



KING LEAR

Discovery Guide for Teachers

*Marin Shakespeare
Teen Touring Company 2017*

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About the Teen Touring Company

Marin Shakespeare's Teen Touring Company is open by audition to teenagers from all over the Bay Area. The Teen Company offers free performances to schools and senior centers in Marin County and beyond, performing a different Shakespearean play each year. This year we are presenting *King Lear*.

This famed story of a father's dwindling health and relationships with members of his family has been adapted many times and in many creative formats. Movie treatments of the story include a 1987 post-Chernobyl science fiction account, *KING LEAR*, starring Molly Ringwald as Cordelia, Peter Sellers as William Shakespeare Junior the Fifth, and Woody Allen as Mr. Allen; *A THOUSAND ACRES*, a 1997 retelling of the story from Goneril's perspective, with Jessica Lange, Michelle Pfeiffer, Jason Robards, and Jennifer Jason Leigh; a 2002 western adaptation, *KING OF TEXAS*, starring Patrick Stewart; and the award-winning Japanese interpretation directed by Akira Kurosawa, *RAN*.

The plot of *King Lear* is fairly easy to follow, however some of Shakespeare's language may be challenging for students unfamiliar with Elizabethan English. This is where the art of acting comes in to effect. When actors perform plays on the stage the audience is able to grasp concepts easier than if they have only read the plays on the page. We hope your students, by watching the unfolding of Shakespeare's tragic story in performance by their peers, will gain a greater appreciation for and enjoyment of *King Lear*.

About the Play

King Lear was produced in a time when the royal family was of central importance, and the role of the monarch was under constant scrutiny. James VI & I, on the throne when *Lear* was written and performed, believed his political role of monarch to be absolute ruler with divine right. Henry VIII's decision to separate from the Catholic church nearly a century earlier showed how a monarch's beliefs and behaviors could affect the destiny and structure of an entire country, with little seeming thought given toward the consequence of decisions. In *Lear*, we see Shakespeare tackle the issue where the king is figured as head of both his own family and of the state, and exemplifies pressing contemporary concerns about the power wielded by early modern era kings.



Plot Synopsis~King Lear

*"Tell me, my daughters –
Which of you shall we say doth love us most" - Lear*

Lear, an aging King with three adult daughters, summons them to his presence and demands each express their love and devotion towards him, with the understanding that whomever does so with the most sincere expression (and in the most extreme of size) shall earn a larger division of his wealth which he will then bequeath. Both Goneril and Regan express their love and devotion with ease and equal show, but his youngest and dearest daughter, Cordelia, refuses to play such a game to win his favor. She expresses a love suitable for her father, while reserving some for a future partner. Lear becomes enraged at his daughter's answer, and rather than try to understand the reason for it, banishes her from his sight and country.

*"I loved her most, and thought to set my rest
On her kind nursery. Hence, and avoid my sight." – Lear*

Kent, a supporter of Cordelia and devoted assistant to the King speaks up for her and is equally banished. Lear decides to split his wealth in property, title and land between his two remaining daughters and plans to divide his time between their two households.

Another father in Lear's court, Gloucester, has two sons: the illegitimate Edmund and the rightful heir, Edgar. Edmund reveals himself to be selfish and crafty, and vows to devise a way to inherit what belongs to his brother. He tells his father that Edgar wants the inheritance and his father stands in the way. He then lies to his brother and says for some reason, Gloucester is angry at Edgar and suggests he hide at his place, or else go out armed.

*"A credulous father and a brother noble,
Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit." – Edmund*

Kent disguises himself so he can continue to be in Lear's presence and serve him. They and Lear's additional staff arrive at Goneril's and demand dinner. Goneril objects to Lear's treatment and the behavior of his staff. And by her doing so, Lear threatens to leave for Regan's place.

Meanwhile, Edmund summons Edgar to tell him Gloucester is on his way and that he'd better run. He then fakes a wound so Gloucester will think Edgar harmed him, and his father, upon learning of this, vows the inheritance once promised Edgar will instead be Edmund's. Regan and Cornwall arrive and, learning of Edgar's behavior, vow allegiance with Edmund and promise him Edgar will not hurt him again.

