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Old Vic New Voices Education  
The Old Vic  
The Cut  
London SE1 8NB  
E education@oldvictheatre.com  
@oldvicnewvoices  

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**Teaching resources**  
Written by Susanna Gould  
Design Matt Lane-Dixon  
Rehearsal and production photography Manuel Harlan  

**Old Vic New Voices**  
Hannah Fosker Head of Education & Community  
Sharon Kanolik Head of Education & Community (Maternity Cover)  
Richard Knowles Stage Business Co-ordinator  
Floriana Dezou Old Vic New Voices Intern  

Further details of this production oldvictheatre.com
FEHINTI BALOGUN
Ensemble (Curan/Captain), u/s Edmund
Fehinti graduated from RADA in 2016. This is his professional theatre debut. Film: First Acts.

FISTON BAREK
Ensemble (Knight/Herald), u/s Edgar/France/Burgundy
Theatre: Love the Sinner (National Theatre); The Rolling Stone (Royal Exchange/Orange Tree); Routes, Truth and Reconciliation (Royal Court); Little Baby Jesus (Oval House). Film: Tau. TV: Silent Witness, Holby City, Doctors.

BESSIE CARTER
Ensemble (Doctor), u/s Regan/Cordelia
Theatre: The Roundabout (Park Theatre). Film: Les Misérables. TV: Cranford. Bessie graduated from Guildhall School of Music and Drama in 2016, and received the Spotlight Screen Acting Prize the same year.

WILLIAM CHUBB
Albany
Theatre: Waste, Great Britain, Othello, Scenes From an Execution, The History Boys (National Theatre); The Sea, Whose Life Is It Anyway?, You Never Can Tell (West End); Lawrence After Arabia (Hampstead Theatre); Richard II (Shakespeare’s Globe); Yes Prime Minister (Chichester Festival Theatre/West End). TV: Close to the Enemy, Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell, Silk. Film: 6 Days, Adrift in Soho, Veer, Milk.

MORFYDD CLARK
Cordelia
Theatre: Les Liaisons Dangereuses (Donmar); Romeo and Juliet (Sheffield Crucible); Violence & Son (Royal Court); Blodeuweled (Theatr Genedlaethol). Film: Love and Friendship, Interlude in Prague, Pride, Prejudice and Zombies, The Call Up, The Falling, Madame Bovary, Two Missing. TV: Arthur & George, A Poet in New York, New Worlds.

JONATHAN COOTE
Ensemble (Third Knight), u/s Gloucester/Albany
Theatre: Yes Prime Minister, The Audience (West End); The Doctor’s Dilemma, Emil and the Detectives, Home, Our Country’s Good, As You Like It (National Theatre); Chilcot (BAC); The Effect (Firebrand); To Kill a Mockingbird, The Grapes of Wrath, Heartbreak House, Dolly West’s Kitchen, Arcadia (Pitlochry); The Duchess of Malfi, A Woman of No Importance, Four Nights in Knaresborough (New Vic, Stoke); The Tempest (Punchdrunk); Cut and Trust, Robin Hood, Worlds Apart (Stratford East); Cyrano de Bergerac (Forest of Dean Theatre Company). TV: Not Going Out, The Scandalous Lady W.

GEORGE EGGAY
Ensemble (Knight/Messenger), u/s multiple roles
Theatre: The Tiger’s Bones (New Perspectives); Arabian Nights (New Vic, Stoke); Dishooode on TV (Hackney Empire); A Streetcar Named Desire, Frozen, The Power Book, The Wind in the Willows (National Theatre); Papa Mas (Told by an Idiot); The Ramayana (Birmingham Rep/ National Theatre); Starstruck (Tricycle); The Servant of Two Masters (Nottingham Playhouse); Crossfire (Paines Plough); Bretevski Street (Theatre Centre London); The Robbers (Gate Theatre); The Meeting (Riverside Studios). Film: Edge of Tomorrow, Final Passage. TV: The Love of Books, Doctors, Shoot the Messenger, Spooks, Between the Lines.

MATT GAVAN
Ensemble (France/Second Servant), u/s Fool/Gentleman
Matt graduated from RADA in 2016. This is his professional theatre debut.

DAVID HARGREAVES
Old Man
Theatre: The Taming of the Shrew (RSC/West End); Henry V, The Globe Mysteries (Shakespeare’s Globe); The Cordelia Dream (RSC); King Lear, The Crucible (Bristol Old Vic); Inheritance (Live Theatre Newcastle); Pub Quiz is Life (Hull Truck); Puntilla and His Man Mattie (Belgrade Coventry); The Worcester Pilgrim (Worcester Cathedral); On the Shore of the Wide World (Royal Exchange Manchester/National Theatre); Hamlet (Birmingham Rep/UK tour/Elsinore); Twelfth Night (Birmingham Rep/UK tour); Quarantine, All That Trouble (Birmingham Rep). TV: The Borgias, Roads to Freedom, The Visitors, Headmaster, Armchair Thriller, Strangers, Sorry I’m a Stranger Here Myself, Juliet Bravo, Albion Market, Making Out, Bloomin’ Marvellous.
JOANNE HOWARTH
Ensemble (Third Servant), u/s Goneril
Theatre: Goodnight Mister Tom (West End); Much Ado About Nothing (Globe/international tour); I Am a Camera (Southwark Playhouse); You Can’t Take It With You (Manchester Royal Exchange); Bingo (Chichester/Young Vic); The Comedy of Errors, Twelfth Night, The Alchemist, The Virtuoso, ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore, Faust (RSC); Romeo and Juliet (New Wolsey Ipswich); The Pull of Negative Gravity (Colchester Mercury/Brits Off-Broadway); The Firework Maker’s Daughter (Told by an Idiot); Singer (Tricycle); Present Laughter (Bath); After the Dance (Oxford Stage Company). Film: Making Noise Quietly, Dusters. TV: Spooks, Wallander, Waking the Dead, Innocents, Doctors, Casualty, EastEnders.

RHYS IFANS
Fool

CELIA IMRIE
Goneril
Theatre: Noises Off (The Old Vic/West End); Acorn Antiques: The Musical (West End); The Sea, Yerma (National Theatre); The School for Scandal (RSC); Hayfever (Kingston Rose); Habeas Corpus (Donmar); Laughing Matters (St James's Studio). Film: Bridget Jones's Diary, The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (1&2), Absolutely Fabulous, Year by the Sea, A Cure for Wellness, Hush, Love Punch, St Trinians, Nanny McPhee, Calendar Girls, Star Wars: The Phantom Menace. TV: Better Things, Doctor Who, Love and Marriage, A Dark Adapted Eye, Kingdom, Dinnerladies. Books: The Happy Hoofar, Not Quite Nice, Nice Work (If You Can Get It).

GLENDA JACKSON
King Lear
Theatre: The White Devil, Phedra (The Old Vic); Marat/Sade (RSC/Broadway/Paris); Hamlet, Hedda Gabler, Antony and Cleopatra (RSC); Scenes from an Execution (Almeida); Strange Interlude, Macbeth (Broadway); Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (Los Angeles). Film: Women in Love (Academy Award), The Music Lovers, Sunday Bloody Sunday (BAFTA Award), A Touch of Class (Academy, Golden Globe & Evening Standard Awards), Hedda. TV: Elizabeth R (two Emmy Awards), Mary Queen of Scots (Evening Standard Award), The Patricia Neal Story. Glenda was awarded a CBE in 1978. From 1992 to 2015 she was a Member of Parliament.

KARL JOHNSON
Gloucester
Theatre: Noises Off (The Old Vic/West End); Frankenstein, The Seafarer, Glengarry Glen Ross, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Scenes from the Big Picture (National Theatre); Hamlet (Barbican); Fathers and Sons (Donmar); The Night Heron, Boy Gets Girl, The Weir, Been So Long (Royal Court); Vieux Carré (West End). Film: The Carer, Wittgenstein, Jubilee, The Tempest, Love is the Devil, The Deep Blue Sea, Hot Fuzz, The Illusionist, The Sea, Good Vibrations, Mr Turner. TV: Lark Rise to Candleford, Mum, Dickensian, A Tale of Two Cities, Vanity Fair, David Copperfield, Rome, The Chatterley Affair, Small Island, Atlantis, Call the Midwife, Merlin.

STEPHEN KENNEDY
Gentleman
Theatre: The Plough and the Stars, The Silver Tassie, Mother Courage, England People Very Nice (National Theatre); The Vote (Donmar); The Cherry Orchard (Young Vic); To Kill a Mockingbird (Regent’s Park); Forty Winks (Royal Court); School for Scandal (Barbican); King John (Rose Theatre); Elegy for Young Lovers (ENO); The Crucible (Manchester Royal Exchange); Cyrano de Bergerac (Bristol Old Vic); Comedians (Oxford Stage Company); Messiah (Lyon); La Traviata (Vienna). Film: Private Peaceful, The Agent, Notes on a Scandal, Braveheart, Nothing Personal. TV: Silent Witness, Lucky Man, A Touch of Frost, Making Waves, The Vice, On Home Ground, Ballykissangel, The Hanging Gale.

SIMON MANYONDA
Edmund
Theatre: Light Shining in Buckinghamshire, King Lear, Greenland, Welcome to Thebes (National Theatre); A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Julius Caesar (RSC); Giving (Hampstead); Romeo and Juliet (Sheffield Crucible); Wildfire (Hampstead); The Mamba (West Yorkshire Playhouse); Antony and Cleopatra (Liverpool Playhouse); A Midsummer Night’s Dream (Lyric Hammersmith); Red Peppers (Old Red Lion); All Night I Dream of Being Good (The Yard). Film: World War Z, Julius Caesar, How It's Done. TV: Uncle, Neil Gaiman’s Likely Stories, Doctor Who, Suspects, Holby City, Whitechapel.
HARRY MELLING
Edgar
Theatre: Hand to God, The Hot House, When Did You Last See My Mother (West End); Women Beware Women, Mother Courage and Her Children (National Theatre); The Angry Brigade (Redes Plough/Bush); Peddling (HighTide/Arcola/59E59 New York); King Lear (Chichester Festival Theatre/BAM New York); Smack Family Robinson (Rose Theatre Kingston); I Am a Camera (Southwark Playhouse); School for Scandal (Barbican). Film: Lost City of Z, Harry Potter series. Short film: The Winds of Change, I Think Therefore, Felicity. TV: The Musketeers, Garrow’s Law, Merlin, Just William, Friends and Crocodiles.

MARK ROSE
Ensemble (Knight/First Servant), u/s Cornwall/Oswald
Theatre: On the Middle Day (Old Vic New Voices); Hangmen (West End); The Beaux’ Stratagem, A Taste of Honey, Port (National Theatre); The Trial of Jane Fonda, Frozen (Park Theatre); Women Laughing (Old Red Lion); Masters Are You Mad?, Twelfth Night (Grosvenor Park Open Air Theatre); The Accomplice (Menier Chocolate Factory); Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (Manchester Royal Exchange); Spider’s Web (UK tour). Film: God’s Acre, The Vintage. TV: Coronation Street, Emmerdale. Mark is a founder member of Blueprint Theatre Company.

GARY SEFTON
Oswald
Theatre: Mother Courage, Widower’s Houses (National Theatre); Beauty and the Beast (RSC); The 39 Steps (West End); Scrooge (St James Theatre); School for Scandal (Barbican); Julius Caesar, Beauty and the Beast (Young Vic); Rhinoceros (Riverside Studios); A Midsummer Night’s Dream (Lancaster Dukes); Parting Shots (Stephen Joseph Theatre); Inconceivable (West Yorkshire Playhouse); Frogs (Nottingham Playhouse); The Chimes (Bristol Old Vic); Metamorphosis (Birmingham Rep). Film: Faintheart, Saving Private Ryan, Elephant Juice, Full Frontal, Fast Food, Noon Sharp, Beauty. TV: Foyle’s War, Criminal Justice, He Kills Coppers, A Touch of Frost, Open Wide, State of Play, Spooks, The Kidnap, Four Fathers.

