Two Kings: An Account of the Preparation and Performance of the Role of Edgar in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

Ryan Kathman  
*University of Nebraska at Lincoln, ryankathman@gmail.com*

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TWO KINGS:
AN ACCOUNT OF THE PREPARATION AND PERFORMANCE OF THE ROLE OF EDGAR
IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE’S KING LEAR

by

Ryan Kathman

A THESIS

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This work is my graduate thesis documenting the creative process behind my performance of the role of Edgar in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s 2009 production of King Lear by William Shakespeare. It is comprised of five sections including an introduction, pre-rehearsal research, rehearsal and performance journal, post-production responses and conclusion. The introduction outlines my impressions of Edgar and King Lear prior to researching or rehearsing the role. In my research section, I attempt to better understand Shakespeare, his play and the role of Edgar by studying the playwright’s life and the history of the character and play, while also making the case for my own pre-rehearsal interpretation of Edgar. My rehearsal journal records my thoughts, discoveries and struggles during the weeks leading up to and including the production’s two-week run. The response section includes my interviews with faculty members of my thesis committee and their feedback on my performance. Finally, my conclusion attempts to synthesize and explore my final thoughts regarding the entire process.
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Introduction

I was fortunate enough to first read *King Lear* as part of an English and Literature class assignment in high school. Unfortunately, I didn’t possess nearly enough intellectual nor emotional maturity to really appreciate the depth and complexity of its themes and characters at that time. Nevertheless, one scene in particular left a lasting impression on me that only grew in significance through subsequent readings.

The scene is between the recently blinded Gloucester and his disguised eldest son Edgar at the cliffs of Dover in Act 4, Scene 6. While I didn’t quite connect in that first reading with the plight of a raving king or the plotting of his ambitious daughters, something about the Dover scene, late in the play, grabbed my attention. The image of a banished son, forced to strip to rags and feign madness for fear of capture, leading his gruesomely wounded father and convincing him that he has hurled himself from impossible heights and survived the fall was instantly etched in my mind. The idea of the devoted Edgar using Gloucester’s blindness to save him from his own suicidal depression by tricking his father into believing that the gods must want him to live was tragic, comic, sweet, twisted, bleak and beautiful all at once. It was the kind of imagery that helped to shape my as yet unmolded taste in art, which has veered heavily toward the tragicomic since.

The scene also altered my view of Shakespeare and his work. I was already a fan of the few major plays of his I’d read in school, enjoying the colorful characters and lyrical wordplay. But I had yet to encounter a scene that felt so modern in its odd yet poetic imagery. Suddenly all the things my teachers had been telling me about Shakespeare’s plays being universal truly hit home. The Dover Cliffs scene didn’t read like a dated or classic text; it felt more durable, fresh
and immediate somehow. I may not have remembered Kent in the stocks, or Oswald’s death, or perhaps even Lear raging against the storm after that initial reading. But I remembered Dover.

What strikes me now, however, is how little I remembered of Edgar as a character beyond Dover. I remember being surprised to learn that he assumes the crown at the end of the play when I read it again a few years later, and being startled by his Poor Tom persona when I first saw it performed shortly after that. In fact, I’ve seen Lear produced three times on stage and, while characters like the Fool, Kent, Edmund and Cornwall have stood out to me, Edgar is one that I’ve always felt gets overshadowed in the cast. Because of my affinity for the Dover scene, I’ve often looked forward specifically to watching the actor who portrays Edgar, but I have yet to feel like the character’s thoughts and motivations have really come alive on stage for me.

All this is not necessarily the fault of the actors I’ve seen in the role. It seems to me that Edgar, for all his physical and vocal character shifts and integral function in the plot, is given very little time to establish who he is before he is thrust into extreme circumstances. Then, by the time the audience meets his colorful alter ego Poor Tom, they are almost too invested in the primary plot of Lear’s descent into madness – not to mention Kent’s disguise and the Fool’s soothsaying – to concern themselves much with yet another masked loon. Shakespeare has created a very compelling character and then allowed him to operate almost too incognito to be noticed.

