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Cover Page Footnote

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Too Young or Too Old? Age and The Politics of Performing King Lear - Successfully!

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ABSTRACT

“It is sometimes said that the problem with the part of Lear is that by the time you are old enough to play it, you are too old to play it” (Jonathan Bate).

Theatre critics rarely see an outstanding performance of King Lear. The thesis of this paper is that it is possible to successfully perform the role of Lear; however, it takes much more than excellent acting skills to do so. To successfully play Lear requires a visceral understanding of the profound psychological and physical changes that generally begin around age sixty-five. This paper demonstrates that what one learns from having lived a long life, along with the physical and mental stamina demanded of the role, are essential to a successful performance of King Lear. Attempting to do so without the benefit of that experience not only dehumanizes the character being portrayed; it is also a disservice to the audience.

Keywords: ageism in the theatre, aging and performance, King Lear, age and stereotypes, older actors and King Lear, older characters in Shakespeare

Too Young or Too Old? Age and The Politics of Performing King Lear - Successfully!

LEAR: Know that we have divided
In three our kingdom; and 'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburthened crawl toward death. (Shakespeare 1.1.35-39)

Introduction

Why on earth did Lear speak those words? What was he thinking? Most younger actors who have portrayed King Lear do not know. They are likely to misconstrue what motivated Lear to divide up his estate amongst his daughters. Most younger people, being fully engaged in pursuing their interests and goals, simply cannot imagine that someone could lose interest in the day-

to-day management of a kingdom. It is extremely difficult for them to conceive what it feels like to deal with the bodily insults that come with aging, such as cataracts, hearing loss, arthritis, sleepless nights, etc. For most actors, it is simply impossible to divine what is going on in Lear's mind and body because they have no personal experience with the psychological and physical changes that come with advanced aging, and until recently

there have been few old people around to serve as examples.¹ Statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau report, “1900-2000: Changes in Life Expectancy in the United States,” tell us that even today few people reach Lear’s age and of that few, how many are actors still capable of practicing their craft? If they are still alive and acting, the challenge then becomes dealing with the debilities that come with age. The physical demands of playing Lear make it difficult to perform the role unless the actor is in good physical condition and still capable of memorizing a substantial amount of text.

Research on aging discussed in this paper contradicts the notion that a trained actor can successfully play any role, particularly when it comes to matters of an aging mind contemplating the end of life, and an aging body with the associated insults unique to old age. This paper makes the argument that it is possible to successfully perform King Lear but that it takes much more than excellent acting skills to do so. In order to successfully perform the role of King Lear, the actor must have a visceral understanding of the profound psychological and physical changes that generally begin to occur when one lives to at least age sixty to sixty-five and are almost certainly experienced after one is seventy. Actors who have successfully portrayed King Lear, such as Derek Jacobi, Ian McKellen and Frank Langella, all waited until they were in their late sixties or mid-seventies to tackle what

McKellen referred to as, “the summation really of an actor’s career in Shakespeare . . . Lear is the biggy . . . and I’m not the first to call it the Everest of Shakespeare. . . Lear is the big, big challenge” (McKellen 2016).

Why is this so? Because, as Karl Pillemer, Ph.D., Professor of Human Development at Cornell University, and founder of the Cornell Institute for Translational Research on Aging, writes in his book, *30 Lessons for Living: Tried and True Advice from the Wisest Americans*, it is very difficult to understand what it is like to be an octogenarian unless one is or is close to being one:

Aging is one of the strangest things that happens to human beings. . . . However, it is extremely difficult for most people to imagine themselves as old. . . . We seem incapable of holding in our minds the reality of our own aging *as a process* and to develop a realistic picture of what our older selves will be like (128) . . . What older people have that younger people do not is this: the profound existential awareness that each of our lifetimes is limited . . . [T]here comes a point in life (and I think of it as somewhere around age seventy) when we truly internalize the idea that we belong to time . . . *life is short*. (Pillemer 200-01)

¹ When it comes to matters of psychology (i.e. how one thinks, what one thinks), lack of experience can inhibit the ability to play a character regardless of the age of the character. The playwright Eric Bogosian wrote *Suburbia* when he was in his late thirties. He wrote about the angst of teenagers living in the suburbs based on his own experience as an adult in his late thirties, particularly when it came to the character of Jeff (I have studied this play in depth and have performed scenes as Jeff as part of my course study). I have seen the movie of the play and also attended a live performance directed by local director Freddie Ashley. In both cases, from my perspective

the actors, in particular the actor playing Jeff, failed to convey the intended meaning of Bogosian’s text. At the “talkback” after the performance of the play, director Ashley opened the discussion by saying that it was only during the first rehearsal that he realized that the young actors did not have the life experience necessary to convey the emotional content of Bogosian’s text. It is in fact very difficult, if not impossible, for an actor to play a character when he has no “as if” experience on which to base his actions. Experienced actors quoted in this paper have, sometimes belatedly, discovered this truth.