JAMES STADDON
Ensemble (Burgundy/Messenger), u/s Kent/Old Man
Theatre: Goodnight Mr Tom (West End/UK tour); Birdsong, Journey’s End, Cyrano de Bergerac, Miss Saigon, King (West End); Cymbeline, Pericles, The Winter’s Tale, The Tempest (RSC); The Crucible, Les Misérables (RSC/West End); As You Like It, Tamer Tamed (RSC/US tour); Birdsong (UK & Ireland tour); The Go Between (West Yorkshire Playhouse/UK tour); Gone to Earth (Lyric Hammersmith); Moonshadow (Royal Albert Hall/UK tour); Food (BAC/UK tour); Macbeth (West Yorkshire Playhouse); The Beggar’s Opera (ENO/Bridewell Theatre); Yarico (Sadler’s Wells/Barbados). Film: The Bench, Dark Communion, Storm, Ticks, Subterrain, Hamlet. TV: Upstairs Downstairs, The Cut, Emmerdale, Midsomer Murders, Coronation Street, EastEnders, Between the Lines.

DANNY WEBB
Cornwall
Theatre: Hamlet (The Old Vic/world tour); Welcome Home, Captain Fox!, The Philanthropist (Donmar); The Seagull (Regent’s Park); The Mistress Contract, Circle Mirror Transformation, The Witness, Chicken Soup with Barley, Pianoforte (Royal Court); Troilus and Cressida (RSC); 13 (National Theatre); Blasted (Lyric Hammersmith); The Green Man (Bush/Drum Plymouth); Richard III (Sheffield Crucible); One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (UK tour). Film: A Little Chaos, Residue, City of Tiny Lights, Churchill, The Contract, Locke, Alien 3, Henry V. TV: Undercover, Humans, SS GB, Plebs, Poirot: Elephants Can Remember, Lightfields, Le Grande, Strike Back, Above Suspicion, Endeavour, Sherlock: A Scandal in Belgravia, Life Begins.

SARGON YELDA
Kent
Theatre: Light Shining in Buckinghamshire, Dana, Emperor and Galilean, Mother Courage and Her Children (National Theatre); Teh Internet is Serious Business, Human Animals (Royal Court); The Comedy of Errors, The Tempest, Twelfth Night (RSC); Moby Dick, The Cabinet of Dr Caligari (Arcola/Simple 8); When the Rain Stops Falling (Almeida); Incognito (HighTide Festival/Bush); Forget Me Not (Bush); Stovepipe (National Theatre/Bush/HighTide Festival); Salt Meets Wound (Theatre503). Film: Spectre, Dead Cat. TV: Innocent, Zen, Compulsion, Midnight Man, Saddam’s Tribe.
DEBORAH WARNER
Director
Theatre: Titus Andronicus – Olivier/Evening Standard awards, King John, Electra (RSC); Mother Courage and her Children, Happy Days, The PowerBook, Richard II, King Lear, The Good Person of Sichuan (National Theatre); Hedda Gabler – Olivier Award (Abbey Theatre/ West End); Footfalls (West End); The Testament of Mary (Broadway/Barbican); A School for Scandal, Julius Caesar (Barbican); Medea – Evening Standard Award (Abbey/West End/Broadway); Der Sturm, Coriolanus (Salzburg Festival); Eine Maison du Poupee (Odeon Paris); The Waste Land (Wilton’s Music Hall/world tour). Installations: St Pancras Project, The Tower Project (LIFT); The Angel Project (Lincoln Center/PIAF); Peace Camp (London 2012). Opera: productions for Glyndebourne, Royal Opera House, La Scala, ENO, Opera Comique, Opera North, Vienna Festival, The Met, Lyon. Deborah was named Commandeur de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2013 and awarded a CBE in 2006.

JEAN KALMAN
Lighting Designer
Jean has received Olivier, Drama Desk and Evening Standard awards for lighting design, and is an Associate Artist at the RSC.

MEL MERCIER
Composer & Sound Designer
Theatre: The Tempest (Salzburg Festival); Sacrifice at Easter (Cork); Shadow of a Gunman (Abbey Theatre/ Lyric Belfast); A Girl is a Half-formed Thing (Dublin Theatre Festival/Edinburgh Festival – Fringe First Award/ London/New York); The Testament of Mary (Barbican/ Broadway – Drama Desk Award). Radio: Documentary on One: Peadar Mercier. Mel is Director of Cork Gamelan Ensemble, and has performed with pianist Micheal Ó Súilleabháin for 40 years, and with John Cage (Roaratorio, Inlets, Duets) throughout the 1980s. He is Professor of Performing Arts at the University of Limerick.

JUSTIN NARDELLA
Associate Set Designer
Theatre as designer: The Hunting of the Snark (Sherman Theatre Cardiff/Hong Kong); Mr Incredible (Vault Festival/Edinburgh Fringe); Where Do Little Birds Go? (Edinburgh Festival/Old Red Lion/UK tour); Legends! (OPAC Queensland/Theatre Royal Sydney); Hansel and Gretel (Opera in Space); Tender Napalm (Brisbane Festival); Orfeo (Brandenburg Orchestra); Before and After (Sydney Theatre Company). Theatre as associate set designer: Tristan and Isolde (ENO); Priscilla Queen of the Desert: The Musical (UK & international tours). Film: Andy X, Spoilers. Justin was the inaugural winner of the Australian BMW Young Artist of the Year Award.

ZEB LALLJEE
Costume Designer
Costume Supervisor credits. Theatre: Much Ado About Nothing (The Old Vic); Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, Blood and Gifts, Mother Courage (National Theatre); A Doll’s House (Young Vic); Kate Bush (Hammersmith Apollo); A Midsummer Nights Dream (Aix en Provence Festival). Opera: Cavalleria Rusticana/Pagliacci (Metropolitan Opera New York); Falstaff (Canadian Opera Company); Lucia di Lammermoor (Washington National Opera); Les Troyens (La Scala Milan); The Messiah (Opera de Lyon); Death in Venice, Norma, Marriage of Figaro (ENO); Falstaff (Royal Opera House). Film: Verdi: A Life in Two Parts. TV: To Walk Invisible: The Brontë Sisters.

59 PRODUCTIONS
Video Designer
Theatre: wonder.land (National Theatre); War Horse (National Theatre/West End); Les Misérables (West End/Broadway); Feast (Young Vic); Game (Almeida); Get Carter (Northern Stage); An American in Paris – Tony Award, Hedwig and the Angry Inch (Broadway); The Forbidden Zone (Salzburg Festival/Barbican). Opera & dance: After the Rain/Within the Golden Hour, Ceremony of Innocence, Invitus Invitam, The Goldberg Project (Royal Ballet); Morgen und Abend, Salome, The Minotaur (Royal Opera House); Satyagraha, Dr Atomic, The Enchanted Island, 125th Anniversary Gala (Metropolitan Opera); Events: London 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony; Harmonium, Deep Time (Edinburgh International Festival); Lighting the Sails (Sydney Opera House).

JESSICA RONANE CDG
 Casting Director
Theatre: The Caretaker, The Master Builder, Dr. Seuss’s The Lorax, The Hairy Ape, Future Conditional (The Old Vic); Running Wild (Regent’s Park); Angus Thongs
and Even More Snogging (West Yorkshire Playhouse). Theatre (children casting): To Kill a Mockingbird, The Sound of Music (Regent’s Park); School of Rock, The Audience, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Made in Dagenham, I Can’t Sing, Singin’ in the Rain, Billy Elliot the Musical (West End); Matilda the Musical (RSC/West End); Bugsy Malone (Lyric Hammersmith); Caroline or Change, Baby Girl, Mrs Affleck, Burnt by the Sun (National Theatre); A Member of the Wedding, Far Away (Young Vic).

MIKE GUNNING
Associate Lighting Designer
Theatre: Tales from the Vienna Woods (National Theatre); Richard III, Henry V (RSC); Shakespeare: The Man from Stratford (West End); The Emperor (Home Manchester/Young Vic); The Drowned Man (Punchdrunk); Ken (Hampstead); The Second Mrs Tanqueray (Kingston Rose); The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui (Everyman Liverpool); The Wizard of Oz (Royal Festival Hall); The Jew of Malta (Almeida); Julius Caesar (Barbican/international tour); My Judy Garland Life (Nottingham Playhouse); Medea (Broadway); Crime and Punishment (Moscow). Opera: Die Zauberflöte (Stichting Nationale Opera); The Marriage of Figaro (Royal Opera House); Dido & Aeneas (Barbican); Madame Butterfly (Holland Park Opera).

LEIGH DAVIES
Associate Sound Designer
Theatre as Sound Designer: The Two Gentleman of Verona (Shakespeare’s Globe/UK tour); A Christmas Carol (Rose Theatre Kingston). As Associate Sound Designer: Matilda the Musical (Australia); Hetty Feather (West End/UK tour); The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (Rose Theatre Kingston); The 24 Hour Musicals, The 24 Hour Plays (The Old Vic); Wah! Wah! Girls (Kneehigh/Sadler’s Wells). As Sound Engineer: Million Dollar Quartet, Ghost the Musical, Avenue Q, Les Misérables (West End); Me and My Girl (Sheffield Crucible); Jekyll and Hyde (UK tour); Blood Brothers (West End/UK tour); BBC Proms 2004–13. As Head of Sound: Matilda the Musical (West End).

JAMIE MANTON
Assistant Director
Jamie is co-Founder and co-Artistic Director of Duelling Productions. Theatre as director: No Quarter, A Single Act, The Norman Conquests, Punk Rock (Duelling Productions); Radicchio (RWR/Theatre503); Our Lords and Masters, August: Osage County (Exeter Northcott Theatre). Opera as Assistant Director: Tristan and Isolde, The Magic Flute, La Bohème, Carmen, The Mastersingers of Nuremberg, The Gospel According to the Other Mary, Xerxes (ENO); Between Worlds (ENO/Barbican).
THE PLAYWRIGHT AND THE PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT – WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

A great deal of reverence surrounds William Shakespeare. In the book *Changing Stages: a view of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, written by the directors Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright, the whole first chapter is devoted to Shakespeare – a playwright alive four hundred years before the twentieth century. This in itself immediately tells us something of William Shakespeare’s influence, but Eyre and Wright go further, describing him as, ‘our icon, our emblem, our logo, our talisman, our secular saint, our patriarch, our sage, our national poet’. Shakespeare’s plays are still performed, over 400 years after they were written, by both professional and amateur companies, all over the world, all the time. Everyone who has been to school will have read, if not seen, one of his plays, so far-reaching is his significance and influence. There are academics, writers and directors who have dedicated their entire careers to understanding and/or staging his work. The Royal Shakespeare Company was set up to stage his work; and The Globe Theatre, which saw the first performances of many of Shakespeare’s plays, was rebuilt in the 1990s, and continues to stage his work in the contemporary style of his day.

Despite – or perhaps because of – Shakespeare’s renown, reading or watching one of his plays can seem extremely daunting: the language can be difficult to understand and, therefore, the storylines difficult to follow. Lots of people feel like they have had bad experiences of Shakespeare – it can feel like the characters are speaking a foreign language – and that they keep talking for ages (Hamlet is the longest and can last up to five hours in performance)!

So, what is the enduring appeal of Shakespeare, and how can we help ourselves understand his writing better? Although his plays can often feel alien, old-fashioned and impenetrable, one of the amazing things about Shakespeare is his ability to write about human beings and universal human emotions. If you have ever been in love, been frightened, experienced grief or loss – in fact any human emotion – then Shakespeare is relevant to you. Furthermore, Shakespeare shows the massive complexity of human beings, the way they feel things they don’t want to feel, or believe they shouldn’t feel, the conflicts they experience with others’ feelings and desires, with religion, tradition and politics. At the beginning of King Lear, when Cordelia refuses her father’s instructions to compete with her sisters to express who loves him the most, she knows that it will offend him and cause trouble, but it is clear from the action of the play how much she does love and respect Lear.

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1Page 18 *Changing Stages: A View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, by Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright
Like real human beings, Shakespeare’s characters are not black and white, but are complicated, finely nuanced and unpredictable. This idea of the characters’ complexity – the idea that it can be difficult to reduce them to ‘patterns’ and generalisations – is reflected in a note once given to the actress Judi Dench when she was playing Cleopatra in Shakespeare’s *Anthony and Cleopatra*. She was told, ‘Don’t think you’ve got to come in and play all of Cleopatra in the first scene. All you do is play different aspects of her in all the scenes, and by the end hopefully you’ll have the whole character’. This underlines the very human unpredictability of Shakespeare’s characters, but also, interestingly, a simplicity of approach that is quite reassuring when coming to Shakespeare as an student, audience member, actor or director.