*"If he be taken, he shall never more
Be feared of doing harm. For you, Edmund,
you shall be ours." – Cornwall*

Lear and company arrive at Regan's and he explains his horrible treatment at Goneril's hand. Regan stands up for her sister. Goneril arrives and Lear explains he will prefer to stay with Regan. Regan then demands he reduce the number of his staff by $\frac{3}{4}$'s and Lear

Plot Synopsis~King Lear ~ Page 2

retaliates by saying to Goneril he will go with her. Lear witnesses his two daughters continue to reduce the number of staff he may bring to attend on him and he vows he will lose his mind and leaves them both.

*"I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
Or ere I'll weep. O Fool, I shall go mad." – Lear*

Lear exits and the two sisters vow neither shall accept any staff. Gloucester enters to warn them of Lear's rage. All retire for the night.

Edgar, on the run, disguises himself as a beggar "Poor Tom" so as to remain invisible from those who search for him.

Lear appears outdoors howling at the storm, and a disguised Kent and Lear's Fool try to convince him to seek shelter in a little hovel. A gentleman appears and Kent has him take a letter and his ring to identify himself to Cordelia so she will believe the words contained within.

Gloucester tells his son, Edmund, he will go try to find and help the King as the two dukes are divided and warns Edmund to be careful in his absence.

Back in the woods, Kent and the Fool succeed in getting Lear to go "indoors" as Poor Tom appears. Lear shows signs of madness descending as he inquires if Tom is hiding from his own daughters, too. Lear begins to tear his own clothes and is restrained as Gloucester enters. Kent reveals to him that Lear seems mad and Gloucester defends him saying his daughters seek his death. He explains the changes he has learned of his own son, Edgar, have almost driven him mad as well. Gloucester proceeds to comfort Lear and gets him to shelter from the storm.

Cordelia receives the letter and ring from Kent via the messenger and learns of her father's behavior in the storm and expresses concern.

Cornwall tells Edmund he is ready to arrest Gloucester as soon as he is found and refers to Edmund as the Earl of Gloucester.

*"True or false, it hath made thee Earl of Gloucester.
You shall find a dearer father in my love." - Cornwall*

Meanwhile in the woods, Kent, Edgar, and the Fool play along with Lear's mock trial idea to try both an imaginary Regan and her sister, Goneril. When Lear falls asleep, Edgar reveals his true identity, only to hide it again as Gloucester enters looking for the King. He tells the men of a plot to end Lear's life and insists they leave immediately for Dover where they shall find welcome protection. After they take Lear away, Regan and Cornwall enter and immediately have Gloucester arrested. When pressed for Lear's location, Gloucester explains he sent him on to Dover because

*"I would not see thy cruel nails
Pluck out his poor old eyes." – Gloucester*

Plot Synopsis~King Lear ~ Page 3

Oswald attempts to protect Gloucester and is killed by Regan but not before he manages to wound Cornwall. After Oswald is killed, Cornwall reveals it was Edmund who hates Gloucester and accused him of treason. Cornwall then blinds Gloucester as he realizes Edgar was falsely accused by his own brother.

“Give me some help! O cruel! O you gods!” - Gloucester

Edgar encounters his father in the woods, blind and lost trying to find his way to Dover. Edgar retains his Poor Tom disguise as he agrees to help Gloucester find a cliff from which he plans to jump.

Goneril’s husband, Albany, learns of her feelings for Edmund and threatens he would rip her to shreds were he a lesser man. Their argument is interrupted by a messenger who brings news that Cornwall has died of his wound by Oswald after Gloucester was blinded by Cornwall. He delivers a letter from Regan to her sister and Goneril jealously wonders at the idea of her newly widowed sister being in the company of Edmund. The messenger informs Albany that Edmund was the one who had accused his father of treason and that he knew of the intent to punish Gloucester. Albany vows revenge for Gloucester and the eyesight taken from him.

Cordelia dispatches an officer to search for her father and bring him to her so they can be reunited.

Meanwhile, Gloucester is led by Edgar to an area he claims is the edge of the cliff.

*“Why I do trifle with his despair
Is done to cure it.” - Edgar*

When Gloucester “jumps” and discovers he lives, Edgar gives him reason to be glad of such a failed plan. Lear arrives, seemingly mad, yet he recognizes Gloucester and they have a bittersweet reunion. Perillus arrives to bring Lear to see Cordelia and Lear agrees as long as he can catch him. As the King runs off, Edgar reveals his true identity to Gloucester and he dies in his son’s arms, reunited at last.