Langella, Jacobi and McKellen had reached the age where imagining what it was like to be old was no longer required. Unlike someone younger, they were fully aware of “the idea that we belong to time . . . *life is short.*”²

This paper addresses the dilemma faced by both younger and older actors who aspire to play King Lear through research on critical reviews of performances of *King Lear*, a critical reading of the dramatic text, and seeing live performances of *King Lear*. Additional research includes the effects of aging, reviews of and interviews with actors who have played Lear, and the author’s auto-ethnographic experiences as an actor who is nearly eighty and still actively performing on stage.³ The intent is not to advocate that *King Lear* should not be performed, but rather to highlight the challenges facing a younger actor attempting to play King Lear, notwithstanding the challenges for an older actor.

What Happens When One Ages

Something totally unexpected happened to me when I was in my early seventies. One day I woke up and discovered that I no longer wanted to deal with the quotidian tasks of daily living. When I ask other men around my age about this phenomenon, virtually everyone acknowledges that the same thing happened to them, but it is not normally a subject of conversation. A report on the effects of aging on the mind found that “psychologists have the necessary expertise to assess and differentiate between disorders such as dementia, depression, anxiety, delirium, adjustment reactions, side effects from

medications, or combinations of these problems,” along with a very long list of physical and mental issues of aging (“Psychology and Aging”). But nowhere was there any discussion of what would appear to be a normal shift in how one wants to live one’s life as one’s mortality becomes omnipresent. An actor who has not achieved “a certain age” may think that Lear has simply decided to pass on his estate while he is still living and can assist his heirs in the transition. Or perhaps he or she thinks Lear is too old and frail (i.e., suffers from the aging issues listed above) to carry on the responsibilities of kingship. In fact, more than a few actors have mistakenly played Lear as being feeble of body and mind from the very first scene of the play (i.e., a stereotypical portrayal of someone who is old). That is likely because the actors did not have a frame of reference for imagining that the old man was no longer interested in overseeing the duties associated with the kingdom. It is little wonder that an actor attempting to understand what it is like to be Lear’s age is easily misled into imagining a stereotypical character who is old and feeble.

Studying *King Lear* through the lens of my own experience as an octogenarian and through critical analysis of the text, it is quite reasonable to assume that as an eighty-year-old man, Lear had decided to unburden himself of the responsibilities of a king; he wanted the benefits that would allow him to do whatever it is he wanted to do with his buddies until the day he died, but without the responsibilities. Thus, begins a story of an aging king, who in the process of implementing the decision to divide up his estate while still living, makes some absolutely terrible mistakes—mistakes that

² As someone who is now in his seventy-ninth year, I can personally attest that even as I watched my own parents and my grandmother, all of whom lived past age sixty-five, I couldn’t imagine what it was like to be old (obviously that is no longer the case!).

³ As Kama Chávez points out in her paper, “Remapping Latinidad”: “Through the sharing of stories from lives that teach lessons or offer insight about the way the world works, narratives work to build theory literally from flesh and blood experience” (168).

are easier to understand if one has a lifetime of experience under one's belt.

There are also physical consequences of aging that are difficult to comprehend until one has personal experience with them. In *Younger Next Year*, Chris Crowley argues, "A lot of us get noticeably grumpier when we reach the Next Third . . . It is dreadful. But it is normal" (186-7). As we reach old age, there is a propensity to get grumpy over relatively trivial annoyances. I think there are two reasons for this: first, as mentioned earlier, one fine day I woke up and discovered that I was utterly uninterested in the day-to-day tasks of daily living. I get grumpy when I have to deal with the mundane—something that did not happen when I was younger. Second, old age brings on aches and pains that, quite frankly, make daily living more difficult. Not able to see or hear well, suffering from insomnia, and other debilities that come with age, can affect how one moves and can make one rather agitated at times. All these consequences of aging contribute to one being prone to grumpiness. The key for an actor is not just to act grumpy, but rather to understand through experience the circumstances that cause one to be grumpy—grumpiness that has true meaning as a consequence of the insults brought on by the aging process and that an actor can manifest through physical actions.

These physical consequences of living to the ripe old age of eighty, which are relatively common today, may not have been apparent in the early 1600s when most people died well before reaching that age (and therefore were unlikely to have been issues for the audience or for an actor playing King Lear). For example, little attention was paid to the physical attributes of the character, as evidenced by the lack of stage directions that Shakespeare included in the script regarding the physical indignities of aging. Poor eyesight is one of the few debilities plaguing Lear. In Act Five, Lear, trying to identify who

is speaking to him says, "Mine eyes are not o' the best, I'll tell you straight" (*King Lear* 5.3.278-9). The National Eye Institute's report "Cataracts" argues that, "cataracts are very common as you get older." I've had cataract surgery on both eyes, an option that was not available to Lear. He would have lived in a fuzzy, dimly-lit world.

According to a report from the National Institute on Deafness, "approximately one in three people in the United States between the ages of 65 and 74 has hearing loss, and nearly half of those older than 75 have difficulty hearing" ("What is Age-Related Hearing Loss"). An aging Lear might very well have put a hand to his ear to better hear what someone says, just as Frank Langella did in his performance of Lear, trying to hear the response to Lear's question, "I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause?" (*King Lear* 4.6.109). Unlike an audience in the 1600s, a modern audience watching an actor portray Lear would expect the character to suffer from and manifest in his performance the physical consequences of living to the ripe old age of eighty.