**SHAKESPEARE’S LANGUAGE**

Arguably, the most significant aspect of Shakespeare’s writing – and the one which so many people, young and old, professional and non-professional, struggle with – is language. Shakespeare writes in verse (discussed in more detail below) and uses poetic language. A common misconception is that everyone in Shakespeare’s time spoke like this in everyday life. They didn’t. People would have spoken differently to us, because language naturally evolves – think of some of the slang words and terms that we use today: some, surprisingly, have their roots in a long ago age, but many would not exist without the developments of modern life, such as technology. However, normal people in Shakespeare’s time did not go around speaking poetry – Shakespeare wrote in verse in order to communicate to audiences in a specific way – the language is stylised, and it is not supposed to sound ‘normal’ or everyday. The director Richard Eyre describes it as ‘an expressive tool that gives a greater...distillation of thought and feeling than prose’ – in other words, it is simply better able to express characters’ thoughts and feelings than prose would be.

Shakespeare’s words are written primarily to be performed – not read – and Shakespeare was not very interested in having his plays published. Not just the word, but the spoken word is at the heart of Shakespeare. It may seem an obvious thing to say, but it is worth remembering that the use of poetry is deliberate, and if we start to think of it as consciously used by the characters, it starts to make more sense.

Looking at Shakespeare’s language from a slightly different angle like this can be a really helpful way of understanding it, and making it seem less alien. Patsy Rodenburg, the well-known voice coach who has worked with the actors on this production of *King Lear*, talks about how we use language now compared to how language was used in Shakespeare’s time, and, more importantly, by Shakespeare’s characters. She suggests that in modern times, we tend to use language to evade others rather than to connect with them. We use subtext – communicating our meaning more through our tone of voice than through the actual words we use – and are much less likely to be direct or explicit in what we are saying. She gives examples of more modern playwrights, naming Harold Pinter in particular, who made this idea famous, with dialogue that goes round in circles, approaching thoughts and feelings that never get expressed directly but make themselves strongly felt through subtext.

Patsy Rodenburg believes that Shakespeare’s characters are the opposite of this: they speak clearly and powerfully, own what they say and how they feel. Arguably, Shakespeare’s characters have no subtext – what they say is direct and explicit, and we are left in no doubt as to what they think or feel. This is helpful to bear in mind when we think about the language they use: the elaborate words and phrases Shakespeare’s characters use are deliberate because they are trying to find the best possible way to express their thoughts and feelings.

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**EXERCISE**

**In pairs, label yourselves A and B.**

A goes first and talks to B for a minute about a chosen (simple) subject, eg what she/he did at the weekend. This should be done without any preparation or sense of performance or entertainment. B should simply listen with eyes shut. Swap over so both have a go at listening and speaking.

**Discuss.**

What do you notice about how people speak and how they use language? When someone is just chatting, they tend to pause a lot, ‘um’ and ‘er’ quite a lot, and often do not even speak in full sentences.
They are trying to be clear and direct. Patsy Rodenburg talks about how Shakespeare’s characters use language to navigate, understand, negotiate and survive the world in which they live, and the other people they encounter. For them, words are like weapons or tools, constructed into speech and speeches that are more often than not trying to persuade someone to do something (arguably, even a soliloquy, a speech spoken by one person addressed to him or herself, can be seen in this light). The director John Barton, in the television series Playing Shakespeare, explores with actors the idea that the characters are deliberately using poetry to express themselves. This is quite a helpful way to approach it - it can be useful to see Shakespeare's characters’ dialogue as a constant work in progress – as if they are forever piecing together their thoughts and reaching for the best words to do this, whether out loud to another character, or internally to themselves. In this way, it seems less odd that his characters use such poetry and such extravagant-seeming ways of expressing themselves.

Once we understand this, Shakespeare’s use of language can actually start to help us understand what is going on or what a character is thinking and feeling. It is all there on the page.

**VERSE AND IAMBIC PENTAMETER**

One of the key things about Shakespeare’s plays is that they are written in verse, and this is something that inevitably affects an actor’s playing of the lines and, in turn, what they communicate. The word ‘verse’ can in itself be confusing, because often what we think of as verse is something that rhymes, or something that is part of a poem – something that looks quite different to a Shakespeare play. In this context, ‘verse’ refers to the rhythm of the lines Shakespeare has written. Mostly Shakespeare writes his plays in ‘blank verse’, meaning that the lines do not rhyme. Occasionally he does write rhyming verse, and sometimes he writes in prose. The use of blank verse, rhyming verse and prose is always a choice – not accidental – and will tell you something about the character, how she/he is feeling, or the particular situation they are in.

As we have seen, blank verse does not rhyme – but it does have a regular rhythm, and this rhythm is key. The proper name of this rhythm is iambic pentameter. Without going into lots of technical detail, this means that a line will have ten syllables in it, arranged in five pairs. The second syllable of each of these pairs is ‘strong’, or ‘stressed’, which means that this is where the emphasis falls when spoken. The first syllable is ‘weak’, or ‘unstressed’. This means that the rhythm of a line sounds roughly like this: de DUM de DUM de DUM de DUM de DUM. Generally what you will find is, that the words that Shakespeare wants emphasised are the ones where the strong beats fall. For example, in the opening line to Twelfth Night is ‘If music be the food of love play on’, the words ‘mus[ic]’, ‘be’, ‘food’, and ‘love’ are emphasised, suggesting the importance of these things to the duke, and to the play as a whole.

However, if every single line of every play was written to exactly the same rhythm, it might start to sound a bit boring and monotonous. Shakespeare’s genius lies not only in his use of the rules of iambic pentameter, but with how he breaks these rules. When you look closely at a speech from one of Shakespeare’s plays, you will notice that not every line has ten syllables. Even the lines that do, do not necessarily follow the ‘de DUM’ pattern and would sound very false if you tried to make them do so. Again, each time Shakespeare breaks these rules, it is an active choice – the change in rhythm tells us something. Different actors may interpret the clues differently, but the important thing to know is that these clues are there if you know how to look for them.

The issue of rhythm may sound like it makes Shakespeare even more complicated, but it doesn’t. Once you get used to how it works, it can provide really useful clues as to what a character is thinking and feeling.

Different directors have different ways of approaching Shakespearean texts, and there are different schools of thought on the way actors should speak his verse. Some react against the idea of the rhythm, feeling that it is too formal and therefore a bit artificial. Others believe passionately that by observing exactly what Shakespeare has written with the voice, the actor will automatically release the emotion and meaning in the language. Others still believe in a mixture of both, so every rehearsal room will look slightly different in this respect.

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2 The whole series of Playing Shakespeare can be found on YouTube
**EXERCISE**

Try getting the rhythm of iambic pentameter into your body and under your skin. Start by clapping the rhythm ‘de DUM de DUM de DUM de DUM de DUM’. Then try moving around to this rhythm.

Try writing some of your own lines in iambic pentameter.

Try unlocking the iambic pentameter in the lines below. Read the line out loud first, then try humming its rhythm, noticing that every second syllable is stressed. Then try speaking the line again with the iambic pentameter rhythm behind it.

‘If music be the food of love play on’ (*Twelfth Night*)

‘But soft what light from yonder window breaks?’ (*Romeo and Juliet*)

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**EXERCISE**

Now try the same exercise with these irregular lines. Notice how wrong it sounds when you try to speak them with the regular rhythm above. What might it tell us about the character and the line?

‘Once more unto the breach dear friends once more’ (*Henry V*)

‘Good Queen, my Lord, Good Queen; I say Good Queen’ (*The Winter’s Tale*)
Just because Shakespeare’s characters speak poetry, doesn’t mean that actors need to act in a really exaggerated way when speaking Shakespeare’s lines. Although we know very little about styles of acting in Shakespeare’s time, there is some sense that it would have been much more melodramatic than the acting styles we are used to now. However, there is also evidence to suggest that, although we would find the acting style of Shakespeare’s own company, the King’s Men, ‘over-the-top’, these actors were trying to find a style of acting that was more naturalistic – the idea of truthfulness was there, if not in a form we would now recognise it. In Hamlet, Hamlet advises a group of actors who have arrived in Elsinore and are going to perform a play. The speech he gives is often referred to as ‘Hamlet’s Advice to the Players’, and it is often used as evidence for Shakespeare’s own belief in the need for a naturalistic playing style. Although people did not have the concept of psychology and character that we have today, the fact that Shakespeare’s plays show such complex characters, and explore the inner workings of their minds, suggests that there was strong interest in these things, and this would inevitably have influenced acting styles.

Nowadays, we are obviously very interested in the idea of character, and more familiar with the concept of psychology, and acting styles have developed to help us explore and communicate this. For some, this can feel at odds with the very stylised language that Shakespeare uses, but, arguably, it does not have to. In the television series ‘Playing Shakespeare’, the director John Barton explores combining modern acting styles with Shakespeare’s poetry. He asks the actor Ian McKellan to try a speech from the beginning of Merchant of Venice in three different ways. First, he gets him to try it taking no notice of the poetry, speaking it casually and conversationally as if it’s every day speech. Then he gets him to do it completely over the top, in the way that some people imagine Shakespeare needs to be spoken. Watching these two examples,
it is very quickly obvious that neither approach works: the more exaggerated version sounds ridiculous and
distances us, and the more casual version that ignores the verse means it is difficult to even understand
what is being said – neither of these extreme styles allow us to connect to the character and what he
is feeling. John Barton then asks Ian McKellen what the character wants in this moment, a very modern
approach. He then asks him to try the speech as if the character is trying to find the words to express
this particular desire. Suddenly the speech comes to life and makes much more sense: we feel connected
to the character and begin to understand what he is trying to do with the very poetic language.

Although the amount of words he uses is a challenge, actually, because of the way he writes,
Shakespeare’s text is peppered with clues to meaning even if we cannot easily make exact sense of a
sentence or speech immediately. His choice of language, and even the sound of the words, gives us a
strong sense of the mood or feeling of what is being said, making the writing very visceral – or strongly
felt. Often actors will say that when they simply speak a speech, observing the language and the rhythm of
the text, the work is done for them – they cannot help projecting a particular emotion because it is actually
embedded in the text, as if it is sewn into its fabric. The actress Sheila Hancock talks of how she suddenly
realised she needed to do less not more to act Shakespeare.

There is a great deal of detail in what Shakespeare has written which actually helps actors rather than
hinders them, because it allows them to be specific rather than generalised. Rather than the actor just
thinking, for example, ‘right, at this point I’m upset’, and making the speech very generalised with a ‘wash’ of
emotion, he is arguably able to use the language and how it develops and progresses to carry him through
the speech.

**EXERCISE**

Below are some descriptive words and phrases from a selection of
Shakespeare plays.

Try physicalising some of these, noticing how it makes your body feel and whether
it has an affect on your emotions. Start by walking around the room and, one by one,
try embodying each one, continuing to move around the room in some way. Try adding
sound. What do you notice about the language and how it makes you feel?

**Fiery-footed; cistern for foul toads; gallop apace; knot and gender; an
unweeded garden that goes to seed; such stuff as dreams are made on;
hurly-burly; full of scorpions is my mind; feather of lead; marble-hearted
fiend; sulphurous and thought-executing fires; gentle rain from Heaven;
babbling gossip.**
SHAKESPEARE’S LIFE

Given the significance of Shakespeare, surprisingly little is known about the man himself as few records of his private life exist. The relative mystery surrounding Shakespeare extends to questions of authorship of the work attributed to him – in other words, people began to question whether there really was a William Shakespeare, and whether, in fact, other people wrote the plays that were supposed to be by him. This controversial discussion is still being explored and debated in the present day.

What we do know is that Shakespeare was born in Stratford-Upon-Avon in 1564, and lived until 1616. At the age of eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, and had three children, Susanna, Hamnet and Judith. He had a successful career as an actor, as well as a writer, and was part owner of the playing company The Lord Chamberlain’s Men (later called The King’s Men).

As a writer, Shakespeare wrote poetry as well as plays. During his life-time, he wrote 38 plays, 154 sonnets and 2 long narrative poems. The plays can be divided into comedies, histories, tragedies and tragic-comedies (or ‘romances’). He produced most of his own work between 1589 and 1613.

