twentieth-century Shakespearean actor, John Bell, in the title role.¹⁶ Like Wilson, his exploration was enabled by experimentation with the dramatic form: he heavily cut the dialogue, used light and soundscapes, non-representational sets, cross-dressing, elaborate yet stylistically divergent costumes, and gave Lear a retinue of perverse animal-like figures instead of knights. Kosky created a monstrous cosmos on the stage. Although he did not have the same amount of sway over the architecture of the stage itself,

¹⁴ Here is the relevant section of the poem: 'Oh, oh, oh! she cried / as the ambulance men lifted / her to the stretcher – / Is this what you call // making me comfortable? / By now her mind was clear / Oh you think you're smart / you young people // she said, but I'll tell you / you don't know anything ... What are those / fuzzy-looking things out there? / Trees? Well I'm tired / of them and rolled her head away.' W. C. Williams, *William Carlos Williams: Selected Poems*, C. Tomlinson (ed.) (London: Penguin, 1972), 127.

¹⁵ On female Lears, see L. Senelick, 'Brush up your Shakespeare', in *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 487–8.

¹⁶ Kosky told the *Sydney Morning Herald* at the time: 'Stylistically the production combines the aesthetics of the evil empire in *Star Wars* with a dash of Nazism and the eerie poetic of William Blake.' Retrieved from <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/brush-up-your-shakespeare-20111020-1m9sp.html> (accessed 29 February 2012).

he unequivocally seized control of the stage picture from the actors' and characters' hands. Indeed, in most of Kosky's productions he is seated in a raised orchestra pit playing piano and conducting the action as if it were his own symphony.

Like Wilson, Kosky's storm invoked a cosmic framework of a contemporary kind; it did not reflect or spectacularize the political or affective situation in any straightforward manner. Initially the storm scenes referenced older productions that highlighted the psychological metaphor and juxtaposed that with wild experimentation. Act 3.1 was cut in its entirety and all that remained of Act 3.2 was Lear's two main speeches beginning 'Blow winds' and 'Rumble thy bellyful'. Lear dominated. There was no Fool as a foil. Bell played the storm scene under the proscenium arch, in front of a ballooned red crushed-velvet curtain, his face picked out in a tight spotlight. As in Granville-Barker's production, these speeches in the storm emphasized Lear's psychological state and referenced the long tradition of fetishizing Lear's head in relation to the storm. But the production went on to disavow the psychological metaphor by not containing the storm within Lear's face for very long. Following the famous storm speeches, the curtains opened, and, as strobe lights flashed, Lear darted madly around the stage. Lear's knights accompanied him dressed in black and white polka dot pants, with oversized prosthetic phalluses hanging outside of their trousers; during the storm they also wore enormous headpieces shaped like the heads of animals and various non-human monsters. Poor Tom entered covered in mud or shit, and both Lear and Poor Tom played around the stage for an extended period of time. Although the dialogue was cut back, the storm scenes remained long. Flashes of light and sounds of thunder, music, hybrid cow-monsters, filth covered Tom and Lear and fragments of the text contributed to the spectacular cacophony of Kosky's storm.¹⁷

Like Wilson, Kosky's *Lear* took the occasion of the storm to explore other themes represented in the dramatic poetry. The parade of phalluses and shit-smeared characters is evidence of Kosky's ongoing preoccupation with the

¹⁷ There is a rare account of Kosky's *Lear* in Richard Madelaine, 'As Unstable as the King but Never Daft (?): Text and Variant Readings of *King Lear*', *Sydney Studies in English* 28 (2002), retrieved from <http://escholarship.usyd.edu.au/journals/index.php/SSE/article/view/562> (accessed 3 October 2011). A grainy in-house video recording is available for research-purpose viewing from the Bell Shakespeare Archives. See <http://archives.bellshakespeare.com.au> (accessed 10 April 2011).

relationship between gender identity, sexual desire and taboo.¹⁸ His other driving theme in this production was cosmological doubt. In a programme note, Kosky samples John Donne's 'First Anniversary':