A younger actor playing Lear has two problems. First, he has to be aware that Lear would have suffered these insults to his manhood; second, he would need to be able to truly understand how debilitating these insults are. Given the lack of guidance from Shakespeare, today's older actors playing Lear must provide the experiences of an aging body that would fill in the gaps of even Shakespeare's imagination. At the same time, he or she must be able to meet the physical demands required to play Lear. Although many of Shakespeare's roles can be a challenge for an actor, playing eighty-year-old Lear presents some very unique, age-related challenges.

What Makes Playing a Character Who is Very Old So Difficult?

It is a rare role where an actor can be either too young or too old to play the part, yet this is the case for many actors who aspire to perform King Lear. Young actors lack the knowledge and ability to imagine what it is like to be very old; old actors often lack the physical stamina and strength required of the role. Even highly respected actors whose careers included many Shakespearean roles have fallen on their swords trying to play Lear, first when they were young and naive, and again when they were old and feeble. Regrettably, when they had finally reached an age at which they understood the demands of the role, they were not physically capable of doing so.

Sir Laurence Olivier is an example of a renowned Shakespearean actor who attempted to play Lear both early and late in his career. Jonathan Bate, Professor of Shakespeare and Renaissance Literature at the University of Warwick, writes of those performances:

It is sometimes said that the problem with the part of Lear is that by the time you are old enough to play it, you are too old to play it. Laurence Olivier tried both too soon and too late: on the stage in 1946, still in his thirties, he seemed to be impersonating a whimsical old tyrant rather than actually being one, while on television in 1983, he was too frail for the rage.

According to Bate, both of Olivier's performances suffered from the issue of his age at the time. When he was young, Olivier relied on stereotypes of how an old person behaved; when old, he lacked the physical stamina and strength to play the role. Olivier unwittingly discovered the central dilemma inherent in playing the role of Lear.

⁴ Most reviews are from *The New York Times* or from *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph* and *The Independent*,

Reviews of twenty-seven productions of *King Lear*, by notable theatre critics at major newspapers from 2000 on, revealed that *not one* of them received a rating of 5-out-of-5 stars from the critics.⁴ Of those twenty-seven productions, only ten, or 37%, received a rating of 4 stars. Like Olivier, the noted Shakespearean actor, Sir John Gielgud, found the role of King Lear to be daunting. During an interview *Telegraph* theatre critic Dominic Cavendish conducted with another great Shakespearean actor, Derek Jacobi, regarding performances of *King Lear*, Jacobi recalled Gielgud's critique about one of Gielgud's own performances of King Lear. Jacobi said, "Gielgud was a mere stripling—27—when he made his first attempt at Lear at the Old Vic in 1931. He [Gielgud] later reflected: '[I] was wholly inadequate in the storm scenes, having neither the voice nor the physique for them. Lear has to be the storm'" (Cavendish). Either Gielgud was a physical weakling ("a mere stripling," as Jacobi refers to him) and lacked the physical stamina to pull off a believable fit of rage, or he had not yet been the subject of serious humiliation himself to know what it is to rage against perceived injustices. He was too young to give a credible performance.

As was true with Olivier, when Gielgud had reached a certain age, (90), he tackled Lear again; once again the role was too much for him to handle. Robert Hanks, a theatre critic for *The Independent*, wrote this in his review of Gielgud's performance:

[T]his simply wasn't the great performance from the man himself that you'd have liked it to be. At times it felt very diluted - as when, in the storm scene, presumably as a concession to 90-year-old vocal cords, Lear's howls of outrage against the elements are turned, by a not-so-

which are major London newspapers that cover the theatre.

deft acoustic gearshift, into an internal monologue, destroying the sense of passion overflowing and uncontainable. At other times it was just unremarkable, taking no risks, offering no new insights. There were many moments—particularly Lear's final speech, weeping over Cordelia's body—when you had the sense of something marvellous [Brit.] flashing into view. But in the end, this was impressive as a record of Gielgud's voice, not of his interpretative talents.

It is hard to understand how an actor of his stature appeared to be incapable of bringing meaning to the text. It seems clear that Hanks concluded that Gielgud was simply too old and feeble to meet the demands of the role. Gielgud tarnished rather than enhanced his credibility as a Shakespearean actor by attempting to play a role that demanded more than he was capable of performing either as a young man lacking insight or as an old man lacking the physical stamina.

In the spring of 2018, I had the opportunity to see first-hand what can happen when an aging actor decides to cap off his career by playing Lear. Antony Sher has been performing works of Shakespeare for thirty-five years as a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, and twice won Oliviers (British equivalents of Tony awards) for performances. Not only was I able to evaluate Sher's performance, it was also reviewed by Elisabeth Vincentelli for *The New York Times*. Sher published a book in 2018 of his daily diaries as he prepared for and rehearsed for the 2016 run. Unfortunately, Sher succumbed to the siren call of Lear; he was sure he had finally reached the age where he was ready to tackle the role.⁵ There is just one problem: he is a

physical wreck, he knows it, and it shows in his performance.