From 1594, Shakespeare’s plays were performed solely by The Lord Chamberlain’s’ Men. In that year, some of his plays were published, and by 1598, his name had become a selling point. In 1599, several of the company members – including Shakespeare – built their own theatre, The Globe, on the south bank of the River Thames in London. In 1603, after the death of Queen Elizabeth I, and the accession of King James I, the company were awarded a royal patent by the king, and changed their name from The Lord Chamberlain’s Men to The King’s Men.
Shakespeare’s life and times were very different from our own. Society had a very different structure and shape; tastes, beliefs and concerns were very different; and things that are of little importance to many people now were then crucially significant.

When Shakespeare was born, Queen Elizabeth I was on the throne, and then King James I. Then, unlike now, the monarchy was all-powerful; and it was the strongly held belief that kings and queens were invested with divine right, meaning that they received their right to govern directly from God. Although there was a parliament, the monarch had the ultimate say in everything. It is worth bearing this in mind when considering *King Lear*, its characters and their actions. It is clear that Shakespeare was interested in exploring issues of power – particularly, in this play, in relation to family and the monarchy.

In Shakespeare’s time, religion played a massive part in almost everyone’s lives, and this religion was dictated by the monarch. The two major religions in England around this time were Protestantism and Catholicism, and different monarchs dictated adherence to different sides: under Queen Mary I, who preceded Elizabeth I, protestants were persecuted, and failure to adhere to the ‘correct’ religion could result in imprisonment, torture or execution. Elizabeth I, however, restored the country to Protestantism, but permitted others to practise their chosen religion as long as it posed no threat to her realm or rule. Questions of religion and power were inextricably linked, and the 16th century as a whole was a period fraught with tensions particularly involving the monarchy and the practice of Christianity.

**THEATRE IN SHAKESPEARE’S TIME**

The importance of language in Shakespeare’s plays is echoed in the performance style and nature of theatre and drama generally at this time. Then, plays were written to be heard rather than seen – the word ‘audience’ comes from the Latin word ‘audire’, ‘to hear’ – and Shakespeare’s contemporary audience did not expect a ‘show’ or ‘spectacle’ as much as, perhaps, a story.

Although, of course, the plays were staged with actors so that there was physically something to actually see when you went to the theatre, little attention or thought was given to the visual aspect of the performance. In 2016, we live in an extremely visual culture – we are bombarded with images from the moment we wake up to the moment we go to sleep, from our phones, the television, magazines – even screens on the Tube and buses and taxis are feeding us images as we go about our daily lives. It is easy to take this for granted and forget that this wasn’t always so. We are sophisticated visual ‘readers’ and modern theatrical productions reflect this – from the time taken to ‘block’ a play so that the actors move around in time and space in a way that illustrates their story, to the more elaborate visual detail of many productions.

The idea of a director was also alien to Shakespeare’s audiences. There would be someone in charge of the staging of the play, but this would usually be the playwright himself, or another actor. This meant that there would be no unified directorial concept governing a production, drawing together acting, design, staging etc – this is, in fact, a very modern idea.

Books in Shakespeare’s time were much less commonplace than they are now, and you couldn’t just pick up a copy of *King Lear* in your local bookshop. This extended to the fact that even the actors did not have a copy of the whole play: a company read-through is a modern phenomenon – in Shakespeare’s day, actors would be presented with a cue script, which meant that they merely had their own lines, and the line (or cue) that came before each of their own lines. This obviously meant that an individual actor would usually have no real sense of the play as a whole at the outset. In turn, this meant that, whilst he (only men were allowed to be actors) might have a sense of his own character, there was little sense of the world of the play. Even rehearsals were unlikely to clarify things in this sense, as they generally focused on the movement of action scenes, or practising costume changes – in other words, rehearsals were designed to ensure the smooth running of practical issues rather than clarifying any more conceptual, emotional or character-based issues. The idea of questioning what a character might be thinking or feeling – or what his or her objective was – things that have almost become a cliché in modern theatre, were just unheard of then.
The performance itself would be very rudimentary compared to what we are accustomed to today. Little, if any scenery, was used (the role of designer, like that of the director, did not exist yet). The stage platform at the 1599 Globe had a trapdoor, which led to a space under the stage, and two pillars which supported a canopy painted with the stars, sun, moon and signs of the zodiac. At the centre of this stage roof was another trapdoor which could be used to lower characters onto the stage.

Not a huge amount is known about acting styles in Shakespeare's day, but there is some evidence to suggest that it was much more melodramatic than we generally see now. This is not to say that actors and audiences in Shakespeare's day were uninterested in truth, just that, to them, this would, perhaps, have simply looked very different onstage. The style would have been much more declamatory – in other words much more like the actor is giving a speech than acting naturally – and the lines would probably have been spoken quite fast.

In Shakespeare's time there was no sense of interpretation of a text as we know it today – for example, The Old Vic's production is not the only production of *King Lear* currently on, and the director of each of these will have interpreted the play differently. In Shakespeare's time, the play would simply be performed in the same way again and again – the emphasis each time, as we have seen, on simply telling the story. This was compounded by the fact that certain companies owned certain plays, meaning that a number of approaches was actually not even possible. It could be said that this period can be thought of as the 'playwright's theatre' – the writing was the centre-piece, and its performance merely a vehicle for making it known and heard.
WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE’S TIME

In Shakespeare’s time the status of women was very different from what it is now. The play King Lear, although set in a time even further back than Shakespeare's own, gives us some sense of the roles and power structures that were inherited by Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

Women in Shakespeare’s time were essentially seen as property – as children, they were the property of their father, and then they were passed into the ownership of husbands – sometimes from as young an age as twelve. They had an extremely limited education, were not allowed to vote or own property themselves. Whilst women from wealthier families might have more access to an education via tutors – perhaps in languages or the sciences – this education aimed only at equipping them for domestic life, arguably making them a more attractive accessory to a husband and home rather than enriching them for a professional, or even more exciting personal, life.

Women were certainly not allowed on the stage. In Shakespeare’s time, the female characters in his plays would instead have been played by young boys.

Paradoxically, however, this period saw one of the most powerful female monarchs of all time: when Shakespeare was born, Queen Elizabeth I was on the throne, defying many of the rules that governed other women of the time. She never married – which, at that time, was completely unthinkable – and this meant that she did not have to give up her power to a man.

The emphasis on the sphere of male experience is very much reflected in the writing of the time. Although Shakespeare wrote some amazing female characters, they do not dominate his body of work, and it is usually the male mind and male actions under scrutiny. Many female actresses have lamented this over the years, including Glenda Jackson who takes on the role of Lear in this production.

Though things are radically different now in so many respects, the issue of gender and the respective status of men and women is obviously still a hot topic. It is particularly interesting to consider this in the context of this production of King Lear, where the title role is being played by a woman.
HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF KING LEAR

Shakespeare finished writing *King Lear* in 1606, the same year he wrote *Macbeth* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*. Though we do not necessarily need to know about history in order to understand a play like *King Lear*, it is interesting to see how the times impacted on its writer, and how they might have influenced what he wrote. Even if we are looking at *King Lear* from a contemporary point of view, knowledge of the time in which it was written may help us shed new light on its themes and ideas.

By 1606, King James I was on the throne, having peacefully succeeded Queen Elizabeth I, who was the ruling monarch when Shakespeare was born. Shakespeare's writing was inevitably influenced by the character of the time which, in turn, was inevitably influenced by the monarch in power. Broadly speaking, Elizabeth's reign was characterised by a much more cheerful and peaceful atmosphere than James’ reign, which was much more turbulent, and characterised by a darker, more cynical mood, which is reflected in the writing of this time. Unlike our own times, in Shakespeare's time, the monarchy was all-powerful, and the belief was that a monarch was invested with a divine right to rule. This was not just an unspoken belief, but one which was continually under scrutiny. James I himself wrote extensively about the idea of a ruler having absolute authority and being invested with this divine right.

A century before Shakespeare's time, King Henry VIII had broken from the Catholic church in order to be able to divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn (which the Catholic church forbid), and the reverberations of this decision were still being felt in Shakespeare's time, demonstrating “the degree to which the monarch's personal desires and actions could affect the destiny and structure of an entire country, seemingly on a whim”\(^4\). It is not hard to see how this idea of a society shaken to the core by the “whim” of a monarch is reflected in *King Lear*; and the major events of 1606 itself tie in with this idea, evoking questions about who makes decisions, and how power and authority is correctly exercised.

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Mark Rose, Danny Webb, Karl Johnson, Joanne Howarth & Matt Gavan
King James I of England was also King James VI of Scotland and then, as now, there was controversy over what should happen with regards to the unity of the two realms. James was keen to turn England and Scotland into a unified Britain, but there was a great deal of resistance to this.

1606 was also the year that witnessed the ‘fallout’ from the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot of November 1605. The plotters were brutally tortured, tried and then publicly executed, as a warning to other ‘would-be traitors’. Despite the fact that the public were outraged and frightened by what could have happened if the Gunpowder Plot had been successful, there was also criticism of the severity of the plotters’ punishment, leading to questioning of authority and power. The idea of what could have happened played in the public imagination, and, because those who had planned to carry out the plot were Catholic, there was increased level of scrutiny of people’s religious practices. Whereas Elizabeth I, though Protestant herself, had allowed others to practise their chosen religion (as long as it was not a threat), the reign of James I, after the Gunpowder Plot, saw ‘anti-Catholic legislation that included the scrutiny of everyone’s mandatory church attendance’. The severity of atmosphere, combined with James’ desire to unite England and Scotland, despite the reluctance of his subjects, inevitably led to questions about power and authority, themes which are at the heart of *King Lear*, and the other plays Shakespeare wrote around this time.

Another aspect to note, when thinking about *King Lear’s* historical context, is the expansion of commerce – the ability to buy and sell things – which meant that people were no longer necessarily confined to the social position they had been born into, but could change their social standing by making money. Because we take this aspect of life for granted now, it is easy to underestimate just how radical this would have been in Shakespeare’s time – the very fabric of society was changing dramatically, with power no longer necessarily based on a given status, title or right. This is reflected in a play like *King Lear*, in which the younger characters can be seen to represent a shift in attitude to power structures; and some of whom can be seen to represent a more mercenary way of viewing the world, regarding the idea of social advancement above all else, and certainly above family and state. By making King Lear a father as well as a king, and showing the muddling of these two roles, Shakespeare shows how deeply these issues have penetrated the fabric of society. The fact that King Lear’s situation is echoed in another character’s (Gloucester) helps to demonstrate that the play is not about the breakdown of just about one man, but about a whole way of life.

**POINT FOR DISCUSSION**

From what you have read above about the original historical context of King Lear, what relevance do you think the play has for a modern audience in 2016?

5 1606: William Shakespeare and The Year of Lear by James Shapiro, page 11
An aging monarch decides to split his kingdom between his daughters. The play opens with King Lear announcing that the amount of land each daughter gets will correspond to the amount of love they declare for their father.

Lear’s eldest daughter, Goneril, speaks first, proclaims her love in hyperbolic language, and is rewarded accordingly. Regan, the next oldest, echoes Goneril, but introduces a competitive edge with her comment that, in fact, her sister ‘comes too short’ in her expression of love. Again, she is rewarded accordingly.

Lear’s youngest daughter, Cordelia, refuses to speak. When prompted, she insists that, whilst she loves her father deeply, she will not exaggerate her feelings or further embellish her language beyond truth. In a fury, the king banishes his daughter from the kingdom, which he now divides in two, to be shared between Goneril and Regan. When one of his men – the Earl of Kent – questions the king’s actions, he, too, is banished. The king announces his intentions to retain a hundred knights, and to split his time between his two eldest daughters, staying a month with each at a time. When Lear asks which of her two suitors – the Duke of Burgandy and the King of France – will take Cordelia now she is without a dowry, the King of France gladly marries her.

Meanwhile, a subplot is developing alongside the main action of the play. Edmund, the youngest son of the Earl of Gloucester, reflects on the injustice of his position as an illegitimate son and decides that he will have to find a way to discredit his older, legitimate brother, Edgar. When Gloucester enters, Edmund pretends to have found a letter from Edgar plotting against his father. Gloucester believes this, and when Edmund next sees Edgar, he seals his plan by telling Edgar that their father is after him.

King Lear has gone to stay with Goneril, along with his retinue of a hundred knights. Goneril is already angry about this arrangement, and her father’s treatment of her staff. She explicitly requests her servant, Oswald, to ensure that her own staff treat her father and his retinue with disrespect. The Earl of Kent, loyal to the king and concerned for his welfare, disguises himself and presents himself to Lear as a new servant. After an altercation between Lear and

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*In Shakespeare’s time, a child of unmarried parents was considered illegitimate and did not have the same social status as children of married parents.*
Oswald, Goneril requests that her father reduce the number of his retinue of knights, accusing him of mistreating her own staff. Lear denounces Goneril and leaves to stay with Regan, assuming that he will be treated better there.