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,
The Element of fire is quite put out;
The Sunne is lost, and the earth, and no man's wit
Can well direct him where to looke for it.¹⁹

Written in 1611, not long after *Lear*, Donne's first work of verse was a eulogy to his patron Elizabeth Drury. But these famous and oft-sampled lines are generally held up as evidence of the emerging new world order, mourning for the loss of coherence of the geocentric cosmos and questioning the meaning of life in the movement towards modernity. Taken as a programme note, or epigraph to the theatrical event, then, the production operates under the sign of cosmic doubt and uncertainty. Not just doubt in a transcendent god and coherent world order, of course, but perhaps calling into doubt in the cultural function and significance of this particular Shakespearean tragedy.

The role of the leading actors within both of these themed and stylized productions of *Lear* was decentred and diminished. The resulting conflicts between actor and director were quite public, with both leading performers stridently critiquing the director's interpretation of the text. Hoppe's retort was especially pointed:

This Wilson can't fool me. I started out at the Deutsches Theatre with Max Rheinhardt [*sic*]. I know what a director is. Wilson is not a director. He's a lighting designer. A Wilson actor runs here or there only because there's a change in the lights. On a Wilson stage, light pushes the actors around. Light is important, but in Shakespeare, language is also important. I can speak the lines the way he wants, but I don't believe Shakespeare wrote the part of Lear to be recited by an autistic child. (Quoted in Holmberg 1996: 137–8).

Her criticism was similar to that of John Bell, who was not surprised that the Kosky *Lear* received 'bags of hate mail', and who felt it necessary to look over

¹⁸ Kosky's durational and spectacular meditation on taboo, desire and myth was *The Lost Echo* (2006); for an exploration of this work see Charlotte Farrell, 'Barrie Kosky's *The Lost Echo*: Rethinking Tragic Catharsis Through Affective Emergenc(e)y', *Peripeti. Tidsskrift for dramaturgiske studier* 17 (2012): 67–77.

¹⁹ Retrieved from <http://archives.bellshakespeare.com.au> (last accessed 2 April 2011). Webpage no longer available.

Kosky's shoulder to make sure he did not 'misinterpret the meaning of an entire speech' (Bell 2003: 263).

Both productions received wildly mixed reviews in the press, which in many ways echoed the criticisms of the actors. One Australian critic reporting on Kosky's production relayed that 'I heard some people walk out at the interval ... older people ... saying "I think this is just incredibly self-indulgent". And I think some young people might love it and others might think, "I don't have a clue what's going on".'²⁰ Key negative phrases that come up in mainstream media responses to the production are 'misdirected' (Nowra), 'stylistic inconsistencies' (Segal), 'not memorable' (Rockwell) and 'interminable periods of tedious spectacle' (McQueen-Thompson 1999: 15). But some of the same reviewers celebrate the directors' 'crisply executed stage pictures' (Rockwell on Wilson) or his 'willingness to locate a Shakespeare interpretation outside the strict confines of known historical spaces' (McQueen-Thompson on Kosky 1999: 14). As with much postmodern work, mixed critical responses indicate that the works were not boring or badly acted, but *incoherent* on a number of levels. In a witty summary of the consistencies, Kate Herbert described Kosky's as 'like Bella Lugosi meets *South Park* in a Hollywood musical with Walt Disney looking on'. Both productions were a visual, textual, aural and performative mash-up that did not always make explicit sense to an audience and that diminished the role of the leading actor in lieu of a wild spectacle.

These tensions between actor and director, and audience and production, arguably cut to the heart of the play's central dilemma, namely the tension between how Lear initially wants the storm to be and what the storm actually is. The storm is *the* more-than-human feature that unequivocally disavows Lear's desire. When the storm is cast as a psychological or political metaphor the storm coheres with or in some way is made to reflect the human drama, rather than being interpreted as representing a force of its own. These actors and audiences had expectations for the storm to cohere with their particular interpretation of the play, as being a study into the mind of a mad king or the architecture of a corrupt kingdom, but those expectations were not met. Instead a wild spectacle – indifferent not only to everyone's desires, but also to

²⁰ K. Herbert, 'Review', *Herald-Sun*, 'Where there's a Will', <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/stories/s12376.htm> (accessed 11 March 2011).

the specific temporal limitations and geographical indications of Shakespeare's text – ensued.