Regarding the role of Lear, Sher writes, "I think it is important to show him as truly powerful at the beginning . . . King Lear can't just walk on!" (12). Sher consults a psychologist, Professor Ian Stuart-Hamilton, who "knows the play very well" regarding Lear's madness. Referring to Lear's health, Stuart-Hamilton tells Sher that, "[H]e's in rude health: he can go hunting, he can ride through the night from one place to another, he can even run out into a storm" (182). Maybe Lear can, but Sher cannot. At the beginning of the play Sher, wearing a huge coat, is carried in on a platform, encased in a glass box, supposedly to make him look powerful. But being carried on wearing a huge coat did not make him look strong, particularly when he spoke his opening lines in a monotone voice, looking straight ahead. Reviewer Vincentelli agrees: in her April 14, 2018 review she writes, "[T]he king does not sound all that assured lording it over retinue and family. A certain feebleness creeps into his voice when he demands declarations of love from his three daughters. The coat that looked so impressive at first glance now appears to engulf him, a small man in a big costume" (Vincentelli C4). Sher does *not* appear to be an all-powerful king! From his lofty perch, he does *not* command the stage. Simply put, Sher does not have the stage presence required to play King Lear. His voice is weak, and his body is frail, due to a lack of care on his part.

Throughout his book Sher acknowledges his poor physical condition, yet the irresistible call of the role drowns out any doubts he may have. He refers to himself as "a creaky old chap" (Sher 24). Later on, he writes, "I cursed my failing powers, and

⁵ In his book, *Year of the Mad King: The Lear Diaries*, Sher writes that, "[Y]ou wait a lifetime to play Lear" (202).

thought of King Lear [but not of giving up the role, apparently]” (96). Later, on a trip to Italy, Sher inadvertently reveals his ambivalence about his ability to perform Lear while at the same time being seduced by the role’s powerful call to a veteran Shakespearean actor: He writes, “On the one hand, this is probably the most challenging role I’ll ever play. On the other, I’m in top condition for it. I don’t mean mentally, and certainly not physically, but simply in terms of Shakespeare skills” (150). Sher seems oblivious to the fact that great acting skills are not enough; playing Lear is physically demanding.

One must be in excellent physical condition, in terms of both strength and stamina, to pull playing Lear. From reading Sher’s diaries, it is clear that physical fitness is not one of his priorities. He drinks too much, eats too much (he admits to being overweight), and was treated for drug addiction (cocaine) in 1996.⁶ His performance shows it. When he was tackling the “Blow Winds” speeches, Sher writes, “Jesus. I’m really understanding why the part is regarded as such a killer. It doesn’t need an actor, it needs a force of nature, it needs another storm” (35). That is not what we got with his performance. For this scene, Sher enters standing on top of the same glass box that he came in on during the first scene. With his left arm raised, he recited the storm scene speeches. He did not move. There was no storm affecting him at all. Vincentelli writes that it was “the least effective storm scene I have ever seen staged” (Vincentelli C4). It was pathetic. Sher knows better, because he writes that the scene needs a “sense of wilderness and chaos,” and that it must be much more than that of “an old man taking a stroll in slightly bad weather” (116). But we

got even less than that. Furthermore, there were no storm sounds during the speech so that Sher’s weak voice could be heard. In his book, Sher makes it clear that he knows that the role demands a powerful figure, yet he is kidding himself when he writes that he is “in top condition for it” (150). He did not take care of his body. Although Sher devoted his career to performing Shakespeare, that does not mean he has earned the right to play King Lear.

Finally, there is the scene at the end of the play in which Lear carries in the dead Cordelia. It is one of those iconic moments in the play that audiences especially anticipate—a fact that director Gregor Doran acknowledges. Yet Sher is not up to the task as, sadly, he even admits in his book. Throughout the diaries, Sher complains of a bad shoulder that gets progressively worse. There is no way he can carry Cordelia. As formal rehearsals commence, Sher has a conversation with husband/director Greg about the issue: “This is going to be impossible for me—with my bugged arm. Another solution will have to be found. Greg says quietly, without anger, ‘But it’s one of the most iconic images in Shakespeare . . . !’” (167). So it is. It also represents an enormous conflict of interest for a director and actor who are married to each other and who both are hearing the persistent call of *King Lear*. It is a conflict which Doran, in frustration regarding the dilemma, acknowledges saying, “This is very hard for me. I’m in three different positions here. Your partner. The director of the show. The Artistic Director of the company. . . I’m in an impossible situation. The private and professional relationships have got impossibly entangled. What do we do?” We sat in silence” (190). What they should have

maintaining a normal weight. . . Unfortunately, less than 2 percent of the people studied had all five low-risk factors, and a third had two or fewer” (Bakalar). Sher is a member of that latter third.