Back at the residence of the Earl of Gloucester, the servants are preparing for the arrival of Regan and her husband, the Duke of Cornwall, who have left their home on hearing, via letter, of the disagreements between Goneril and Lear. Edmund continues the plan against his brother. He advises Edgar to flee and, making use of gossip he has just heard from a servant about tensions between the husbands of Goneril and Regan (the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall), he embellishes his story by suggesting that Edgar might have made comments about their guests. Edgar believes all this and leaves just as his father enters, with Edmund drawing his sword in pretence, to suggest that he has had to defend himself against Edgar, who, he says, has tried to involve him in his plot against Gloucester. Gloucester believes everything and sends out an order that Edgar be found and caught. Edgar flees and disguises himself as a beggar.

Kent has been sent on ahead of the king to announce his imminent arrival at Regan's home, but found her absent, and so has continued on to Gloucester's home. Here he again meets Oswald, Goneril's servant. They fight and, on discovering them, Regan's husband orders that Kent is put in the stocks for offending Goneril's servant. Gloucester tries to protest against this, but Regan and Cornwall insist.

When Lear arrives at Gloucester's home, he is puzzled by Regan's absence from home, and offended to find his servant in the stocks. He is further insulted to discover that Regan and Cornwall refuse to see him. Eventually, Regan and Cornwall appear, but Regan merely further insults her father and suggests that he apologise to Goneril. Goneril arrives and the two women continue to insult their father, particularly with regards to his age. Regan suggests that Lear dismisses half his knights, as her sister has requested, and returns to stay with Goneril for the rest of the month, before returning to her. Lear refuses and says he will stay with Regan and keep all his hundred knights, but she rejects this possibility, insisting that, in fact, he does not need even as many as fifty. Lear decides he will stay with Goneril after all, as at least he can retain fifty followers, but, at this, Goneril concludes that her father should come with none of his own retinue, but rely solely on her household. At this, Lear, along with his Fool, withdraws from both his daughters, just as a storm begins to break.

Kent meets with a gentleman, from whom he learns that Lear and the Fool are out in the storm. He relates the news that the King of France is planning an invasion in support of Lear, and asks the gentleman to go to Dover with a ring to give to Cordelia that will signal Kent's real identity and the fact that he is with Lear.

Meanwhile, Lear and the Fool are on a heath, out in the open during the storm. Lear is raging against his daughters. Kent finds them and persuades them to take shelter in a hovel while he returns to Gloucester's home in the hope that Lear might be re-admitted there.

Gloucester has asked Regan and Cornwall if he might help Lear and, as a result, they have seized his home. Gloucester unwittingly reveals to Edmund that he has heard about the plans afoot in support of Lear; and that he supports this. Edmund decides to betray his father to the Duke of Cornwall.

Back on the heath, Kent leads Lear and the Fool to the hovel, where they find 'Poor Tom' (Gloucester's son, Edgar, in disguise) hiding. Seeing Edgar as the poor man he is pretending to be, as 'the thing itself' (Act III, Scene IV), Lear tears off his own clothes. When Gloucester arrives to offer food and shelter, the king refuses to go, wanting, instead, to talk more to 'Poor Tom'. However, when 'Poor Tom' complains he is cold, they all go into the hovel.

Edmund tells Cornwall about his father's plan to help the king, and about the planned invasion by the King of France. He is rewarded by Cornwall with Gloucester's title and lands.

Lear holds an imaginary trial of Goneril and Regan, in which Edgar (as 'Poor Tom') and the Fool both take part. Gloucester, who has been out to find food, returns and relates that he has heard of a plan to kill the king. They plan to take Lear to Dover, where he should be able to receive help.

News reaches Regan and Cornwall that Gloucester has alerted the king and is part of the plan to save him. Gloucester is captured and punished by having his eyes gouged out by Cornwall. One of Gloucester's servants tries to stop Cornwall, and Cornwall is injured in the ensuing fray. Regan reveals that Edmund has betrayed him, and Gloucester realises that he has misjudged Edgar. Blinded, Gloucester is thrown out of his home.
Gloucester is led to the heath, where he again meets Edgar, still disguised as Poor Tom. Edgar does not reveal himself at this stage, and Gloucester asks him to take him to Dover where, he has now decided, he will throw himself from a cliff-top.

As the cruelty of their actions becomes clearer, the Duke of Albany turns against his wife, Goneril. She, as a result, turns her affections to Edmund. News comes that the Duke of Cornwall has died of injuries incurred in the fray following his blinding of Gloucester. Albany is horrified to hear what has happened to Gloucester, and vows to avenge this.

The French and English armies are amassing. Cordelia, who is leading the French army, sends an officer to search for her father. Meanwhile, Goneril's servant, Oswald, tells Regan that her brother-in-law, Albany, has deployed his forces. Regan, now a widow, like her sister, has turned her affections to Edmund, and intercepts a letter Oswald is carrying from Goneril to Edmund. She instructs Oswald that, if he is found, Gloucester is to be killed.

Edgar, still in disguise, leads his father to some fields near Dover. He pretends to the blind Gloucester that they are on a cliff-top, describing the scene and the great height. He leads Gloucester to believe that he is leaving him to jump. Having allowed Gloucester to 'jump', Edgar then disguises his voice again, and pretends to 'find' Gloucester at the bottom of the cliff, leading his father to believe that he has survived the fall, in the hope that this will persuade him to continue living.

Lear and Gloucester meet at Dover. Attendants of Cordelia arrive, having been sent to find Lear. Battle between the two opposing sides is imminent. Oswald arrives and attempts to kill Gloucester, but is killed by Edgar. Letters found on Oswald's body reveal Goneril's request that Edmund should kill her husband, the Duke of Albany.

Lear and Cordelia are reunited in the French camp, and the two sides soon move into battle. Edgar leads Gloucester to a safe place, but Lear and Cordelia are captured, with Edmund as jailor.

A confrontation ensues between Albany, Goneril, Regan and Edmund. Edgar appears and denounces Edmund. Goneril flees when she realises her plot to have Albany killed has been revealed, and, soon after, kills herself after poisoning Regan. Edmund admits his treachery, and Edgar reveals his identity. Edgar also reports that, having revealed his true identity to his father, Gloucester has died, unable to bear any more.

When Albany discovers that orders have been given to kill Lear and Cordelia, he tries to undo this, but Cordelia has already been killed and, within moments, Lear also dies. Albany tells Kent and Edgar that they must now rule the kingdom.

**POINT FOR DISCUSSION**

Re-read the plot summary of *King Lear* above. Working in small groups, create a five minute version of the play, then a one minute version, then a ten second version. What are the most significant aspects or events of the play?

Watch each groups’ versions. Discuss. Are there similarities between the groups in terms of what has been included/left out? Did any of the groups include/leave out something radically different from the other groups? How do the events selected for inclusion – or left out – alter the impact of the story?

From the plot summary above, can you identify what you think the themes of *King Lear* are?
THEMES AND IDEAS IN KING LEAR

King Lear is obviously an extremely complex play, touching on many ideas and working on many levels. This section briefly explores just a handful of the play’s themes, and gives some examples of how these manifest themselves in Shakespeare’s play.

POWER

Even a glance at the plot of King Lear indicates immediately that power is a key theme being explored by Shakespeare. The play was written at a time when the idea of what it meant to be a monarch was very much at the forefront of people’s minds — in particular, the huge consequences and repercussions that a monarch’s whims could have on society and the world at large. It is not difficult to see the parallels in Shakespeare’s play, in which King Lear decides to divide his kingdom between his daughters according to who says she loves him the most.

There are a number of different power structures at work in the play, including that between servant and master; king and subject; parent and child; age and youth.

King Lear sees himself as powerful enough to demand an extreme display of devotion from his daughters, and to banish his youngest daughter, Cordelia when she refuses to submit to this request. Lear spends the rest of the play realising and learning how foolish this belief is, partly through stripping him of everything that once gave him a sense of power. Through this, the play goes to the heart of what the nature of power is, how we get it and lose it, its importance, responsibilities and abuses. We see a complex exploration of different models of power which touch on loyalty to family, nation and monarch; justice; inheritance and tradition.
NOTHINGNESS

The writer James Shapiro describes Shakespeare’s plays as being like ‘symphonies’, each with ‘its own distinctive music’. He suggests that in King Lear, the word ‘nothing’ is like a musical theme that is repeated again and again with different variations as part of a symphony. In Lear’s exchange with Cordelia in the first scene of the play alone, we hear the word five times in the space of four consecutive lines.

The idea of ‘nothingness’ is tied, in this play, to the idea of power: Cordelia says ‘nothing’ in response to her father’s request for love in exchange for power. As a result, she is punished with ‘nothing’ – banished from the kingdom without a dowry.

By the end of the play, King Lear himself has been brought down to nothing. Throughout the course of the play, negatives echo and reverberate through the characters’ lines: the words ‘never’ and ‘nothing’ come up over thirty times during the course of the play; the word ‘no’ one hundred and twenty times; and the word “not” over two hundred and forty times.

YOUTH AND AGE

The play makes very clear divisions between older and younger characters, and it is significant that much of the tension arises between the beliefs and demands of the older generation and the beliefs and demands of the younger generation: King Lear is an older man at the mercy of his daughters; Gloucester, similarly, is at the mercy of his sons.

In some respects, Cordelia can be seen as a radical, a new generation challenging the status quo when she refuses to do what her father asks of her. In this way, she can be compared to Edmund who – although he obviously goes about things in a way that is completely indefensible – is actually rebelling against the traditions of an older generation who view him as less worthy because he is ‘illegitimate’. Similarly, Goneril and Regan are refusing the particular roles allotted to them of subservient wives and daughters.

LOYALTY

The notion of loyalty is based on an allegiance or sense of duty to something or someone. It is a complex issue in the play, as it is closely related to the question of power. King Lear, in effect, uses his power to demand loyalty from his family and his subjects alike, rather than seeing the need to earn or deserve it.

Goneril, Regan and Edmund express loyalty, and are rewarded accordingly. However, their actions, of course, demonstrate the total opposite – to their family, to their country, and to each other. Instead, their actions are based on self-interest and gain at the expense of others.

However, throughout the play are many instances of amazing loyalty which, significantly, appear to go hand in hand with telling the truth, rather than saying what would most please, or what is demanded of them. Cordelia speaks the truth at the beginning of the play, but remains loyal to her father, despite his brutal treatment of her. Edgar similarly remains loyal to Gloucester, despite his treatment. Kent and the Fool remain loyal to Lear, Kent returning, despite his banishment, to try and protect the king. None of these instances are of loyalty that has been demanded of them, but something that is inherently felt and believed in by the characters that demonstrate it.
Deborah Warner is a world-renowned director of both theatre and opera. She studied Stage Management at Central School of Speech and Drama, and went on to found her own theatre company, Kick Theatre, with whom she took a Shakespeare play to Edinburgh every year. In 1985, Kick Theatre’s production of King Lear (discussed in more detail on page 27) won the Time Out Theatre Award and a Drama magazine Special Achievement Award, and transferred from the Edinburgh Festival to the Almeida Theatre in London. From there, Deborah went on to work at the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC). In 1993, Deborah directed the first of many operas, Wozzeck for Opera North. Nicholas Payne, then Artistic Director of Opera North, had been trying to persuade her to direct opera since 1987.

Deborah has also created a number of site-specific pieces which include staging the famous Modernist – and notoriously difficult – poem The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot; and The St Pancreas Project, The Tower Project and The Angel Project, installations which took the ‘audience’ members one at a time on a walking tour of a particular city or building. In New York City, one reviewer describes a ‘long, lush U-shaped pathway of white feathers in a celestial locker room; the pastel plumage of the small caged birds that had taken over a deserted office, high above Times Square; the feathers – sometimes black, sometimes white – on the angels themselves, who were often to be found sleeping on floors and desks’7. Though site specific theatre has become a popular form of entertainment, in 2003, when Deborah was making these pieces, it was much less familiar and much more radical.