Perhaps this interpretation is why, when I sat down to re-read the play in preparation for our thesis role auditions, I fully expected to focus on the arguably more visible and charismatic brother Edmund. Not only had it been a while since I’ve played a Shakespearean villain (Tybalt in undergrad was the most recent), but the productions I’d seen of Lear unmistakably thrust Edmund front and center, which gave me the impression of the bastard being the juicier of the roles.
Nevertheless, as I waded through the text, I kept finding myself mumbling Edgar’s lines aloud more often than Edmund’s, surprised yet again by the poignancy and power of his character’s journey. By the time I finished the play, I had no doubt that I would prepare my audition with Edgar in mind. Not only had I discovered a better appreciation for the character, but I also recognized challenges perfectly suited to areas I hope to improve upon as an actor.

Other than his deathbed remorse, Edmund is a rather static character. His ambitions and motives remain the same throughout. Edgar, however, is as dynamic as they come, becoming more and more heroic and affected by everything he sees. Exploring a dynamic arc has always been more interesting to me as an actor, no matter how charismatic that single-minded villain may be. During the course of Edgar’s journey, he is also faced with several visceral and emotional responses to what he sees: Lear in his lunacy, his father blinded, Cordelia limp in her father’s arms. I would like to push myself into more risky and dangerous territory emotionally on stage, as I worry that I rely a little too heavily on technical skills over emotional investment.

Lastly, Edgar’s variety of “characters” – Poor Tom, the peasant who fights Oswald, the man who “finds” Gloucester at Dover – offer a wonderful opportunity to take physical and vocal risks that I’ve rarely pushed myself to take in the past.

I have no idea what kind of journey lies ahead of me with this character, but my goal in the end is to hopefully leave some newcomer to Lear with the same kind of indelible impression that the Dover scene first made on me in high school. If possible, I hope to go one step further and do what I have yet to see done on stage: make the whole character of Edgar truly memorable.
An Altered Ending

When the Irish-born poet Nahum Tate significantly altered William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* in 1681, one of Tate’s most glaring revisions came at the play’s conclusion. Rather than allow Lear’s daughter Cordelia her tragic death by hanging, Tate preserved the king and Cordelia, developed a subplot between her and Edgar resulting in their marriage, and permitted Lear a restful retirement with Kent and Gloucester by his side (Hadfield 376).

Modern critics have lambasted Tate’s version for its downright cheerful new postscript, which replaced Shakespeare’s catastrophic conclusion with a hopeful and happy ending. But for two centuries, Tate’s *Lear* dominated the stage to the apparent delight of many audiences and critics who preferred the sanitized version to Shakespeare’s gloomy and devastating original. According to John Reibetanz in his book *The Lear World*, “Spectators have felt shocked by the deaths of Lear and Cordelia, and outraged that neither finds the happiness – or even the survival – that both so undeniably deserve” (5). Lear purists and revisionists alike can agree on the initial version’s disturbing finale, though not, perhaps on its merit.

But even contemporary analysis of Shakespeare’s now preferred and restored original story yields little in the way of optimism. Many consider Lear to be a work akin to the plays of Samuel Beckett or Bertolt Brecht; a kind of existential, nihilistic piece of proto-modernism or postmodernism. In *The Masks of King Lear*, Marvin Rosenberg asserts that any kind of unifying theme discovered in the play – “that men learn through suffering, that they do not, that the gods are just or unjust, or heedless, or random, or absent, or imaginary, or anything else” – can easily be countered by an opposing view or sample quotation from the text (5).

Indeed, the few lines that remain following Lear’s final breath seem devoid of hopefulness. After the deaths of the innocent Cordelia and the relentlessly suffering Lear, the
stunned trio of nobility, Edgar, Kent, and Albany, are left to determine, reluctantly, the new ruler of Britain, a role that only falls to Edgar after Albany relinquishes his title and Kent refuses his share. As Harold Bloom points out in Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human, "Shakespeare leaps over several intervening reigns in order to have Edgar succeed Lear as king of Britain" (479). The one character who, arguably, has suffered more than any other survivor – after enduring his own naked pilgrimage, the blinding and death of his father, and the betrayal and execution of his brother – is left to shoulder, unenthusiastically, the burden of rule.