Ironically, these perverse, irreverent and doggedly postmodern spectacular illusions could be viewed as more 'authentic' versions of *King Lear* than the earlier twentieth-century representations of the play in some ways. First, they do not aim to contain the storm's significance by relegating it to a psychological or political metaphor, nor do they simply aim for meteorological verisimilitude. Instead, they dramatize the stormy setting as, on the one hand, spectacularly difficult to interpret in coherent relation to the human narrative and, on the other, as an attempt to build a world around Lear, rather than creating the world as Lear. These theatrical cosmologies represent entangled social, political, scientific and meteorological forces. The vitriolic reactions to the productions serve to re-emphasize frustration at the storm's indifference and its refusal to be contained by clearly human systems of signification: the reviewers would have preferred the Lear cosmos to reflect their understanding of the play, but instead the actors and audience become the 'flies' to the 'wanton boys' Wilson and Kosky who play everyone for sport, leaving all baffled and asking, like Lear, 'What is the cause of thunder?' or 'What is the purpose of this spectacle?'

Despite seeming nonsensical to many audiences and the leading actors, Stengers's idea of cosmopolitics can assist in thinking this a postmodern phase of the play's performance history. In 'The Cosmopolitical Proposal' Isabelle Stengers turns to the figure of the idiot – 'a conceptual character ... who always slows the others down' – to propose a new kind of epistemology. The idiot is the person without answers, but who nevertheless should be taken seriously. The idiot is the person who does not make sense or who cannot make sense. 'Don't ask him why' she implores, 'the idiot will neither reply nor discuss the issue. The idiot is a presence or ... [someone that] produces an interstice ... His role is not to produce abysmal perplexity but the idiot demands that we slow down, that we don't consider ourselves authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know' (1995). Within the world of the play, Edgar is this idiot. And although Lear attempts to ask him 'why', by virtue of his non-response Lear is forced to reflect upon how he knows what he knows. Here, too, Kosky and Wilson might be thought of not as visionaries but as idiots, who produce spectacles apparently more meaningful as

expressions of their own egos than the play. Nonetheless, the directors use the storm as a site for their experimentation. In this regard, the storm becomes 'the cosmic idiot's murmur ... indifferent to the argument of urgency, as to any other' (1003). Whether indulgent, incoherent or visionary, Wilson's and Kosky's storms open up a space for rethinking not only the individual human or social political order in *Lear* but their entanglement with the wider weathered world. Crucially, following Stengers, we need to be accepting of confusion. A complete and comprehensive knowledge or understanding of that new order will not emerge quickly, if at all.

'Nine tonnes of water'

This stormy history of *King Lear* in performance began in London in 1606 and travelled through time with a fairly unidirectional and limited sense of its passing over the last four chapters, demonstrating, by way of a series of select examples, how the specific design and performance of the storm played a key role in the theatrical reimagining of the play across successive generations. To bring this journey to a conclusion, I look briefly at four relatively recent productions which all occurred around the same time: David Farr for the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Courtyard Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon (2010) and the Roundhouse in London (2011); Michael Grandage for the National Theatre at the Donmar Warehouse (2010–11); Benedict Andrews's *Lér Konungur*, for the National Theatre of Iceland in Reykjavik (2010–11); and Marion Potts for the Sydney Theatre Company at the Opera House (2010).²¹ Both Farr's and Andrews's productions used real water on the stage, while in contrast, Grandage's and Potts's production represented *Lear* on a bare stage with only light and sound to indicate the storm. The striking differences between these four productions reveals the extent to which the storm remains central to the overall design and interpretation of the play and can today be used to either advance conservative humanist readings or to critique the dominant political class in a changing climate.