Cordelia returns home to be reunited with her father and thanks Kent for his selfless service on Lear’s behalf. Lear is in a weakened state, yet rejoices in seeing his beloved daughter again.

*“You must bear with me.
Pray you now, forget and forgive.” - Lear*

Regan questions Edmund about his feelings towards her sister and he makes it clear he doesn’t care about Goneril. As Goneril arrives and insists Regan go with her, Edmund weighs the pros and cons of being involved with either sister and decides it impossible to consider as long as they both live.

Plot Synopsis~King Lear ~ Page 4

Edmund has both Lear and Cordelia taken away to prison. After they leave, Edmund gives orders to hang Cordelia and make it look like suicide.

*“My state stands on me to defend,
Not to debate.” - Edmund*

Goneril and Regan enter fighting over Edmund while Goneril's husband, Albany, looks on. Regan complains of not feeling well as Albany threatens to arrest both Edmund for treason and his wife for unfaithfulness. Regan leaves with an officer charged with assisting her at Albany's home as her symptoms worsen quickly. At her husband's command, Goneril follows her out.

Edgar enters armed against his brother and demands he draw his own knife, calling him a traitor. Edmund is seriously wounded by his brother and then demands to know his assailant's identity. Edgar reveals he is his brother and the son of a newly deceased Gloucester. Perillus enters with the news that Regan has died from poisoning by Goneril, who has then killed herself.

*“Yet Edmund was beloved:
The one the other poisoned for my sake,
And after slew herself.” - Edmund*

Kent arrives looking for Lear and Albany questions Edmund on the whereabouts of Cordelia and her father. Edmund says to quickly get to the prison as he intends some good in saving them from their fate, and then he himself dies from his wounds.

Before Perillus can comply, Lear enters with the body of Cordelia. The King is told of the deaths of his other children and he in turn reveals his Fool has also been hanged. Lear then dies with Cordelia in his arms.

“He is gone indeed.” - Edgar

“The wonder is, he hath endured so long.” - Kent

CAST OF PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Gloucester - an old friend of Lear and naively kind, whose advancing age and declining agility subject him to misuse by one son, and gentle selfless care by the other.

Edmund- crafty and cruel illegitimate younger son of Gloucester.

Edgar- banished and devoted older son to Gloucester, and brother to Edmund.

Lear - an aging King of England and father of three daughters, needs protection by those that love him from the clutches of those that seek to do him harm.

Goneril - Lear's devious, oldest daughter, recipient of one-half of his realm, who later falls for Edmund.

Regan - is Lear's second daughter, married to Cornwall, both of them being really cruel, ambitious people.

Cordelia - is Lear's youngest and favorite daughter, banished from her father's kingdom for not telling him she loved him totally. She marries the King of France, and later returns to Britain where she is reunited with her father.

Albany - is a thoughtful, considerate man married to Goneril, Lear's oldest daughter.

Kent - devoted and kind companion to Lear who risks his life by wearing a disguise so he may continue to serve the King.

Fool - is a loyal servant to the King, whose presence reminds us that it is not always easy to tell who the fool is and who is the wise man.

Lesson Plans

EXPLORING DEGREES OF STATUS USING A DECK OF CARDS

This easy exercise is designed to physically engage the students and command their focus in a quick manner while getting them to consider nuances of behavior.

MATERIALS: a deck of playing cards. Depending on the number of students involved, sort the cards so that there are many options of numbers available to choose from and few “face” cards.

Initiate a discussion with students on the outward, physical behaviors one might exhibit to convey various degrees of lower status (such as hunched shoulders, limited eye contact, etc.) and higher status levels (aligned posture, raised chin and eyes, etc.). Distribute one card to each student with the instructions not to look at what the card is, but rather to hold it against their forehead so that others can see what their “identity” is. When everyone has a card, direct the group to move around the room and react to people based on what their forehead card reveals. As students are presented with a response to their status, the students should then begin to behave as the level of status they understand have been assigned to them. When students have explored this exercise for a bit, ask them to pause, and then have them try to line up according to their status (Kings at one end of room descending in order to Aces at the opposite end). After the line has been formed, have students look at the cards.