But perhaps it is in Edgar we find the kind of pale and poignant optimism provided by Horatio in Hamlet or Macduff in Macbeth. After all, much like Prince Hal or Hamlet before him, Edgar undergoes a significant transformation thanks to the unique experiences he is privy to over the course of the play. As Reibetanz notes:

Edgar claims our attention by taking over both the Fool’s role as sympathetic choral interpreter and Edmund’s as chief stage manager, and as the play progresses we see more and more of its events through his eyes. He witnesses and approximates Lear’s madness on the heath, and deals with Gloucester’s blind despair on Dover Cliffs. Edgar is the only one of the three noble sufferers who establishes a direct relationship with the audience through soliloquies and asides, and he faithfully tries to reckon with the play’s actions and help us to comprehend the Lear world. (110)

As the audience representative, the change that occurs within Edgar mirrors the impact the play is meant to have on the audience: a deeper appreciation for life and family as a result of tragic events witnessed on stage. But as a character, Edgar’s conversion is far more dramatic and necessary.

Upon closer examination it becomes apparent that a pattern and parallel emerges in Lear between the aged king and his godson Edgar. Both are duped and cast out by family members
they believed they could trust: Goneril and Regan for Lear, Edmund and the unwitting Gloucester for Edgar. Both determine to strip themselves of all royal trappings as they both seem to descend further and further into madness, though perhaps not for the same reasons. As Edgar endeavors initially to survive and clear his own name by using his Poor Tom disguise, he becomes more than just a shadow or reflection of Lear’s emotional and mental state. He also serves as commentator on the king to the audience. We begin to perceive that Edgar is learning and growing through his experiences on the heath with Lear and at Dover with his father. W.H. Auden, in a lecture presented in 1947, observed that Edgar’s Tom o’ Bedlam disguise allows him to see human equality, frailty, evil and love (Lectures on Shakespeare 227). The disguise also permits him, perhaps more importantly, to accept these complex human qualities.

By the time Edgar unenthusiastically assumes the throne, he has grown from being a youthful companion of Lear’s “riotous knights,” as Regan informs us – truthfully, we assume, as she has no motivation to defame Edgar – to a man who has learned all of the most valuable lessons for any would-be ruler: compassion, humility, decisiveness, loyalty and trust. Edgar himself represents some hope for Britain’s future and, while it is clear that Shakespeare derived the Gloucester subplot from Philip Sidney’s romance The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia, his character is compatible with history (Hadfield 3). The actual King Edgar, who ruled from 959 to 975, was known as Edgar the Peace-winner or Peaceable after brokering an accord with the Welsh and Scots, according to Louise Creighton in her book A First History of England (42-3). The ruler was also renowned, Bloom noted, for ridding England of overrunning wolves, much the same way Shakespeare’s Edgar disposes of the ravenous and wolf-like Edmund (479).

It is my contention that while King Lear is and must remain an unequivocal tragedy, its conclusion need not be as unbearably bleak as some critics have found it if the role of Edgar is suitably played as the story’s ultimate hero; the only character whose moral substance is benefitted by the events of the play and who, in turn, will go on to use the lessons he has learned
to unite and improve the divided kingdom he inherits. Shakespeare’s printer indicates Edgar’s significance by including him in the subtitle of his 1608 quarto edition: “With the unfortunate life of Edgar, sonne and heire to the Earle of Gloster, and his sullen and assumed humor of Tom of Bedlam” (Bloom 480). Yet the strongest proof we have that Shakespeare intended for Edgar to be seen as the young beacon of hope who will fare better than his predecessor are the many parallels, symbolic and otherwise, that connect Edgar to Lear.

In order to fully explore the dramatic similarities between these two kings and apply that understanding to a realized performance of the Edgar role, it is helpful to first examine Shakespeare’s own life and intentions, Edgar’s function and character in the story, as well as the historical significance of the Poor Tom archetype.

Through this exploration, I hope to demonstrate why Edgar, though not the tragic hero of Lear, remains the shining example of the leader Lear might have been had he served as witness – and audience proxy – to the horrors that Edgar observes. To begin, Shakespeare’s own life and the political atmosphere in which he was writing King Lear offer insight into the playwright’s intentions for Edgar, heir to an earldom.