²¹ Andrews's production opened in 2010 on 26 December, the day on which the very first *Lear* of which we have any record was staged, in 1606.

With Greg Hicks in the title role, David Farr's production charted a fine line between traditional Shakespearean character acting and physical experimentation. The production was not located in a particular historical period but seemed to move through history. It was initially set in a factory, which served as an industrial age castle. The characters were clothed in large fur coats, suits, crowns with chunky jewels and long gowns, but by the time the storm broke many of the characters were wearing modern military uniforms and the factory seemed no longer to be iron-clad, but rather made of flimsy plywood – which the Fool was physically able to kick down. While the design moved through historical time in the background, the drama itself, rooted in conventional contemporary character acting, played coherently in the foreground. The tone of the production was dark and cruel, reminiscent of Brook's interpretation almost half a century earlier. Embracing the large-scale spectacle for his storm scenes, Farr brought together elements of metaphoric abstraction and meteorological literalism. A complex system of pumps, tanks and drains enabled real water to fall as rain on the stage – not the entire stage, however, simply upon Lear who stood upon a small podium centre stage. The thunder was made up of scratchy metallic and sound effects, evoking at once affective, political and meteorological storms, with the architecture of the world straining under bureaucratic and climatic pressures. The lightning consisted in flashes of both strobe and fluorescent lights, which represented both the meteorological lightning, and also failing electrical wiring in a doomed kingdom.²² This staged storm represented the agency of the thunder, lightning, wind and rain on the one hand, but also aimed to thoroughly materially and conceptually entangle the more-than-human world with the built environment on the other.

Like Farr, Benedict Andrews's *Lér Konungur* combined bold character acting and spectacular meteorological realism, but rather than situating it across history, Andrews situated it in the present.²³ His version of contemporary

²² In a private conversation on 26 August 2010, Greg Hicks (Lear) explained to me the advantages of being on a podium and set apart from everyone else at that point: feeling real water on his face enhanced his capacity to understand the emotions behind Lear's lines.

²³ This production is described by E. Blake, 'Praise Rains Down on Lear', *Sydney Morning Herald*, retrieved from <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/praise-rains-down-on-lear-20110104-19f5m.html>, 12 February 2011; 'B. Andrews, Benedict Andrews', retrieved from <http://benedictandrews.com>, 12 February 2011; 'Lér Konungur', retrieved from <http://www.leikhusid.is/Syningar/Leikarid-2010-2011/syning/1071/Ler-konungur> (accessed 12 February 2011).

urban realism included human clothing, accoutrements and dwellings, as well as material elements like water and electricity. He stripped his stage back to its walls and painted them black and dressed the characters in conservative contemporary business clothes. Rather than picturing every aspect of the Lear world in a photorealistic manner, design was used to highlight aspects of key scenes. For the division of the kingdom, the stage was cleared of any permanent structures and filled with hundreds of helium balloons, reminiscent of an American political convention.²⁴ The scenes following the storm, in the hovel and Cornwall's castle, were played in white rooms that looked like the wings of a demountable office space or kit home, with the real storm water continuing to fall outside. Whereas Farr situated *King Lear* across time, Andrews located it in 2010, a neoliberal capitalist and corporate kingdom.

To an even greater extent than Farr, the central element of Andrews's storm was water: all the actors exposed were drenched by nine tonnes that fell, like heavy rain, for 30–35 minutes.²⁵ As the photograph below shows, the stage was lit to highlight the rain and the characters, and left bare, except for fragments of burst balloons used in as set dressing in the division-of-the-kingdom scene. While the empty stage served to emphasize Lear's psychological dilemma, the sheer force and relentlessness of nine tonnes of water meant that the actors, like their characters, were obliged to endure the storm.²⁶

Although these two productions create a contemporary social, historical and meteorological cosmos, referencing the deep entanglement of political and ecological forces, such an interpretation is not ubiquitous. Indeed, arguably the influence of productions from the mid-twentieth century, in which psychological metaphors drove the design, continues. The Bell Shakespeare Company production, directed by Marion Potts and again starring John Bell, at the Sydney Opera House in 2010²⁷ and the Royal National Theatre

²⁴ See the notebook images on Andrews's website, retrieved from <http://www.benedictandrews.com> (accessed 12 February 2011).

