

The modern popularity of KING LEAR among audiences has its obvious counterpart in the theatrical movement which stresses the theatre's social role as being responsible to the people. There are two important social themes in the play that are particularly relevant to the nineties: a) the breakdown of family relationships, and, b) how society treats the old - how do we care for our aging parents? These ideas provide the framework and hook for this production. KING LEAR presents the alienation, despair, and loneliness of the aged when their families and, ultimately society, turn their backs on them. Lear is not an innocent and has his faults and foolishness but is still "a man more sinned against than sinning".

In seeking to shorten the gap between the world of KING LEAR and ours, the story is being given an ambience from a period that is sufficiently dated to be older and stranger than our own, yet near enough to our sense of history and clear enough for an analogy. The setting is a Victorian sanatorium and the play unfolds as a haunting dream in the mind of a dying old inmate during his final breaths. The Victorian equivalent to a modern day nursing home becomes a practical backdrop for this version of the play. Further, setting the play in a period known for its political and social politesse adds a deepening perspective as it probes down to the bone of human behaviour. It was a period of confrontation and of the inner cruelty of family. Health conditions were perverse; small problems like the measles, now taken in stride, then lethal. The beggared, the crippled, the sick, the old, the young, the unwanted were confined together and treated like animals in sanatoriums, away from society's view. It was an era of claustrophobia: walls and windows wall-papered over, very little air in the interiors for the candles and oil-lamps took it all, stiff, repressive collars welded down in the morning and soon limp with daily, ever-present sweat. Perhaps the greatest tribulation which the Victorians suffered from was maintaining the elaborate facade of double morality which was such a necessary part of their insecure, rigid, class system. The Victorians were power hungry and outwardly appeared secure and in control, but, inwardly, their lives were governed by fear - fear of losing their position and status, fear of being exposed, the fear of living. Under these conditions, the characters in LEAR have very real Victorian counterparts.

The sanatorium setting frames the action of the play. When LEAR begins, lights come up on what is suggestive of a rotting asylum. Throughout this opening scene, there is a soundscape combining the sound of distant moans, doors slamming, and a November wind groaning outside the windows. Centrestage is a feverish old man (Lear) sitting in a wheelchair. He restlessly turns back and forth. He is dying. Beside him kneels an inmate (the Fool) who is trying to comfort him. Huddling downstage is a naked beggar (Edgar) chained to the floor. Upstage left another abandoned old man (Gloucester), blind with his eyes covered by a dirty cloth, sits rocking on a bench. Four orderlies enter at different intervals, one feeding the beggar, another refilling a lantern, another retrieving a bucket serving as a collective bedpan, and the fourth one sits on an upstage step watching the proceedings. At the same time a benevolent porter (Kent) enters and pokes at the remaining embers in the fireplace, trying to create some warmth. A young nun (Cordelia) enters. She readjusts Gloucester's blanket, touches the Fool gently on the head, and kneels down to pray beside Lear. She is in fact performing a ritual similar to the last rights. Meanwhile on the stage right balcony, two visitors (Goneril and Regan) are sitting beside a desk going over admittance papers with an assistant administrator (Albany). The administrator (Cornwall), cold and reserved, enters on the stage right balcony, comes down the stairs and passes through the asylum, indifferent to the

suffering around him. He glances up to a doctor leaning over the stage left balcony and exits. The doctor (Edmund) smokes a cigarette and stares down at the inmates. There is a mocking quality about his presence. A house-proud steward (Oswald) enters beside the doctor carrying a bowl of table scraps. He throws them off the balcony and the scraps land in front of Gloucester who reaches pathetically for them. A porter comes to his aid.

As this overlapping action winds down, the Fool begins to gently sing "The Wind And The Rain" (the final song of TWELFTH NIGHT and one verse is sung by the Fool in III.ii of KING LEAR) into Lear's ear. He sings the first three verses causing Lear to fall into a troubled sleep, entering the nightmare world of his dreams. His life unfolds before him - the way his family has treated him - symbolically created in his mind in the form of KING LEAR. As his nightmare begins, lighting and sound help to take us from the

reality of the sanatorium and into the world of his dream. The soundscape changes to a transitional droning buzz, fading into a synthesized Victorian violin concerto. Lighting fades around Lear as he begins to dream. As this happens, the orderlies enter and adjust the furniture slightly. An orderly unchains Edgar and leads him offstage (these shackles will later be used as the stocks in II.ii). An orderly removes Gloucester's blanket and blindfold and exits. Gloucester is revealed to be wearing a conservative period suit; he is transformed into the character in the play. The porter buttons up his jacket and is transformed into the Earl of Kent. He crosses downstage to Gloucester. Edmund comes down the stage left stairs and reclines on a stage right bench. The remainder of the characters, except for the Fool and Lear, freeze.

Edmund, Kent, and Gloucester are now ready to begin Act One, Scene One of the text. When Gloucester says, "The King is coming", Lear takes his cue, opens his eyes, and, now as King Lear, rises out of the wheelchair and enters the scene. He has now entered his nightmare completely. At this moment the remaining characters take up their positions in Lear's court. The sanatorium becomes the various settings required and the play unfolds as indicated in the text.

The four orderlies will act as a chorus and provide the continuity of the asylum throughout the play. They will execute the scene changes, and, as a unit, through the addition of a key costume piece, they will become Lear's knights, Gloucester's servants, the French officers, and the British officers.