**Shakespeare and Lear**

There were two primary sources, it would seem, for Shakespeare’s King Lear. The most significant appears to be an anonymous play published in 1605, the same year the bard probably wrote his, called *The Chronicle History of King Leir* (Hadfield 367). The second source, however, was decidedly older, written in the twelfth century by Geoffrey of Monmouth. This was his *History of the Kings of Britain*, a chronicle that includes the tale of King Leir who divided his kingdom among his three daughters only to have his youngest and most beloved refuse to join her plotting older sisters in over-praising their father (Hadfield 2).
It is worth noting that, as reviled as Tate is by some critics for his alterations to Lear, Shakespeare is actually the writer who changed the ending from the original story. Both original sources conclude with Leir reuniting with Cordelia to defeat Goneril and Regan, leaving Cordelia to succeed her retiring father on the throne. Though Tate added the romantic union between Edgar and Cordelia, he was otherwise simply restoring the tale’s original ending.

Why then did Shakespeare present us with such a dismal finale of his own invention? Most modern critics agree that this deviation from traditional dramatic structure showed a maturation not seen in many of the bard’s earlier works. Reibetanz argues that, thanks to “the rapid evolution of English dramatic form through a multitude of styles; the existence of several different kinds of theatrical venue . . . and the multigeneric nature of Elizabethan drama,” plays like Lear with great range and variety flourished in the early 1600s (4).

In Shakespeare: A Crash Course, Rob Graham argues that it was the political climate of the early seventeenth century that prompted the richer and deeper tones in the later work of Shakespeare and many of his contemporaries. “The accession of snobby James I ushered in a darker world, reflected in the plays of some of the gloomiest writers, John Webster . . . John Marston and Cyril Tourneur. Shakespeare’s works became more thoughtful, with Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, and Othello” (37). It may be a stretch to say Shakespeare became a political playwright, but there is an undeniable shift in tone found in the plays written following King James’ assumption of the crown in 1603.

It is difficult to ascertain Shakespeare’s motivation for writing Lear as he did without first examining the known life experiences that shaped him. Born and reared in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, young Will Shakespeare enjoyed both the pastoral countryside that found its way into many of his romances and comedies, as well as a sturdy education in Latin grammar and classic Roman and Greek plays and writings (Graham 16). While it is known that the writer did not attend a university like many of his playwright competitors, Reibetanz dispels the widely
spread notion that he was “an untutored child of nature” (3). In fact, the author notes, Shakespeare has proven more resourceful in collecting source materials than his contemporaries and his plays reveal a substantial familiarity with a wide range of artistic traditions and folklore.

For centuries, opinions about Shakespeare’s personal and family life have largely been based on speculation, as very little documentation on the subject exists. If, however, we allow ourselves to indulge in such speculation, some interesting conclusions about the characters in Lear could be drawn. For example, there is a curious absence of mothers and honest wives in the tragedy which could reflect on the perceived marital difficulties Shakespeare had with his wife Anne Hathaway, who was eight years his elder and who remained in Stratford while he made his career in London (Graham 18-19). By that same token, Cordelia, it could be argued offers an example of a loving and virtuous wife, while Edgar himself blames Gloucester’s downfall on his father’s infidelities, so perhaps Shakespeare did not view married life quite so darkly.

In addition to romantic unions, Lear, perhaps more than any other of Shakespeare’s works, is fundamentally about filial love between father and child. In it we witness both the pure bond between Lear and Cordelia or Gloucester and Edgar, as well as the fractured one between the king and his eldest daughters or between Gloucester and Edmund. While we can only guess at Shakespeare’s relationship with his own daughters Susanna and Judith, the depth of Gloucester and Edgar’s affection might be somewhat reflective of the playwright’s grief over losing his only male heir, Hamnet (Judith’s twin), to unknown causes at age 11 (Graham 18-19).

Whatever role Shakespeare’s personal life may have played in the themes of King Lear, it seems clear that his professional stature had an impact on the play’s structure and style. While at its core a tragedy, Lear is nevertheless a blend of comedy, history and morality, much like Shakespeare’s Henry IV plays. Reibetanz identifies this combination of genres as a distinctly Elizabethan art in which the bard was uniquely qualified to practice.
Shakespeare was in a better position to appreciate this wealth of dramatic traditions than any of his contemporaries. Playwright, actor, shareholder, housekeeper at both the Globe and (after 1608) Blackfriars, he was more intimately and continuously involved with the London stage than any other Elizabethan dramatist. (6)

As a true “Renaissance man,” by the time Shakespeare wrote *King Lear*, he had come a long way from his beginnings as a struggling actor in London.