²⁵ In private correspondence with me (as well as on his website), Andrews has confirmed the duration of his storm.

²⁶ Andrews is known for direction that sets up an endurance task for the actor. An eight-hour two-part spectacular for the Sydney Theatre Company, his *The War of the Roses* (2008) included adaptations of Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Richard III*, alongside *Henry V* and *Henry VI*. For the duration of *Richard II* and *Henry VI* showers of gold confetti and ash were made to fall on the stage. See R. Higson, 'With Cate Blanchett, all that glisters may really be gold', retrieved from <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/with-blanchett-all-may-be-gold/story-e6frg6o6-111118546278> (accessed 11 March 2011).

²⁷ See <http://www.bellshakespeare.com.au/whatson/past/2010/kinglear> (accessed 29 February 2012).

Figure 8.1 Arnar Jonsson, Palmi Gestsson and Olafía Hronn Jonsdóttir in the National Theatre of Iceland's *King Lear* (Reykjavík, 2010) Director: Benedict Andrews, Set: Borkur Jonsson, Costumes: Helga I. Stefansdóttir. Photography by Eddi. Reproduced with kind permission from the company.

production at London's Donmar Warehouse (2010–11),²⁸ directed by Michael Grandage and starring Derek Jacobi (Figure 8.2), were both minimalist in terms of design, reminiscent of a much earlier trends in staging. These productions were given almost free rein to explore the protagonist's psychological complexity, neither actor having to 'contend with the fretful elements' – their speeches reflecting upon their own internal sorrows and punctuated by the thunder. Indeed, the sound effects were so quiet in Grandage's production that Jacobi could whisper the speeches in the storm, a peculiarity that privileged Lear's private struggle. In the next act, Jacobi wore a crown of weeds, which was like a crown of thorns and gave him an ultimately redemptive and Christ-like image. This staging emphasized the storm only as an extension of Lear's psychological situation. Although, as Brook showed, it is possible to invoke the presence of a 'storm' without resorting to literal water on stage, by gesture, movement, characterization and design, the absence of a force to be

²⁸ See <http://www.donmarwarehouse.com/pl114review.html> (accessed 29 February 2012).

Figure 8.2 Derek Jacobi in the Donmar Warehouse Production of *King Lear* (London, 2010). Photograph © Johan Persson/ArenaPAL.

reckoned with in both these productions meant the default interpretation of the psychological spectacle prevailed.

‘The future’

At the time of writing, the production of *King Lear* freshest in my mind was by the Sydney Theatre Company (STC), directed by Neil Armfield, with Geoffrey Rush in the title role. Before going into the details of that experience to conclude this history, it is time for a confession: ever since starting this project, although I love Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, storms, and the particular storm in this play, I really hate King Lear. He is a thoroughly misogynist, power-drunk old fart who to my mind does not deserve a skerrick of sympathy. In many ways this project was a masochistic attempt to grapple with the widespread cultural reverence and compassion directed towards such a reprehensible figure. With this in mind, on 1 January 2016, I saw the STC production at the Roslyn Packer Theatre, ‘The Ros’, in Sydney. It was recently renamed because of a sizeable endowment from James Packer, one of Australia’s richest men. By funding the arts and honouring his mother, Packer was seeking to stave off critics for his blatant abuse of power

in commandeering prime public land for a casino and luxury apartments around the corner from the theatre, named after the Cammeraygal woman, Barangaroo. The production opened on 26 December 2015, 409 years to the day after the first known performance by the King's Men at Whitehall.