Deborah’s work has often been described as ‘radical’ and seen as controversial – for example, in 1994, her second opera, Don Giovanni for Glyndebourne, the famous opera festival, met with boos from some members of the audience, and prompted headlines such as the one which appeared in The Independent – Disturbing the Picnic: Deborah Warner: The Director Who Shocked Glyndebourne8. The issue – for those booing – was the non-traditional staging of a well-known opera: the singers wore modern dress costumes and the set was ‘brutalist grey’.

The writer of the article Disturbing the Picnic describes how the audience would have expected ‘tricorn hats, wigs, big dresses and rococo decor, especially at Glyndebourne’, in keeping with more traditional productions. Earlier that same year, Deborah’s production of Samuel Beckett’s Footfalls had also caused consternation. There are very strict rules about the staging of Beckett’s plays, including that a director must follow the writer’s stage directions exactly. The Beckett estate felt that Deborah had ignored some of these stage directions, and were also unhappy that she had reapportioned some of the lines of text – in other words, taken the words of one character and given them to another.

Deborah Warner

9 Performing King Lear: From Gielgud to Russell Beale by Jonathan Croall, page 224
However, Deborah’s work is not controversial or radical for the sake of being controversial or radical. Instead, she is looking for ways to more clearly express the heart and soul of a piece of art, whether it is theatre or opera. Sometimes a traditional staging of a play, whilst interesting, is not the most illuminating or revealing way of presenting the thoughts and ideas that lie beneath its surface. The designer Hildegarde Bechtler, who worked with Deborah on Don Giovanni, explains how, actually, they were originally interested in retaining the eighteenth century setting of Mozart’s opera. However, the modern setting was ultimately, ‘just how it had to be to give the singers certain other freedoms we needed them to have’. Similarly, Deborah’s decisions for Beckett’s Footfalls were based on the desire to better express the spirit of the text. So, rather than approach a play with a concept that she imposes upon it, Deborah is interested in exploring the play with actors and finding the best possible way to communicate what they discover about it.

This is reflected in the way Deborah works in rehearsals which is based on the idea of exploration and play rather than dictating what must happen. The actor, Brian Cox, echoes this when he describes how, in rehearsal, Deborah did not ‘impose anything on us’ but instead waited ‘for us [the actors] to offer it up’.

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**POINT FOR DISCUSSION**

Is there anything about this production of King Lear that you would describe as ‘radical’?

Why?

Do you think it is important to explore new ways of staging classic plays? If so, why? If not, why not?

**Exercise**

Explore a scene from King Lear that you are not familiar with, focusing purely on the language: work in groups, with each person taking a role, and simply speak the words. At this stage, don’t worry too much about understanding every individual word, but focus on the sound and the feeling they create.

Discuss what you have discovered from the exercise about the scene. Try to keep your focus on what you have got from the actual words on the page rather than imposing anything you already know about the characters or what happens.

Either individually, or as a group, come up with a stage design based on this moment. It doesn’t need to be realistic or literal – try to find a way to express some of the thoughts and feelings the text has inspired.

Work on a staging of the scene, taking it in turns to direct. As the director, rather than imposing ideas, let the actors lead the work, trying out different ideas of how to play the scene; and act as ‘editor’, choosing what you think works and developing this.
DEBORAH WARNER AND KING LEAR

Deborah Warner has directed *King Lear* twice before this production at The Old Vic. With such an epic play it is inevitable that a director might return to it again and again, as their ideas about the text – and about theatre practice – evolve and crystallise, and it is exciting to trace the seeds of this 2016 production back to its roots thirty-one years ago. Furthermore, although Shakespeare’s plays are timeless, its resonances for a modern audience also change according to the time in which it is being performed. Thus, a production of *King Lear* in 2016 is likely to have different resonances than a production in 2000 or in 2050.

Deborah has described *King Lear* as ‘a mirror of the desolation of the human spirit, how lost it is’\(^\text{10}\). In 1985, she directed a production of the play with Kick Theatre, the company she had founded herself after graduating from Central School of Speech and Drama. Deborah took the production to Edinburgh, and it then transferred to the Almeida in London, subsequently touring to the former Yugoslavia.

What is significant about this production is that, due to financial constraints, the company had very few resources at their disposal, which meant that the production, of necessity, was completely pared back. The set was simply ‘three step-ladders against a bare brick wall’\(^\text{11}\) and the only props the actors had were buckets of water (used during the storm scene) and a cart. The costumes were ‘neutral white shirts and trousers’\(^\text{12}\). The epic scale of the play meant that it was an unusual choice for a small fringe company to put on, but it was precisely this epic nature combined with the necessarily simple staging that gave the production its power.

Deborah’s later, 1990 production of *King Lear* at the National Theatre, though with a much bigger budget, retained the rawness and stripped back nature of her earlier Kick Theatre production. The colour palette used for set and costume is muted and stark. Neutral colours were used, but with occasional, dramatic splashes of colour, carefully orchestrated to stand out against these\(^\text{13}\).

**POINT FOR DISCUSSION**

How is Deborah Warner’s 2016 production of *King Lear* at The Old Vic similar or different to what you have read about her previous productions of the play?

Why do you think very ‘spare’ or ‘stripped back’ staging might work for such a play?

**Exercise**

In pairs or a group, find an empty space at home or at school. Choose a scene or a speech from King Lear and take it turns to watch your partner – or the rest of your group – act out the speech or scene. What is the effect of watching actors speaking the text in an empty space?

Design a set for your own production of *King Lear*.

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\(^{10}\) Performing *King Lear*: From Gielgud to Russell Beale by Jonathan Croall, page 176

\(^{11}\) Performing *King Lear*: Gielgud to Russell Beale by Jonathan Croall, Arden Shakespeare, page 175

\(^{12}\) As above

\(^{13}\) Photos of both Deborah’s earlier productions of King Lear can be found at [http://www.photostage.co.uk/search?s=deborah+warner+king+lear+kick](http://www.photostage.co.uk/search?s=deborah+warner+king+lear+kick) and [http://www.photostage.co.uk/gallery/preview/1041/1215/2379/0/king_lear-90nt-ct-003/0_00027895.html](http://www.photostage.co.uk/gallery/preview/1041/1215/2379/0/king_lear-90nt-ct-003/0_00027895.html) respectively
A GENDER-BLIND KING LEAR

In this production of King Lear, the title role is played by the actress Glenda Jackson. As young boys used to take the female parts in plays in Shakespeare’s time, and given that all-male productions of Shakespeare’s are still staged with some regularity, this should not feel such a radical move. Perhaps this is the point.

The director of King Lear, Deborah Warner, has emphasised that her production ‘is not an exploration of gender’. But, conversely, it is perhaps precisely because she is not making a point about gender that the decision to cast a woman in the role of King Lear is exciting and interesting – it is normalising what has been termed as ‘gender-blind casting’. King Lear is not being played as a woman, but simply by a woman, because she is a great actress able to portray the complex human experience that this character demands.

It is not the first time that Lear has been played by a woman. The German actress Marianne Hope played Lear in 1990 in a production directed by Robert Wilson; and Kathryn Hunter played Lear as a wheelchair-bound woman in a Young Vic production in 1997.

‘Gender-blind casting’ is becoming less unusual. This year alone, in addition to King Lear, two other of Shakespeare’s most famous male characters are being played by women in major productions, with Michelle Terry taking the title role in Henry V at Regent’s Park Open Air Theatre, and Tamsin Greig playing Malvolio in Twelfth Night at the National Theatre. The director Phyllida Lloyd has directed all-female productions of Taming of the Shrew, Henry IV and Julius Caesar and The Tempest at The Donmar Warehouse.

POINT FOR DISCUSSION

What effect does it have seeing the role of King Lear played by a woman?

Do you think it’s important that Shakespeare’s roles are made available to performers, regardless of their gender?

Who would you cast in the role of King Lear and why?

Every director has a particular way of working in the rehearsal room – some directors have a very specific system that they have developed to help the actors unlock their characters and the text, and others favour a more organic approach.

Deborah Warner sees rehearsals as being very 'organic and complex processes which defy definition', and her role as being to 'create conditions for free exploration'. This immediately suggests an exciting and open process in which, far from dictating exactly where an actor should stand or move at any given moment, or offering an 'explanation' of a character's thoughts or feelings, Deborah is interested in facilitating her actors so that they can arrive at decisions themselves. She talks of ‘beginning from an actor's idea rather than my own’, and believes that if the actors are asked to repeat or replicate certain emotions or actions, and not given the chance to find things out for themselves, the performance will ring false.

This idea of exploration and discovery has been at the heart of rehearsals for King Lear, in which the company have been invited to play, working initially, for example, with any props they chose to unlock a scene or a moment for their character. The emphasis on discovering the play together, rather than starting from a predetermined idea of the director's, is rooted in every detail of Deborah's process. To begin with, the company spent time playing games, getting to know each other. Starting with games may seem a strange idea, though it is something that will be familiar to any student of drama, whether amateur or professional. It is inevitable that the better the actors in a company know each other, the more inter-connected they are, the better their ability to relate on stage and in character, and the purpose of these games is to break the ice and help the company get to know each other. According to Jamie Manton, Assistant Director on this production, this really helped the company form 'a tight ensemble'.

After this initial 'getting to know' stage, the company embarked on a series of read-throughs of the play. A read-through is such a familiar idea to most of us that it is possible almost to take this for granted as a starting point. It is, in fact, a relatively modern idea – in Shakespeare's own time, for example, actors would not even see a copy of the entire script, but, instead, only be given their lines, and those of the character directly before him. Many directors see the first read-through as a very important stage in the process and, conversely, some directors dispense altogether with the idea as a way of beginning!

Although Deborah's process is very open and organic, the work does fall into distinct stages. Early on in her career, Deborah started using the idea of a series of read-throughs in which the actors read characters other than their own, and this is a method used in rehearsal for King Lear. This allows each actor to be an 'observer' of the character they are playing, and even, perhaps, experience being another character interacting with their character. This can throw up all sorts of exciting ideas that might not otherwise occur. Jamie Manton, Assistant Director, talks of how, 'because they're [the actor reading the part] their own physical selves and completely different to the other people playing the characters we started to see different shades to the characters'. The other great thing about this way of doing a read-through is that it integrates the company, and gives a sense of inter-connectedness between characters and actors alike, a better understanding of all the parts of the whole.

The read-throughs become ever more physical, starting as a round-the-table exercise, moving through to a more improvised version, moving around the space, and then to an even more 'staged' version, using props, and 'almost try[ing] to perform it as if performing it to an audience'.

After this series of read-throughs, Deborah asked the actors in King Lear to translate their lines into modern day English. Again, this is a practice that she started early on in her career, describing the discipline as 'on one level about bringing the company together, but it was also about getting them to understand the material, to really excavate and dig deeply'. Jamie Manton describes how, in rehearsals for King Lear, it took about a week to go through the whole play in this way. The company worked round-the-table (rather than acting it out on their feet),
and spoke their paraphrased version of the lines on the spot. This can obviously be quite a daunting task, even for really experienced actors, and some of the actors did prepare in advance for the exercise.

After this stage of rehearsals, the company started on scene work, working through the play and ‘sketching’ out each scene. Once this ‘sketch’ of the production was in place, they worked through the play again, fleshing out detail. According to Jamie Manton, ‘Deborah always likes things to remain open so that things never become closed and contrived’, and she encourages actors to try things out rather than offer them a prescriptive answer for how or why a character is doing or saying something. Her work is very embedded in the words on the page and what they are doing, rather than imposing something from outside the text – in other words, she will point actors towards certain words that they can use vocally to help unlock a moment (ideas about how to unlock Shakespeare's language are explored in more detail earlier on in the guide). Jamie explains how Deborah might say something like ‘use that word, because then that word will get you this’, and then as soon as they do that it just unlocks everything19.

Questions of Character and Characterisation often come up as part of a rehearsal process, and each director has a different way of thinking about, and dealing with, these. This is also, to some extent, dependent on the style of the play. Some directors will run character exercises, encouraging actors to explore their role in different ways in order to fully engage with, and inhabit, it. Some directors believe very strongly that this is, in fact, not the way to develop a role or the world of a play. In rehearsals for King Lear, there have not been explicit discussions or explorations of character separate from an exploration of the text itself. Deborah is keen that the actors use what is on the page; and let the text they are speaking embody and reveal character.

When they were not needed in rehearsal, actors also had individual sessions with Patsy Rodenburg, the Voice Coach on this production, to look in more detail at the language being used by their character.

