

KING LEAR - A SET DESIGN CONCEPT



Synopsis:

When King James I came to the English throne in 1603, after Elizabeth's death, Shakespeare's troupe became the "King's Men" and now performed regularly for the royal household. This succession marked the dynastic end of the Tudor family and the rise of the Stuarts during a period of high religious tension that would explode in civil war within a generation.

"King Lear" was one of a set of new tragedies written after 1603 and deals directly with the question of succession, but more daringly with the question of the abuse of authority, wealth, and privilege in human relations.

The story of "King Leir" is likely an old folktale of an ancient English foundation myth.

The play opens as a succession ritual with the manipulative old king vaingloriously dispensing his kingdom to his daughters proportionally to the degree of love they express for him. When Cordelia refuses to be manipulated, his inflated pride explodes in disproportionate rage and he disinherits her to demonstrate his power. The court is divided and intimidated. The King of France, attendant at the ritual, moved by Cordelia's honesty and plight, takes her away to France as his queen. In Aristotle's analysis of tragedy this pride is Lear's character

flaw, **hamartia**, which will lead not only to his own downfall, but the collapse of his dynasty.

A parallel succession plot develops between the two sons of Gloucester, the king's old but naively faithful friend. The elder, Edgar, will inherit his father's Earldom. Edmund, illegitimate, malevolently plots to displace Edgar by poisoning his father's mind against Edgar, who must flee for his life under the guise of a madman, Poor Tom.

By surrendering his power, his kingdom and authority to his unworthy daughters, Regan and Goneril, the old king, moving from one castle to another, is immediately diminished, abused, insulted, and ignored. Raging at his misjudgment, Lear becomes unhinged and flees the shelter of Gloucester's castle with the court fool to wander in a storm on the wild heath.

One of the old king's faithful but much abused friends, the Earl of Kent, pursues Lear onto the heath to help him find shelter. Having lost his reason, miserable in the storm, Lear with Kent and the fool find a hut and meet Poor Tom who must maintain his guise as a madman. In Tom, Lear finds a kindred tormented soul and the two engage in apparently mad banter. Lear reaches a moment of Aristotelian **anagnorisis** realizing he is just a man like any other once stripped of the "image of authority: A dog's obeyed in office."

Meanwhile, civil war is incipient, with news of Cordelia with the King of France invading England to rescue the old king. Gloucester is betrayed as sympathetic to Lear by his illegitimate son Edmund and as a consequence arrested and blinded by the Earl of Cornwall, husband of Lear's daughter Regan. Blinded, Gloucester is enlightened, experiencing an Aristotelian **peripeteia**, or reversal of circumstance realizing his own mistaken judgment of his sons. Left to die, Gloucester wanders the heath and is found by his son Edgar still disguised as Poor Tom.

Civil war sweeps over the heath and Cordelia's forces are defeated by her sisters and she is captured and reunited with Lear. They reconcile unaware that Edmund, victorious and merciless, has already ordered their execution. But victory only brings out more betrayal. Goneril poisons Regan. Edgar, now disguised as a black knight, emerges off the battlefield to confront Edmund in single combat and mortally wounds him. Goneril commits suicide as Edmund confesses his duplicity and reveals his order to murder Cordelia and Lear. Too late, Lear emerges with Cordelia dead in his arms and dies in agony. Edgar is thus left alone to rule despairing, apocalyptic:

*The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.*

LOCATION: Ruïnes d'Empúries

Opening scene of the ritual of succession takes place within the oldest Greek ruins.



Scenes in the castles of Goneril, Regan and Gloucester take place in the outer Roman ruins.