That said, I never thought it would be possible for a lower-middle-class ecofeminist millennial such as myself to actually cry in a Shakespearean production, let alone *King Lear*. As much as I genuinely love the play, reading and watching it was always a scholarly exercise in coming to terms with the wild history of the text or the variant performance traditions. Schooled in feminist new historicism, I read from my body and through the lenses of adaptations by Jane Smiley and Sarah Kane. In this regard, during graduate school my supervisor was always troubled by my support for Goneril and Regan and utter lack of compassion for Lear, his marginalia relentlessly labouring both to fix my punctuation and draw out my sympathies. But at the end of the recent Sydney Theatre Company production, I cried. It was not a howl like Lear, but several dramatic tears rolled down my cheeks. This affective response was somehow drawn out by way of this production.

The production was tragi-comic, Lear and the fool ribbing each other throughout Act 1, with the 'boom-tish' of the snare and cymbal actually deployed to punctuate their terrible jokes. The stage was all black until Gloucester's blinding and then, after the interval, it was all white until the end of the play. And yet, come Act 3, the storm raged. Hundreds, maybe thousands of litres of water were dumped on stage. Large fans blew away stray props and set pieces and set clothes flapping about wildly in the wind. Edgar was completely naked and Lear ran around with his pants around his ankles for much of 3.4. Rush's training as a clown made his embodiment of the absurdity of the scene, a result of his stubborn attachment to the knights, all the more wretched.

What enabled the tragic to work in concert with the comic in this production, set within the seemingly 'black and white' moral universe of the stage, was the dramatization of Lear's similarities with Goneril and Regan. There was no moral dichotomy in this play. Rather than driving the emotional line down the centre with Lear, Cordelia, Kent, Albany, Gloucester and the Fool on one side and Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and Edmund on the other, Lear's similarities with his elder daughters were unmissable. Throughout

Acts 1 and 2 they made each other chortle with the ridiculousness of their arguments, which accelerated as if in a game of one-upmanship until the end of Act 2. If one line could be picked out to define the production it is the following from the Fool: 'I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are' (1.4.173). In contrast, Cordelia was painfully serious and she spoke too well, too clearly and too slowly; she was too honourable, as opposed to the others who were all too happy to indulge whatever affective whim might grip them in a given moment.

Despite the comedy that swept the moral high ground away from Lear by way of his juvenile love of a theatrical barney, the resulting production was deeply dark and serious. As online theatre reviewer Kevin Jackson said:

King Lear is hardly fare of good cheer for a Christmas or the start of a New Year night out, in Sydney (or anywhere else). It is, however, a great 'thing' for those of us ruminating on the behaviour of our species, the homo sapiens, at the beginning of a new century of our 'recorded' history, in anticipating the future of us all. Of, even, the planet earth, itself. (2015).

In this production, any vaudevillian holiday cheer stopped around the same time as the storm began. Or, if laughter continued, it was in response to the horror of what was unfolding, tinged with discomfort and guilt of earlier giggles wasted on cynical enjoyment of the indulgent antics of the political class. Come the storm, the ineptitude, greed and ambition underscoring Lear's fight with Goneril and Regan was exposed. In the way that the storm brings all the threads of the plot together, in this production the weather served to tack the production sharply from comedy to tragedy. After the blinding of Gloucester before the interval break, it felt terrible to ever have laughed at all.

Moreover, by making, in particular, Regan's lavish love of excess a trait inherited from her father, this production gave me a clear moral position on the play. It gave me a way to read with the storm and brought me to tears. For me, *King Lear* in our time is a critique of excess. The fight between Lear and his daughters, which culminates in Lear's defence of extravagance by comparing his knights to his daughters' love of unnecessary objects, reflects clearly on a Western upper-middle-class addicted to stuff, unable to let go of lavish lifestyles. Lear would 'Rather I abjure all roofs and choose / To wage against the enmity o'th' air - / To be a comrade with the wolf and owl' (2.2.400-2,

emphasis added) than to return to Goneril with fewer knights. My tears came from either mourning a realization that nothing can actually be done about this love of luxury, or as a strange physiological index of the overwhelming sense of the work still to be done. The storm, in this context, was metonymy, metaphor, synecdoche or symbol, and an irreducibly elemental otherness that called out the ridiculousness of some creatures that call themselves human.