**EXERCISES**

Choose a scene from King Lear and gather a selection of props together. These do not have to be obvious choices, or immediately relevant to the scene – choose some things that have no obvious place in that context!

Working in groups or pairs, choose a character and experiment with using different props whilst playing the scene.

Do any of the props help you understand the scene better or unpick a particular moment?

Choose a short scene from the play, with just two or three characters, and decide who will be playing each role. Working in pairs or groups of three, take it in turns to read each of the characters in the scene.

Return to the original role you chose and play the scene again. Is there anything you are now doing differently, or any decisions you have made, based on your experience of playing the other character(s) in the scene?

Work on a more prepared performance of this scene, using your discoveries from playing these other roles to help you.

Choose a short scene with two or three characters and, working in pairs or threes, have a go at paraphrasing the text, translating and speaking it in modern English. You could try doing this together first, discussing each line, and then move onto another bit of text and try translating spontaneously on your feet!

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18 Performing 'King Lear': Gielgud to Russell Beale by Jonathan Croall, page 176
19 Jamie Manton interview, page 32
INTERVIEW
WITH SIMON MANYONDA, WHO PLAYS EDMUND IN THIS PRODUCTION OF KING LEAR

What is it like being in this production of King Lear?

This production of King Lear feels very special, because, firstly, Glenda Jackson is in it, who is a legendary actor and hasn’t acted for years, and it’s great to see her literally bounce back into action – that’s incredible – and then I’m working with actors I grew up watching as a child like Jane Horrocks [who plays Regan] and Rhys Ifans [who plays the Fool] to name just one or two; and I’m working with one of my best friends in the whole world, Harry Melling [who plays Edgar], who I went to drama school with and then lived with for a few years after drama school, and used to work with a lot when we were at drama school on independent extra-curricular projects. We’re playing brothers, and we’ve spent time together like brothers for the past nearly ten years now, so it’s great, it’s just fantastic. Deborah Warner is the most unique director I’ve ever worked with, actually, personally and professionally, so I feel like I’m really growing.

Can you describe the work you have been doing with the Vocal Coach, Patsy Rodenburg as part of the rehearsal process?

The work that I’ve been doing with the vocal coach has been mainly work to do with speed of thought. Speed of thought meaning that you don’t necessarily need to talk fast – it’s not about talking fast – but it’s about thinking quickly, thinking on the line, and my character particularly, Edmund, is a great inventor in the moment, he’s a liar – he’s really good at lying – and he has to invent and think extremely quickly, and that’s what I’ve been working on, and that’s been my challenge.

What have rehearsals been like?

Rehearsals have been very unique. We never read our own part until we got up and did our own part. So we were around the table for about two weeks reading different parts – we read three different parts. Then we wrote down the text word for word – our own individual text, but we still never really read it, we were still left in a place of kind of uncertainty, and for things to be discovered on one’s feet. It was quite exciting but it was scary as well, I can’t lie. As an individual I just learnt my lines, made sure I knew what I was saying, had some ideas about who the character was, but most of the discoveries came once in rehearsals and up on our feet.

Do you have a favourite moment that your character experiences, and/or a favourite scene, line – or even word?

I always find it very hard to say a favourite moment because it’s happening there and then and it depends on what’s happening with your fellow actor really. I do enjoy Act One, Scene Two, because it’s the first time I get on stage and Edmund is spinning so many plates and it’s just all exciting because it’s how it starts his journey. So Act One, Scene Two I’d say as a whole, the start of the play. I sort of have a small bit in Act One, Scene One, but really he comes into his own in Act One, Scene Two, and I really enjoy that.

Is there an example of a moment or scene you can describe that has particularly evolved during the rehearsal process?

I’d say Act One, Scene Two particularly developed over the course of the rehearsal process definitely. The invention, because Edmund is all about invention. He invents a life for himself and it works out so well and everything links back to what he set out to do at the beginning.
What is this production of King Lear going to be like?

The way that Deborah described the production to us was that the stage is going to appear almost like a blank canvas, so it's all white. Then, we’re building the stage into the auditorium, four rows in, so it’s very much more immediate to the audience. The reason it’s a rehearsal-room type setting is because Deborah believes that something like King Lear is about the theme of having nothing – everyone's brought down to their basest essence. So the idea is of it being almost like the best and last rehearsal-room run of the show presented on stage. So instead of it being a specific context that is traditional costumes and rehearsed to be a specific world of the play – it’s not that – it’s very much what you’d see in the last run in the rehearsal room. So with that, it’s very deconstructed and slightly avant-garde – we’ve had so many different props, so the actors can use any kind of prop that they wish in order to try and unlock a scene or unlock a moment with their character, so for example there’s one moment where Edmund comes on with a ladder and a Samurai sword...so its playful and fluid. In terms of Glenda playing King Lear there isn’t any stamp on what that means – it’s very much being a King Lear and no kind of angle on it being a woman.

In terms of costumes, Deborah really wants the characters to almost become the actors so in terms of costumes they’re very much going to be wearing what they’ve been wearing in rehearsals, with slight amendments in order to fit their characters. So Albany, for example, he’s been wearing a blazer off the costume rail, so it’s their own clothes with additional items on top which then help them reflect on their character, and then obviously the designer will then colour-code things and make sure it all works to an aesthetic vision. It’s very much a stripped down version of King Lear. It is a contemporary setting – King Lear almost as a presidential figure rather than a great monarch back in the olden times.

What has the rehearsal process been like?

In terms of the process that Deborah took us through... we started, like most productions, with games and name games, so everybody got to know each other and we’ve really formed a tight ensemble. With that we [then did] a series of read-throughs, where each actor would read a different character from the one they were playing, so that they bring a different kind of intelligence to the role, a different take on the role, a different angle, and obviously, because they’re their own physical selves and completely different to the other people playing the characters we started to see different shades to the characters. It was really good research, then, for those playing the characters, to see what doesn’t work, what does work. It also means the whole company learns the play together, so the first read-through was a table read, the second one would be more of a staged improvisation, and then the third one [was to] really start using props and almost try and perform it as if performing it to an audience. That was informative as well.

After that, we spent about a week going through the whole play, translating it to modern day English to make sure everyone in the company was on the same level in terms of what everything really meant. It was really good because there were certain parts where people were disputing as to what it meant, and then it’s meant everyone’s on the same page, the same level, so that when we get into scene work, everyone knows what the
scene means, everyone knows what everyone else’s lines mean. I think that’s so important. If the language can be read and spoken with understanding, then that conveys to an audience.

The way we did it, instead of all talking together, people would then start playing their roles and having to speak their lines in modern day English, and if someone said, ‘oh, I don’t understand that’, then we’d have to work it out together. It was round-the-table, and they’re [the actors] having to modernise it on the spot.

After that, we jumped into scene work, so what we wanted to do was sketch through the play in about two and a half weeks, so we got a basic understanding of each scene in terms of its framework, its visual structure and dynamics, and then for the last two weeks we’ve been going through the play again, putting more detail into it and making it more concrete. Then we did a run, and now we’re going through it working out all the problem areas.

It’s such an open set. Where the usual back wall of The Old Vic is we’re going right to the very back wall, so there’s this immense depth of stage, so it means you can have people at the very front of the stage and the very back of the stage, so that will be the visual blocking, and then we’ve got various plastic sheets that are flying in and out for the storm scene. We’re using really kind of basic products and elements.

Deborah always likes things to remain open so that things never become closed and contrived. She says, ‘do that because it will aid this’, but then if it doesn’t work then she’ll try something else. She often leaves things very much open to the actors, so, for example, if an actor says, ‘what should I be thinking in this scene?’ she’ll say, ‘don’t ask me. It could be this, it could be that. Try something and see if it works or not’, so she very much leaves it up to the actor to try and find every corner.

Where Deborah’s amazing is she’s unbelievable with the language, and she and Patsy [Rodenburg, the Voice Coach on this production] have said how [with] Shakespeare, the text is constantly probing, [so the actors should] really use the text. It’s always the words which are doing something. So Deborah is really good at saying, ‘use that word, because then that word will get you this’, and then as soon as they do that it just unlocks everything.

All of the sessions we’ve had with Patsy have been individual ones at The Old Vic, so when we’re not using actors [in the rehearsal room] we send them to her and then they’ll have individual voice sessions. And she came into watch the second half of the run on Monday. They [the actors] always have an hour’s session with her each.

I think what Deborah does brilliantly is she lets the play speak and helps the actors find their way into the play [through] that. She and Patsy agree that the language is everything.

[Deborah has] said [to the actors that] you can’t have so much time to think, because the way Shakespeare is written, especially when it’s in verse, there’s so many specific beats, you just need to process that thought and get on with it because, again, the language will do it for you. As soon as you do the thinking, and don’t let what you’re saying do the thinking, then it just shuts everything down.

Can you talk about the decision to have a woman playing King Lear?

The decision to cast Glenda as Lear was that it would be a gender-blind interpretation. You’re watching it and you don’t question it at all, not even from the first entrance. To be honest, it’s amazing seeing a female figure with three daughters: it just intensifies all of the drama, all of the chemistry. That maternal connection, I think, in contrast to a paternal connection, is just so much more interesting to watch as an audience member. I think with a male King Lear it can come across as violent and abusive, but with a female King Lear, yes it can be violent and abusive, but because you haven’t got that large body, or dominant [physical] presence, it can come across as more manipulative. And [there’s] the plotting and the planning, and using the intelligence. Deborah keeps emphasising ‘family niceties, family niceties, that’s the way you’re going to get round each other is by playing that you’re family members to each other and it’s all game-playing’.

Have you done character work and off-text exercises?

No. [Deborah] said you just need to follow the text, go with what you’re given in the text and then make decisions with the text.
INTERVIEW

WITH RAPHAEL PIMLOTT OF 59 PRODUCTIONS,
VIDEO DESIGNER FOR KING LEAR

What does 59 Productions do?

As a company 59 Productions does chiefly video design, chiefly for live events. There has been a bit of film work, but its normally live in some capacity. It’s also animation as well as live action video production, so we project onto the sides of buildings for events – we opened the Edinburgh Festival this year, projecting onto the castle on the rock, but then also I worked on a ballet in Copenhagen earlier in the year, I did an opera earlier in the year, we projected onto a cello being played for BBC Proms. It’s very much about bringing a narrative to life through video and engaging a wide audience, and that also includes working with sound. But we chiefly work on video.

With King Lear, it’s [the video design] not what the show’s about. We’re there to support and enhance the show, I’d say in the case of a theatre production – whereas, with a projection-mapping event onto the side of a building the video is the key player – so [for a theatre production] we are a part of the design team and part of the creative process. But at 59 also there’s a technical aspect to it, it’s not just a design studio. We can take something from start to finish as a project – as with the projection-mapping project – but with theatre we are normally a department within the design team.

What is the role of video design in live performance?

As far as I’m concerned it [video design] is not always necessary. It could detract from a show if it’s not appropriate, in the same way excessive sound design can be really unnecessary in a show when it’s about the live element. It’s a tool that should be used when it needs to be used, in my opinion. There’s no point in using anything gratuitously. You don’t have to have video to have a great show, but I think it really can enhance a performance. A show like Wonderland, if there’d been no video, and its show about digital, it would be very bizarre.

What was your brief for King Lear? How did discussions start?

It was talking about the set really, this large white set – of like a blank page in a way, and it’s an open space. It’s totally amorphous as well as being incredibly monolithic. It’s quite an interesting space because, in a way, the surfaces are perfect for projection if you had a totally dark-lit stage, but with lighting as well it becomes a tricky.

The brief is a lot of different things actually, and I think that’s evident within the show itself, what’s going on onstage. It seems to be a show being made from emptiness, and the video is also adding a sense of that. We’re not going to be projecting constantly. A lot of it is going to be suggestive.

Is it naturalistic or quite abstract?

At the moment it’s an absolute mixture. So there is going to be some more literal things, which are figurative in the script as well, or literal. So, like Dover, which is where the whole second act takes place, that is a big LED screen at the back and it’s going to be a sense of that outside world. Not all the video is actually projection in the show. There’s an LED wall in it that’s going to be upstage, twenty-two metres away from the front row, a huge LED wall, and there are going to be literal things within that. But even though its literal, its abstracted in a way – you [the audience]’re not totally sure – it’s not the White Cliffs of Dover with a ferry going past – it’s not quite that literal. And the set itself lends itself to abstracting things anyway because they’re clearly flat surfaces that we’re projecting on – we’re not trying to completely trick you.

