

My retirement project: playing King Lear

After almost 50 years of judging others, former FT film critic Nigel Andrews is preparing for the role of a lifetime – with trepidation

Never mind that deathless teaser “Is there life after death?”, a day comes when human beings face the more immediate question: “Is there life after that early ‘death’ we call retirement?”

Yes, we tell ourselves, of course there is. You can travel, paint, draw or write; garden, cook, carpenter, or learn a musical instrument. And if you’re truly mad or neglectful of your limitations, you can play King Lear. As I am about to.

Why? I can only plead that I was mugged, soon after bowing out as the FT’s film critic, by an ancient acting yen. A sense of deprivation—hitherto below my cognitive radar—had obviously reached critical mass, after 46 years of envy-prompting exposure to other people acting. Also: a long career of judging without being judged back can leave one prey to illusions of invulnerability and entitlement. What could be healthier than to play a humbled monarch?

Above all, Lear is the supersized stage role for a mid-septuagenarian staring down the barrel of 80. Everything is there: anger, stupidity, passion, intelligence, folly, pathos, elemental vision, darkest comedy. What’s not to relish? Especially if you’re a wannabe Wolfie, with or without sheep’s clothing.

So I now find myself preparing to play Lear at the Hampton Hill Theatre next month. How on earth did this come about? Well, two years ago I met an old university friend who was a leading member of a local theatre club. The plan: he would act and project-manage, I would act and finance the theatre hire. We called ourselves the Rhinoceros Theatre Company, because Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* was the play we did together at Cambridge.

Quickly we found a wonderful director: Fiona Smith, tough, insightful and funny. Thank goodness for the last or we might have drowned in *Sturm und Drang* and portentousness from the first read-through. I especially enjoyed Fiona’s referring to Regan, Lear’s nastiest daughter, and her eye-gouging ducal husband as “the Cornwalls”, as if they were characters from some TV soap circa 800BC. (Not without the hint of a homonymous couple currently sharing their real-life ducal-royal soap opera with us.)



‘I was mugged by an ancient acting yen’: Nigel Andrews as King Lear

Alastair Levy

For research and inspiration, I roamed my memory and my DVD collection. Who are the good or great Lears? Scofield, Stephens (Robert) and McKellen on the stage are stamped on my mind, especially Scofield’s metallic growl and despair-sculpted face for Peter Brook (though not, oddly, in his flat 1971 film version). Binge-watching screen Lears has treated me to a mercurial-magisterial Michael Hordern, a raging Ian Holm, a sonorous Orson Welles, and an Olivier veering wildly between the titanic and the tricky. My favourite as a whole? I’ll take Kurosawa’s *Ran* (1985) – resplendent, kinetic, irresistible – closely followed by Gregory Kozintsev’s moody 1971 Russian version.

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Needless to say, I’m not in the above acting leagues, but it helps a new pretender to the role that *King Lear* may be the best play ever written. Nor has it dated. Shakespeare’s cruel, conclusionless tragedy has as much to say to 2022 as it did to 1605: a canvas for any age of conflict and irresolvable wars, of political power used and abused, of schisms from the generational to the geopolitical.

It’s also a play for the age of “What do we do with our old folk?”: as modern in its dissection of a dementia-haunted decline as Florian Zeller’s *The Father*. It may even be a play for the age of climate change. Who but an English playwright, soon to author *The Tempest*, would put weather front-and-centre at the heart of his drama?

The storms of challenge and responsibility clattered around my head at the outset. What the hell had I taken on? There were a thousand lines to learn, give or take. I got more scared as a series of tip-top local actors tiptoed in to join the cast. And I nearly lost my voice from shouting at daughters and storms. I started sounding like Brando’s Don Corleone crossed with Clint Eastwood in his sandpapery-whispery mode. “Do you feel lucky, punk?” No, not very.

In desperation, I googled “voice coaches”. And so I found myself at the National Theatre stage door, escorted by my kindly teacher, Victoria Woodward, into the “voice studio”, a small subterranean room painted screaming white. I learned from the patient Victoria, over weeks, to breathe, hum, hiss, murmur, utter, speak, and finally grapple with the long Shakespearean lines I could at last deliver without panting like the last horse home at the St Leger.

In many ways I felt I was reliving the essentials of my film critic career. Yes, I enjoyed the vanity of being a cub actor-manager, as I had enjoyed the previous vanity of writing words that might be read the world over. Yet what mattered (I learned, I hope) was not my power nor ego, but art and the wonderfully varied responses it could provoke: the cumulative, continuing kaleidoscope of affect and effect that is film or drama or other arts, and their experiencers.

And there is that other motivation I hinted at. After nearly half a century of dishing it out, it’s time for me to face the critics myself. Lear has a line: “Take physic, pomp. Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel.” Exactly. I’m here to be judged.

Hampton Hill Theatre, London, February 23-26, rhinoceros-theatrecompany.co.uk