DISCUSSION: Was it easy to determine your own status by the treatment received from others? Did you encounter people of similar status or very different and how could you tell? Was your eventual placement in the line correct? What made you choose that location? Have students discuss the characters in the play and decide the order they would put those characters in based on their status. Have the students consider if any character’s status changes during the course of the play, and offer examples.

FURTHER DISCUSSION: Have students consider what behaviors are familiar in their own lives. Have them offer examples from the play that can be viewed as similar to something they have witnessed, either personally or in a broader sense such as a figure in the news. Discuss how actors are tasked with the challenge of creating very different characters’ status and give examples from movies or other mediums they may have seen (such as Jim Carrey in *Dumb and Dumber* is a very low status character while he has very high status in *Bruce Almighty*). Are there certain types of physical behavior that are more commonly associated with comedy or drama?

EXPLORING EMPATHY BY MAKING PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

This exercise is effective both as preparation for seeing the play, and/or in furthering understanding after one has seen *LEAR*. The teacher should guide the students through this exercise with verbal instruction following the prompts below. It is important to shape this as an exercise that uses imaginary ideas with true feelings/associations.

Have each student create a list of eight different things that they truly love or feel are important to their lives. This does not need to be created in a particular order of importance or value. There are no limits to what students should consider for this list as the ideas can relate to people, places, things, dreams, etc. The only rule is that they be considered an essential component to their life happiness and well-being.

Once students have created their lists, have them review their ideas and determine what three things from the list they would be able to do without. Have them write their answers down.

Then have them explore what is essential to them and write three things they do not think they could manage to live without having.

The next step is to assign some random numbers that they must remove from their lists.

- Take away number 2.
- Take away number 8.
- Take away number 4.

Have them then write down their immediate reactions to losing these things. Have them consider if their feelings match what they first predicted they could or could not lose.

Instruct the students to look at their original eight things and instead remove items numbered 1, 3, 5, 6, 7. Ask the students to again explore how they feel about losing those things. Did their feelings change about losing something from their lists? Have them consider if they could in fact survive without them and ask them how/what would help? If there was one essential thing from their original lists they would now want to keep, what would it be and why?

DISCUSSION: As this exercise offers a very personal response from students, ask them to consider general answers, unless they feel comfortable sharing something specific they discovered.

Considerations:

- When they had to consider having everything taken away, how did they feel?
- How did they feel when they were given permission to pick one thing they could add back to their list?

FURTHER DISCUSSION: Consider having students track all the things Lear loses in the play. After they see the show, have them explore his reactions to losing things. Were there any moments to which they could relate based on the above exercise on loss? Do they see themselves as being more or less sympathetic to his plight when they compare their own reactions? What do they consider the one thing Lear would want back and why?

UNDERSTANDING THEME OF BLINDNESS AND SIGHT

In *LEAR*, Shakespeare uses the following words throughout the script and with much repetition: “see”, “eyes”, “eye”, “sight”, “eyeless”, and “blind”. As Shakespeare would often repeat words in his plays to help illustrate ideas and themes he was exploring, it is obvious from the amount of repetition of the words in the above list that the playwright was examining both the literal and metaphorical concepts involving sight.

When we view the play, it is easy to want to question why Lear behaves the way he does without effort of self-reflection, recognition and understanding. It is as if he truly does not see himself. He certainly does not view Cordelia’s response to his question early in the play as a sign of true love for him, but rather a signal of betrayal and insignificance when compared to the responses from his other two daughters.

When Lear finds himself in the storm, an obvious metaphor to the quickly-changing moods and minds of those characters in his life (including himself), he seems unable to recognize true examples of goodness and loyalty in the company he finds himself as both Edgar and Kent are in disguise. Perhaps he can only see what appears on the surface. Nonetheless, in his inability to recognize examples of things he seeks being already present, he is ill equipped to understand what is happening to him, and this blindness brings on madness. He cannot shift and adjust in the storm of life, but he must rather howl and let it drench him.