⁶ In the May 8, 2018 “Science Times” section of *The New York Times*, Nicholas Bakalar documents “5 Behaviors for a Longer Life.” They are: “eating a healthy diet, not smoking, getting regular physical activity, moderate alcohol consumption and

done is agree that Sher was not up to playing Lear. However, when a conflict of interest confronts a powerful desire to support the dreams of one's partner, good judgment is often tossed aside. The result in this case was a disservice to Shakespeare's text and the portrayal of Lear. This scene is the denouement of the entire play. The physicality, emotional content, and pathos of losing his beloved Cordelia so soon after their reconciliation demand far more than Lear being rolled in on a cart with Cordelia draped across his lap. It was impossible to do justice to this scene while reclining in a chair on a cart with the dead Cordelia lying across his lap, reciting his lines. It was a travesty.⁷ And yet it has to be acknowledged that Sher has an in-depth understanding of Shakespeare's plays and can perform scenes that he has great affection for quite brilliantly, provided they are not physically demanding.

Regarding the scene on the heath between Lear and the blinded Gloucester, Sher writes, "I think it's one of the most memorable images in drama" (39). In the performance I saw, this scene was absolutely wonderful—two old men sitting on the heath commiserating with each other and showing great affection for each other. It is a quiet scene with no great physical demands, and it was spot on. Unfortunately, one great scene does not a great play make. Attempting to play Lear was an enormous disservice to the audience as well as the other members of the

⁷ I believe it is possible to successfully finesse the problem of an otherwise capable actor being unable to carry in Cordelia and remain true to Shakespeare's text, but not as was described here nor in the recent misbegotten Broadway production of *Lear* with Glenda Jackson as Lear, which I saw in late April, 2019. In the fateful moment when Lear is to carry in the dead Cordelia, a trap door opened in the ceiling and Cordelia, hanging by a rope around her neck, was dropped into the scene. Jackson rushed on stage to be there by the time Cordelia hit the stage and began to howl. I mean, it was almost laughable. I audibly groaned. I offer a proposed solution when describing Frank Langella's performance of Lear.

cast. Having spent one's career as a Shakespearean actor of note does not entitle one to play Lear at the end of one's career.

Nevertheless, as demonstrated by actors such as McKellen, Jacobi, and Langella, who all underwent intense soul-searching before agreeing to play the role, it is possible to successfully perform King Lear. Jacobi and Langella decided to wait until they were older when they first contemplated the role because they didn't feel ready at the time. Too many older actors never stop to ask themselves what qualifies them to play the role of Lear. What are the demands—the stamina to sustain such a large role, the physical ability to carry Cordelia on stage, and the mental ability to memorize the substantial text—required to play a credible Lear? Yet as Derek Jacobi noted in an interview, the role of Lear (and Hamlet) is to many actors as the Sirens were to sailors in Greek Mythology. The seemingly irresistible call of the role leads to the equivalent of sailors getting shipwrecked as they were lured to the Sirens' island. In this case, the actors are "shipwrecked" not by pretty girls, but rather by the siren call of one of the truly great Shakespearean roles. And if one is a younger actor attempting to play Lear, as discussed in the next section, one almost certainly will rely on stereotypes of old age to create a character, which leads to gross misperceptions of what it means to be old.⁸

Overall, this version of *King Lear* was one of the worst I have seen. As Sara Holdren wrote in her review in *New York Magazine*, ". . . the painful truth is that [director] Sam Gold's *King Lear* is a hot, heavy mess. And more painful still, Jackson's Lear fails to transcend it" (The play closed a month early . . .)

⁸ It isn't just the role of Lear that can be a problem for younger actors. Adam Driver, who at age 35 is reprising his role, this time on Broadway, of Pale in *Burn This*, in an interview with Alexis Soloski of *The New York Times* said, "I had played Pale, which is

Misconceptions and Stereotypes of Old Age

For the younger actor, there are two ways to discover what it is like to be a character who is old: use one's own knowledge gained by living around those who are old or closely observe others who have traits similar to a character to get insights into how a character might behave. However, notwithstanding other options, relying solely on observation when it comes to playing someone who is old, in the absence of personally lived experience, can lead to a regrettable performance. The problem with observation is compounded by mainstream portrayals of older people that, for example in films and television, are stereotyped.

In the February 28, 2012 issue of *The Guardian*, the writer and television producer David Cox wrote an article entitled "Why do films do such a bad job of portraying old people?" He writes that some films, such as "*Million Dollar Baby*, *Harold and Maude*, *Driving Miss Daisy* [and others] have portrayed older characters with both compassion and respect. . . Nonetheless, it has to be admitted that the complainants have a point. . . More often, elderly characters have simply been pushed to the fringes of the action, and, by implication, to the fringes of life" (Cox). Fringe characters are often one-dimensional, with little in the way of character development. The psychological richness of someone who is old is never fully explored, leading to stereotypes of old people. However, the problem goes beyond stereotyping.

Not only are most old characters marginalized, in addition there are few meaningful roles that portray old people as fully developed human beings, and if they do exist, they often go to younger actors playing

old. Cox writes, "In 2005, two academics assessed different [age groups'] prominence in 88 top-grossing films and compared it to their presence in the population. Thirtysomethings were heavily over-represented and fortysomethings did OK, while fiftysomethings were significantly under-represented and the over-60s severely so." Thus, it is relatively easy for an actor to understand and imagine what it is like to be middle-aged. But with few examples of older characters and the propensity to marginalize characters who are old and mimic stereotypes of the debilities of old age, it makes it very hard for a younger person to properly portray someone who is old. What often results is a performance of an elderly person who is "shown as ineffectual, grumpy, behind the times, depressed, lonely, slow-witted, sickly, whining, rude, miserly, hard-of-hearing, ugly, interfering, heartless, intransigent, doddering, mentorish, frisky or profane" (Cox). There have been far too many younger actors who have relied on these false impressions of how older people really behave when they attempt a role like King Lear.