LOCATION: Ruïnes d'Empúries

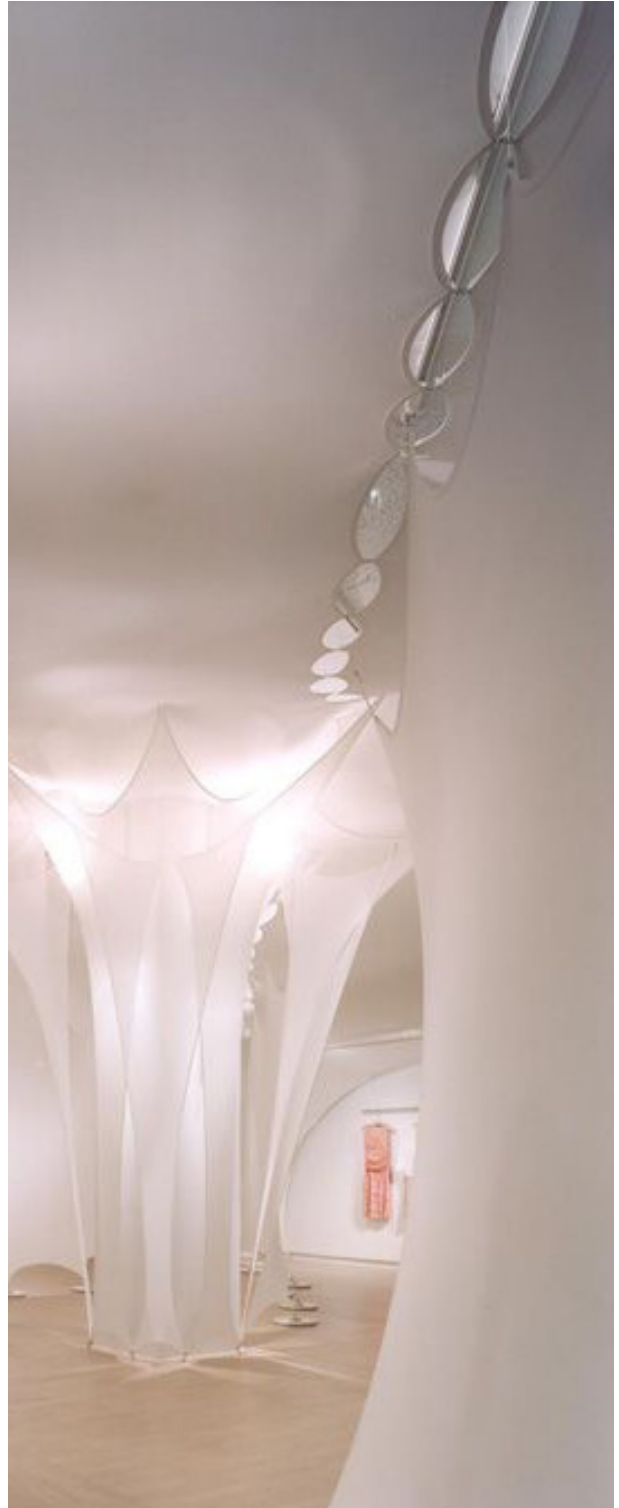
Scenes on the heath take place on the beach near the ruins of the old Greek seawall.



SET DESIGN:

The set design is no more than a minimal arrangement of diaphanous curtains to mark the boundaries of the action within the extensive Ruines d'Empúries. This is to emphasize the very temporary and fleeting nature of King Lear's reign, suggesting an illusion of power (as Shakespeare openly suggests in the dialogue), but also the fleeting nature of all the reigns of the past as evident in the ruins.

The play is performed at night, the diaphanous curtains are faintly back-lit to provide a very low level of general lighting and spots are closely focused on the actor's faces to leave the impression of talking heads.



COSTUME DESIGN:

To highlight the social division of King Lear's reign those in power express their status with sumptuous display. Animal skins express ruthlessness in power. Rags express powerlessness.

King Lear:



COSTUME DESIGN:

The sisters Goneril and Regan:



COSTUME DESIGN:

Edgar and Cordelia:



COSTUME DESIGN:

Nobility:



COSTUMN DESIGN:

Peasant:



COSTUME DESIGN:

Edmund:



COSTUME DESIGN:

The Lost and Faceless:



BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Bloom's Shakespeare Through the Ages: KING LEAR, 2008 by Infobase Publishing

Behind 'King Lear': The History Revealed, Fintan O'Toole, NY Review of Books, 2015

Shakespeare and the Uses of Power, Stephen Greenblatt, NY Review of Books, 2007

What makes a great King Lear?, Jonathan Bate, The Telegraph, 2010

"The Theme of the Three Caskets," Imago, Sigmund Freud, 1913

"King Lear," from The Meaning of Shakespeare, Harold C. Goddard, 1951

"King Lear," from Northrop Frye on Shakespeare, Northrop Frye, 1986

"King Lear," Jean-Luc Godard. 1988