What has the process been of creating video design for this production?

It’s difficult because we’re preparing for it all to change in a way, as it does. There’s no projections in the rehearsals – we would normally not be projecting while they’re rehearsing – it’s the same as light guys – you know what you’re planning to do but the actors are working without it and then when we get to tech that’s the first time.

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20 wonder.land was a musical by Moira Buffini, with music by Damon Albarn, directed by Rufus Norris, staged at the Royal National Theatre early in 2016, with video design by 59 Productions

21 Technical Rehearsal, which happens towards the end of the rehearsal process. The focus of the ‘tech’ is on light, sound and, if applicable, video, as well as any other purely technical aspects of the production, such as moving scenery or set.
At the moment we’re looking at it on a screen and we’re sharing it with Deborah [Warner, the director] and Jean [Kalman], the designer of the show, but we haven’t seen it within the scale [of the theatre]. We can look at projections on the model box\footnote{A model box is a model of the set, made to scale by the designer, to show the director, cast and creative team what the design will look like in the theatre space} , Deborah and Jean are the designers of the show, so they designed the set along with the Associate Set Designer, which is Justin [Nardella]. It’s a show that’s being developed in rehearsals and its always changing, but at the same time there are specific things that I have to create that I know we’re going to need, key moments in the show, things literal are wanted, and I can prepare for those. But I’m also preparing an arsenal of different things that, when we get to tech rehearsals, and there’s an idea that comes from Deborah, I can react to that and we can fine-tune it if we think it works; because one of the difficulties of video is that it takes quite a lot of time for us to prepare what we can push out, because we have to create a video which then goes on to the server, which is then mapped onto something. Whereas with, say, lighting, it takes a long time to plot your lights, but if someone says ‘can we have some more light here’, it’s quite a lot easier, whereas if someone says ‘I’d like a city now projected onto that wall’, unless we have some cityscapes prepared, it’s impossible to do that.

We have a conversation with Deborah, Justin and Jean, and they’ve come to us and said ‘these are the moments we know we’re going to want in the show. We are going to want Dover in the second half, we are going to want the title of the show’ or ‘we’re going to want certain aspects – there’s going to be a scene where we want mist’, and there’s things that we go away and we can prepare for and set up cues as you would before going into a show, and then when we tech it we can work out what works, when we need to cue it. But then there’s also a sense of ‘can I second-guess what they want from what I know about the show, going to see rehearsals, seeing where things are going and getting a sense of what’s appropriate’; and also what we can bring to the table ourselves – so rather than just [the creative team saying] ‘I want this’ and us giving it to them, if we can suggest more things, hopefully they’re pleasant surprises. But if they’re not wanted then that’s fine, that’s alright as well. It depends on the show.

We are doing stuff now where I’m sharing stuff with Jean and Deborah and Justin and they’re giving me feedback and then we’re going back and working on those, or taking a different direction after what they’ve seen, but it’s not like a show where it’s like ‘this is the set-piece’ – it’s not blocked out as clearly as that and I think that’s to do with the design of the white walls, because it’s not ‘oh here’s a scene change to be within the castle’. As the set itself isn’t literal, it means it’s a lot harder for us to pre-visualise and design bespoke scenes for every scene as it stands now, which is different to other shows I’ve worked on. I think having an arsenal of things up your sleeve to bring to rehearsal [is an advantage], and then being able to be very active within a situation as well. So when we’re in the theatre, I’ll be working with an animator, Nick, and our programmer, Katie, who will be programming the show so I’ll be telling her what content to use, where to put it, how to cue it, and we’ll be working that out while Nick’s working on finding the things that we already have; and if anything comes up and we don’t have anything prepared for it, he will then create the content for it. But, as much as we can, we like to be prepared for, so whatever we know about from the original briefing.

So far it’s been quite a reactive design process for us, and I’ve also been told by Deborah to be prepared for things to change, and I think that is because we’re going to go into this space [The Old Vic theatre] and it is going to be huge. We’re using the whole dock of the theatre. It’s incredibly hard to say, I think, when you’re projecting onto a model box which is one to a hundred of the scale – you can’t get the sense of scale, so certain ideas which look great on a screen, when they’re blown up that large, a thing that’s maybe moving too fast will look way too fast and maybe way too big, so its preparing for that, being able to second-guess from our end what might go wrong. It’s also the different materials being projected on, because it’s not just a white box.

**What’s your personal creative process in this?**

So for me it was to meet with Deborah, Justin and Jean and have them outline this sort of ethos. From what I understood, its [the world of the play] not a rehearsal space, that’s not what it is, it’s an open theatre, it’s a blank theatre, it’s an open space which transforms in its own way but its two-tonal, it’s not as decorative as an opera. And from what I understand about the rehearsal
notes, a lot of it is being changed on the go, but it's developing that style. My process was then to go away and read *King Lear* multiple times again and again and think about what I’d bring to the table apart from what was brought there [by Deborah, Jean and Justin], and how we'd interact that, how we'd work it in.

**What did that throw up for you at that stage?**

It's all developed now and developing still. A lot of it did seem, rather than specific designs, it was mood and feeling, and sometimes they're obvious and sometimes they're not. So, if a character is outside and having a soliloquy, and its quite dark and broody, then, do we want to project something literal [to show] he's outside, or do we want to just give a sense of movement, that there's some sort of wind passing, or some sort of fog – or maybe it's just some movement within the set that you can’t tell 'that's fog,' 'that's wind,' 'that's grass' or 'that's rain.' It could be a mix of any of those things, but its giving you a sense of outdoors and, again, because it's all going to change when we’re out there, there's loads of different things I want to bring to try and make that, so I've got my first idea here and we’ll programme that into the show and we’ll see what it looks like with the lighting state, but everything will have to be adjusted to work within how Deborah feels, how Jean feels, working with the lighting, working with the actors as well, because we’re going to be projecting onto surfaces, a lot of different surfaces, as well as having the LED wall.

**Once you've had your initial ideas, what is the next step in your creative process?**

That would depend on what it is we’re making. Quite often I'd gather references of stills, I'd gather references of other video, whether that's from film or people taking photographs, or people taking footage, and I'd gather those to get a sense – it's almost a mood board – and maybe I'd create a reference document, and that would also help me, not just to serve as an 'is this the right lines?' for Deborah and Jean, but if it comes to me briefing an animator to work on it, or to use as a reference for myself. That's really helpful, and I can filter down and narrow where I think the look is going based on Deborah and Jean's input or my other colleagues' input.

So, first thing is to gather the looks of what we think we want to achieve, but that's normally a lot easier to pre-visualise if you have got really specific tasks, and there are shots we can do that for, and there's shots that we can't. [For example], if it's a more abstract gesture, such as a white line passing across the stage, or it's just a shape, then it's impossible to visualise that unless we see it in the space, because having a white square on a black background, it doesn’t really do anything unless you're in that space and you're surrounded by it, so that doesn't always apply to that process [having specific tasks]. [But] in the case of Dover, or the storm that takes place in *Lear*, then that is very specific and I would want to do that and I would want to show that before we get there because I don't want to go with Deborah and Jean never having seen anything and them feeling unsure and me feeling unsure, and it to be wrong, because that's the worst thing because it takes time to recreate that and it has a specific look. But for something less specific, like mist, I would rather create a lot of different variants which I think are all great but work in different ways, and then be able to draw on those when we're in tech and react to what's going on on the stage.

**It's a very 'live' process then?**

I think it has to be. Even on the most planned-out shows – projection-mapping shows – we are reacting and that's often to how something's taking to a building in terms of lighting, but we will pre-visualise every shot because we're creating effectively a narrative for ourselves. So for the director in that case, we'd create a still image of what our reference is that we can hand over to our animator, and that's the same thing, so if there's something very specific that we want, it would be to create a collection of references, potentially a still pre-visualisation, and then handing that over to an animator and saying 'please, this is my reference, this is my mood, I'd like this animated', and then they at least have a good source of reference that they can then refer to or look up and use assets from. I could also provide them with assets because I like to consider myself an animator myself, so I feel like I

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23 Assets, in this context, are the different components, ‘building blocks’ or elements that are used to make up an animation – for example, still photographs and/or video footage.
can them provide assets for them to use, or when I pre-visualise, sometimes I’d rather make something made out of video because it will read better than a still: for example, if it was fog, if I was to provide a still of just fog [then] there’s no background, there’s no landscape.

[I like to go into] tech with as much ‘right’ stuff that we’ve agreed on, and then as much other stuff that I think could come up that I’d like to show when we’re in the space, because it’s impossible to translate straight away. I like to bring as many things like that to the table and then we can always take away and narrow it down to what’s right for the show. But I’m sure there will be things that come up that we won’t have – there always is, and we’ll have to go away and make them. It takes time. Everything is possible – which is almost the problem, because anything is possible but it [making video material] takes time – finding [the different assets], creating them. They then have to be rendered, they have to be applied through to the surfaces. There is a technical process and a creative process, and it doesn’t always work out so if we provide something new and that’s not right we have to go back to stage one. Finding or creating what you need to create the video, creating the video, then that has to be rendered – so it has to be exported from the computer into a format that can be read by the projector or the LED, then it has to be placed into the server, then placed into the show, and quite often in tech, everyone else is moving forward [and] you can’t stop the video. So either that has to happen at the same time, or that has to happen out of hours. That’s one of the best things about video is that everything can be continuously changed. Yes, you might be locked with your set of projectors, but what you’re shooting on is entirely variable in that you can continually fine-tune it and change it.

What will the tech for King Lear be like for you?

I can’t wait to see the set [of King Lear] in its full scale because all I’ve seen so far is the model box and pictures and even though you can tell it’s huge, it’s totally different when you’re there. It’s like when we’ve worked on projection-mapping shows and we’ve worked on a model, say, 40cm by 20cm, which is Edinburgh Castle, and then you go there and project onto it and its six hundred metres across, so it is completely baffling when you see something on such a different scale. And some things do and some things don’t work, but tech and dress rehearsal are my favourite part of working on a show because everyone’s working together and you get to see everything come to life that you’ve been working on. And the time before can be frustrating because you’re making things you’ve no idea how they’re going to look, whereas trying it on a surface is so much more interesting, and also working with an animator who can then see how their own work looks, because they’ve got a creative input as well – they’re not a tool – I can’t say to an animator ‘make this exact picture’ – I can but they have their own design and art skills in themselves, and they bring something, everyone brings something to the table and it’s great for everyone to be there and get visual feedback on what they’re doing.

There’s a lot of shows where we can pre-visualise things. There is software where you can see what happens, you can time everything and cue everything, but that’s not always the case. This show is a lot more difficult to do that because it’s not to a soundtrack, it’s a Shakespeare, it’s a live play, and theatre is very different to ballet or opera where you’ve got clear cues for everything to come in because its musical and we’re based off music, whereas with theatre, it’s so much harder until you’re in the space. That’s not to say we can’t do stuff beforehand. There’s a lot of technical work that goes on beforehand of just constructing how we’re going to create the actual pieces of video that are going to go into a server that will then be distributed to different projectors; and work out how they’re being projected onto, which projectors we’re going to use, and there’s a vast amount of technical work that goes in before. With Lear that’s been a challenge as well because of the nature of the set because there’s four projectors and then there’s an LED wall, and then you have to have the servers and the systems. That’s not normally my job but I have to be involved in that, I have to understand. I think with such new technology I think it is always a design and a technical role. You have to bring a level of technical expertise when dealing with something so technical. So it is a design role but the technical affects the design so much – in the same way it does with your lighting set up and your lighting plot, but with video as well – what can we achieve? How bright can our projectors be? Can they deal with lighting? because lighting is so much stronger than projection – we can’t project onto a wall of light – the light will just blow out the projection. So it’s working out where we can position ourselves. It’s interesting. We’ll see when we get in there how much we’re right about.

Tech’s always a place where you find out a lot of things, especially in a show like this where the set is so – it’s a blank page. It can be anything, and that’s part of what it is. Because it can be anything, it’s not prescriptive – ‘we are set in Medieval Times and this is London, and then now we’re in Kent, and now we’re in Gloucester, and now we’re in Cornwall’. We’re not going to project Cornwall, Kent, Gloucester, that’s not how it’s going to work. We’re not locked into a set piece that looks like a castle or a tree, we’re not locked into that, we’re locked into a blank space so anything can be anything.
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