Contemporary stereotypes about older demographics create the impression that all old people share similar personalities. It blinds actors as well as authors to other possibilities, as a much younger author, Ceridwen Dovey, discovered when she attempted to write a novel with an old person as a protagonist. Dovey writes in her October, 2015 *New Yorker* article, "What Old Age is Really Like," that she embarked on a novel written from: "the perspective of a man in his late eighties. . . I'm in my mid-thirties, but felt confident that I could imagine my way into old age. How hard could it be, really? . . . Somewhere along the way, though, things went wrong. My protagonist became Generic Old Man: crabby, computer illiterate,

embarrassing, a kid in a costume at 23, being like 'I know what I'm talking about!' I had no idea" (AR5).

grieving for his dementia-addled wife.” Like so many actors and directors, Dovey used stereotypes of how old people behaved to define her character; but in her case she got much-needed help from her publisher.

Fortunately, her editor had apparently been down this road before with other authors: “After reading the first draft, an editor I respect said to me, ‘But what else are they, other than old?’ I was mortified, and began to ask myself some soul-searching questions that I should have answered long before I’d written the opening word” (Dovey). Dovey had fallen into the classic trap that is a major part of the thesis of this paper: unless one is old, it is really hard to understand, to imagine, what it is like to be old. The editor pointed out exactly what the problem is for a young actor attempting to play Lear: in the absence of understanding and manifesting all the ramifications of what it means to be old, the actor resorts to playing the stereotype of someone who is old.

Certainly, there are old people who suffer from dementia, incontinence, insomnia, physical frailty, and so on. The problem is actors who project these issues as being the *essence* of old age and the *essence* of Lear, which is simply not the case. Shakespeare is telling a different story—the story of an arrogant, powerful old man who, over the arc of the play, discovers what it means to be a human. Many younger actors miss Lear’s essential humanity and do not understand the complexity, subtleties, and nuances of the aging body and mind and thus lean on the dominating stereotypical features of aging. They mostly turn towards *signifying* aging versus *inhabiting* the aging body and mind. Today’s audiences include many more people who are themselves old and therefore know what it is like to be old, and in particular, know that old people are not like peas in a pod when it comes to attitudes and behavior.

Dovey also interviewed “the eighty-two-year-old British novelist Penelope Lively,” who made an important observation about attempting to portray old people: “stereotyping is a kind of fictional abuse.” Think for a moment about that phrase: “fictional abuse.” It is not a stretch to call performances by actors who stereotype an aging Lear, or performances by actors who lack the physical stamina and/or the mental capacity to play Lear, fictional abuse. Such a portrayal is a disservice to the audience and to older people in general. There are certain traits or physical insults brought on by the aging process that most old people share. But how those debilities are dealt with varies widely. In addition, the fact that one is old does not mean one loses one’s individuality.

What did Dovey conclude about her ability to write a novel about a character of a certain age? She ends her article by writing:

For my part, I’m not sure I will return to my novel. It now strikes me as an exercise in speculative showing off: look at me, so young and hard at work imagining old age! I think I prefer to watch and learn as this “coming of old age” literature continues to explode in scope and scale, and listen closely to artists who, in their advanced years, “have the confidence to speak simply.” (Dovey)

Even after researching the aged, Dovey doubts that she could write with competence about someone who is old. That is sound advice for younger actors who contemplate tackling Lear: one’s ego should be checked at the door. Without a base of experience, it is tough to imagine being old with any hope of achieving authenticity.

As noted at the beginning of this paper, there *have* been actors who, after waiting until late in their careers and having given careful thought to their ability to tackle

the role, have given very good performances of the aged King Lear.

A Case Study of One Actor Who Got Lear Mostly Right

Frank Langella and Derek Jacobi have played Lear and have also given interviews regarding the challenges of the role. Michael Billington reviewed Langella's November 2013 performance of Lear in *The Guardian*:

We are used to director's Shakespeare. This production . . . is unequivocally actor's Shakespeare. . . [W]hat impresses is the spellbinding power of that fine American actor, Frank Langella, . . . who plays Lear and wins.

Langella has that mysterious quality known as "weight." It is not merely that he is tall, has a voice that could be heard in Bognor Regis [a town 55 miles south of London] and is more oak than ash: it is that he has an authority that compels our attention. This is palpable from the start when he needs help ascending the steps of Robert Innes Hopkins's set. . . Langella even cups a hand to his ear to hear Goneril's fake protestations of affection. But despite his slight stoop and white thatch, this is a Lear who looks born to command. (Billington)

Billington's review makes it strikingly clear that Langella did not rely on stereotypes of what it means to be old as he crafted his character of Lear. Yes, he was old; he didn't hear well, but he still was in command. He is compelling; he radiates a sense of power. His performance informs us that Lear has cast aside the responsibilities of kingship so he can spend whatever days he had left carousing with his retinue. He "belonged to time: *Life is short*" (Pillemer).