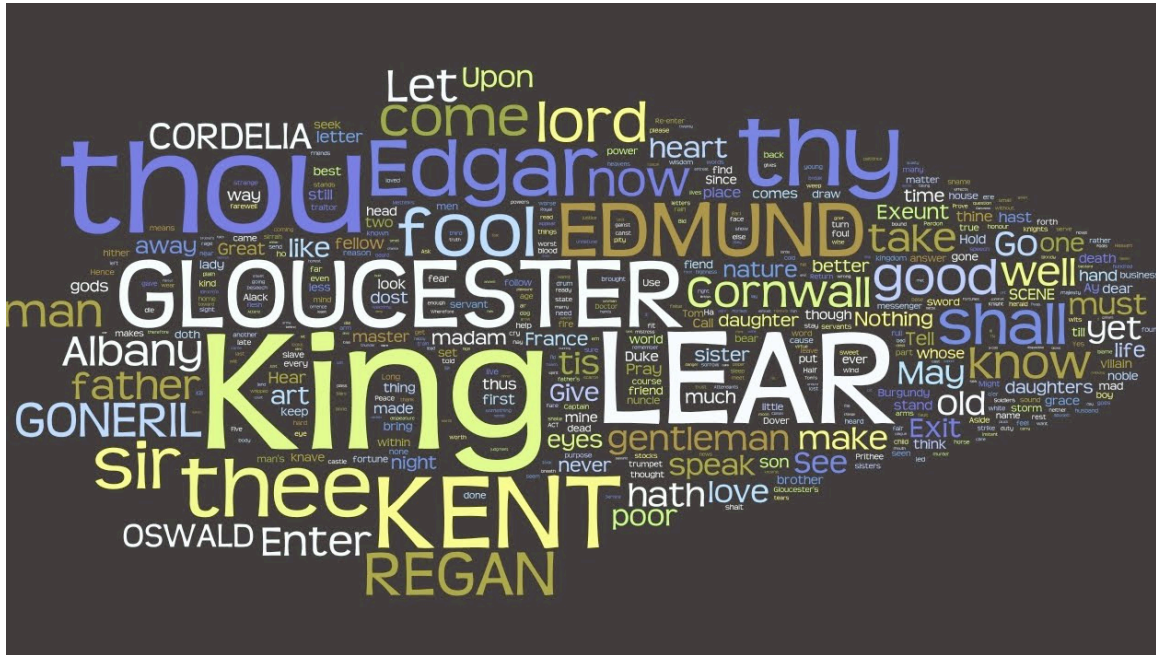
It is interesting to consider the literal blindness of another father character in the play, Gloucester. Without his eyes, he must rely on his other senses to attempt to put understanding and order back in his life. Gloucester’s blindness puts a literal connotation to the idea of maneuvering through life without really seeing, and drives home the idea that there are unavoidable consequences when the truth is not “seen”.

MATERIALS: Blank sheets of paper, and an assortment of pens and pencils for drawing.

ASSIGNMENT: Group students in pairs and have them sit somewhere in the room where they can be situated back to back. Have one student in the pair draw a picture of something (whatever they choose to create). If possible, have that student incorporate as many kinds of pens, pencils and colors as he/she can. Once the student has finished their picture, they must describe it to their partner with as much detail and explanation as possible, as long as they do not turn to their partner and show them the drawing. The receiving student must use that description to try to recreate the exact picture on his or her own paper. When they have completed their interpretation of the description, have them face each other and reveal their work.

DISCUSSION: What was it like having to rely on what your partner was saying and trust your interpretation? Were there any things that were not conveyed clearly or were misunderstood? Did you do anything to compensate for not being able to see the original drawing? Did those adjustments help you or hinder your task? Taking this exercise further, discuss the challenges Lear had in communicating with his children. Why was it challenging? What worked in his favor? What worked against him and/or his daughters? Did their status and relationship to each other play a significant part? How?

Study Questions



Things to think about when watching the play

1. How many different kinds of patriarchal relationships are there in this play?
2. Different people want different things during the play: the fathers, the children, the heirs, and the power-hungry. What is the relation between individual roles and an aging monarch?
3. How does this ancient story of Lear relate to things happening in the world today?

Things to think about after watching the play

1. What was the most memorable part of the play for you?
2. Who was your favorite character and why?
3. Do you think Lear and his family would have died at the end of the story had he not insisted on his daughters proving their love of him early on? Was Cordelia a dutiful daughter or not? Should she have told her father what he wanted to hear?
4. What would you have done to help or save the King had you been in the Fool's or Gloucester's situation?
5. Who is right and who is wrong in the play? Are things black and white in the play? Did the costume and set design add to the story? Did it make you think about selfish and selfless thought and action, right and wrong, in different ways?
6. In your opinion, what is the most important lesson that this story offers?