Furthermore, Langella did not come to the role of Lear casually, or with the idea of resume enhancement in mind, as discovered by Charles McGrath of *The New York Times* when he interviewed Frank Langella about his portrayal of Lear: ". . . [T]wo years ago when he began talking about Lear with Angus Jackson, the director of this production, he worried whether he could even learn the part. He also wondered whether he had enough stamina to get through it on days that called for him to do it twice." Langella was seventy-six when he played Lear. He recognized the potential hazards of attempting to play Lear at his age: the ability to memorize lines and the physical stamina required by this demanding role. He gave it serious thought.

As an actor, Langella had been offered the opportunity to play Lear when he was younger. Unlike other actors given such a chance, he rejected the opportunity, but not because he felt he lacked experience. Rather it was more like dumb luck—when he considered the role again about ten years later, he realized how lucky he was to have waited:

"I freely admit now that I hadn't even read the play," he said. "I just believed all the clichés that I'd heard: That Lear is offstage for an hour or an hour and a half, depending on the version; that's he's a whiner, a screamer; that he's self-indulgent. 'Oh, that old bugger,' somebody said. 'He's such a bore.' But then two years ago, I read it and saw something *that only a 74-year-old man can see* [italics mine]. I saw something I hadn't realized and hope to achieve: It's a play about finding his mind, not losing it" (McGrath).

Langella initially saw the role of Lear through the stereotypical lens of what it was like to be old. But when he was in his

seventies and therefore more attuned to the actual experience of being old, he saw things much differently:

“As you get older, you learn what you can endure,” Mr. Langella went on . . . But he added that one of the difficulties of growing old as an actor—or his kind of actor, anyway—is “the horrible and frightening revelation that in order to be good at what you do, you have to go deeper and deeper with each part and have to eviscerate yourself in a way that the man in the audience would never dream of doing.” (McGrath)

Langella’s performance explores, in-depth, what it really means to be an old man. He reveals who Lear truly is, what his failings are, with an intimate transparency that is devoid of any stereotypes.

While in New York City in December 2017, I went to the New York Library Performing Arts Archives and watched a DVD of the January 23, 2014 Brooklyn Academy of Music performance of Frank Langella as King Lear. As noted in the video’s description, it was “shot from the back of the theatre, using a single camera, with no close-up shots” (Brooklyn Academy of Music). Therefore, I was unable to see any facial expressions. Overall, I agree with the critics that it was a very good performance. Unlike many productions, the performance was largely on a bare stage, without the distractions of spectacle. During the opening scene, Langella is in command. Yes, he is old; yes, he speaks slowly; yes, he shuffles about like an old man, but through voice and gesture, he is in his element. It is obvious he prefers Cordelia. When Langella goes into a fit of rage when Cordelia’s response to his challenge does not please him, he uses violent outrage and intense, soft-spoken rage to excellent effect. His interactions with the Fool through voice, gesture, and physical

intimacy demonstrate the closeness of the relationship and why the Fool can speak to Lear as he does. When Lear is challenged by Goneril and Regan, Langella’s pleading and incredulousness at what is occurring are stunning. We are witnessing a performance by an actor who is expressing a fully fleshed out, three dimensional Lear—a man who is old but is also in full possession of his faculties, who engages in very meaningful interactions with a wide range of characters.

In that last scene of the play, Langella’s performance ultimately suffered from the same lack of physical strength that plagued Antony Sher: he is a seventy-six-year-old man who is not in the best of condition. When Langella carried the dead Cordelia up the steps onto the stage, there was no one there to help him. He struggled to make it up the steps and immediately put her down on the stage. Then he grabbed Cordelia by the arms and dragged her center stage where he paused, bent over, for a good 15 seconds (it seemed like an eternity), before finally beginning to speak lines he was supposed to say while carrying her on stage. Clearly, he was lacking in strength; otherwise, would not a person who is utterly devastated by his daughter’s death be wailing as he carried her, as Shakespeare’s text specifies? And would he really drag her around on the ground by her arms, rather than leaving her body where he put it down? It was an unfortunate end to what otherwise was a stellar performance. Nevertheless, unlike Antony Sher whose performance, with the exception of one scene, was overall very weak, Langella gave a highly credible portrayal of King Lear. If Langella had had the benefit of a creative director who was cognizant of the issues of aging, his struggle in the last scene could have been easily overcome.

Directors routinely cut and edit scenes from Shakespeare’s plays and even change words that, for example, in the

modern world, are considered to be racist. In the last scene of the play, Albany sends Edgar, a young man, off to find Lear and Cordelia. According to the text, when Lear enters, Edgar and a captain enter with him. Why couldn't Edgar either help Lear carry in Cordelia or carry Cordelia himself? ⁹ Notwithstanding Shakespeare's direction, it is actually more believable that a young man rather than a man in his eighties would carry in the dead Cordelia. Making this change simply recognizes a reality that did not exist in Shakespeare's time; it acknowledges the inevitable effects of aging on an actor much closer in age to that of Lear than was the case in the 1600s. Yes, the scene is iconic; however that does not mean that it cannot be altered to reflect the fact that actors now live long enough to, as Langella did, give us a marvelous interpretation of Lear, while also recognizing that what one can do when one is fifty is nearly impossible when one is seventy-six. Langella's Lear dominates the stage from the first scene to the last. In his performance we witness a man who, over the arc of the play, transforms from an arrogant, dominant king to one who has learned what it means to be a human.

Shakespearean scholar Harold Bloom in his book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, has this to say about performing King Lear: “. . . I have attended many stagings of *King Lear*, and invariably have regretted being there. Our directors and actors are defeated by this play, and I begin sadly to agree with Charles Lamb that we ought to keep rereading *King Lear* and avoid its staged travesties” (Bloom 476). He is wrong. Shakespeare's plays are meant to be performed, and as Frank Langella, Ian McKellen, and others have demonstrated, *King Lear* can be quite successfully

⁹ It is interesting to note that in some versions of *King Lear*, Albany sends a Gentleman off to get Lear; in other versions he sends Edgar. Which is the original version by Shakespeare? Who knows. But it is

performed. Having said that, it is clear that performing the role of King Lear requires that one wait until one has sufficient life experience, combined with great acting skills and the physical and mental stamina; then, with proper preparation and a director who understands the effects of aging, one can Perform King Lear - Successfully!

In Conclusion

A friend of mine, Lela Long, once said to me: “Growing old is mandatory; growing up is optional.” I have spent a good portion of my life contemplating those words. I believe that for most of us, “growing up” occurs as we grow older and experience all the challenges and opportunities that life presents to us. We have to grow old in order to understand what it is like to be old. A life full of experiencing successes and failures can help an actor understand what it means to be Lear. But there is at least one additional obstacle to a great performance of King Lear that I would like to highlight, and consider what successful actors who have a lifetime of acting experience under their belts have done about it: that is the short rehearsal time (normally no more than four weeks) afforded actors. Frank Langella and Derek Jacobi each found a way to overcome this handicap.

In his interview Frank Langella noted that he first read *King Lear* when he was seventy-four (McGrath). He was seventy-six when rehearsals began. In the interim he had time to do research; by the time of the first rehearsal he was already off book. In a 2011 interview with the highly respected Shakespearean actor Derek Jacobi, whose production of *King Lear* was about to open at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Sarah Lyall of *The New York Times* writes, “. . . Derek

entirely possible that Edgar and Cordelia could have been very close friends since childhood—perhaps even secret lovers. That being the case, he could be as devastated as Lear over Cordelia's death.

Jacobi had been pondering this question [of whether to take on Lear] for at least a decade, after the director Michael Grandage first suggested that they do a 'Lear' together. Over the years, the two talked about the play and how they might approach it. Then Mr. Jacobi decided it was time. 'I just felt too young before,' said Mr. Jacobi, who is now 72" (Lyll). Talk about taking time to ponder just who Lear was! How many younger actors could begin to afford to take that kind of time to research a role?

Returning to the thesis of this paper, if one is to successfully perform King Lear one must first have the maturity and life experience. That, combined with physical and mental stamina, is required to be able to imagine what Lear experienced that leads him to speak those fateful words at the beginning of the play. Otherwise it is very difficult to understand the effects of aging on the body, and difficult to understand the terrible mistakes that Lear makes in passing on the kingdom to his daughters. That knowledge is key to conveying, over the arc of the play, how Lear comes to terms with his culpability in the ensuing tragedy. *King Lear* is not a run-of-the-mill play. It has been performed for over four hundred years, and its iconic status is confirmed by the continual publication of new books and articles in magazines and newspapers related to the play. Yet, many performances continue to fall short.

Recently, Ben Brantley, the longtime theatre critic for *The New York Times*, wrote about a meeting he had with Michael Billington, who has been the theatre critic for *The Guardian* since 1971. In 2015, Billington published a book, *The 101 Greatest Plays: From Antiquity to the Present*. During the course of their conversation, Brantley quotes Billington, who said this regarding his list: "'As we both know, the moment you do a list, you open yourself to every challenge in the world,' he said. 'And there's one topic that

came up at every single talk I did about the book: Where is 'King Lear?'" Brantley continues, "He is still defending that choice. It must be said that he makes a good case. It must also be said that I would probably disagree with him, depending on the day and my mood and what productions of 'King Lear' I have seen most recently." There is no doubt in my mind that the reason *King Lear* did not make Billington's list, and why Brantley equivocates on whether he would have included it in his, is that both of them have seen far too many mediocre productions of the play.

However, Billington's selection of what he calls *The 101 Greatest Plays* also makes another point: there are lots and lots of plays that do not make the list. Sometimes that could be because, unlike *King Lear*, they are mediocre plays. But it could also be because actors and directors mistakenly assume, as with Lear, that a good actor can play any part; a good director can direct any play. This paper demonstrates that, as many actors have discovered when they attempted the role of Lear, age, as well as what one learns from having lived a long life, are essential to a successful performance of an older character. Attempting to do so without the benefit of that experience not only dehumanizes the character being portrayed; it is a disservice to the audience.

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