We know that Shakespeare became a member of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men as an actor-playwright in 1594 following a particularly deadly wave of the Black Plague, and “remained with them until his retirement in 1612” (Graham 34). After King James I assumed the throne in 1603, Shakespeare’s troupe had the honor of being renamed the King’s Men, giving royal command performances for the rest of his career (35). It could therefore be inferred that some of the bold political and moral plot points found in several of the playwright’s later works, like *Lear*, *Othello*, or *Macbeth*, might have been motivated by the knowledge that Shakespeare would have the king’s ear.

But why choose and then alter the familiar story of Lear (or Leir, as Britons would know him)? First of all, as with many of Shakespeare’s works, there is something universal and elemental about the Lear story, separate from its national relevance to his native England. Eerily similar myths and folk tales can be found in a variety of cultures around the world. For example, there is a Chinese story about a king who banishes his third daughter for not marrying the man he wishes, only to have her return to rescue and heal him when his evil sons-in-law poison him to take over the kingdom (Rosenberg 329). Nearly identical stories can be found in Indian, African and Irish cultures, with slight variations on the genders, details and conclusions of the family drama (330-1).
Shakespeare most likely did not intend his tragedy to be included as one of the history plays – though it was so labeled in the original 1608 Quarto – or he would not have so dramatically modified its conclusion; nor included the Gloucester subplot, lifted quite clearly from Sidney’s *Arcadia*. It is also worth noting, as P.W.K. Stone does in *The Textual History of King Lear*, that *Lear* seems to be one of Shakespeare’s more revised or at least textually debated plays, with about 100 lines appearing in the 1623 Folio that are not in the early Quarto, and as many as 300 lines found in the Quarto that are absent from the Folio (2). Perhaps most notably for Edgar is the redistribution of the play’s final speech in the Folio from Albany to Edgar.

There were a number of political and artistic factors to consider in Shakespeare’s motivation for writing *Lear*. The ultra violent and epic style of Senecan tragedy, which was particularly concerned with "showing how the gods were immune to the pleas and actions of mankind," was popular in Elizabethan and Jacobean theater, and *Lear* seems like Shakespeare’s way of "deliberately outdoing Senecan writers and seeing how far he could test the limits of the form" (Hadfield 5). Then there’s the potential desire to supplant the anonymous *Leir* play – or vice versa – whose publication in the same year as Shakespeare’s indicates the topicality of a story about a British king who divides his lands. After all, James I, a Scottish monarch, was also the king of a divided British empire in England and Ireland during this time (367).

While there is little evidence to suggest that King James paid much attention to the lofty messages in plays like *King Lear*, the play did emerge not long after the king’s failed attempt in 1604 to formally unite the nations of England and Scotland (the proposal was rejected by Parliament) (Hadfield 370). The following year, when *Lear* was first performed, was the same year that political terrorist Guy Fawkes failed to blow up Parliament with 36 barrels of gunpowder underneath the building (Graham 58). It was a time fraught with political tension and, as Hadfield writes, “Whether or not we read Shakespeare’s play as critical of James, the suggestion is there that the events of ancient Britain were produced on stage in order to encourage
the audience to think about their relationship to current events” (370). Also a reason why Shakespeare’s plays have continued to find political relevance throughout time around the globe.

Hadfield goes on to ponder whether Shakespeare’s Lear was meant as a critique of the new king of Britain, warning James “about the abuse of power and the dangers of autocratic rule,” or whether Lear is instead meant to be a comforting antithesis to James in his division of his kingdom and weak authority (12). “Perhaps Shakespeare is arguing for a better, stronger monarchy, not its limitation or control. After all, this was a common feeling in the early years of James’ reign, with many powerful men glad to have a king after years of what they saw as vacillating female rule” (12). The playwright certainly seems to suggest in Lear that so much of the tragedy could have been avoided if the king had not divvied up his land at the outset.

So if this latter theory is true, the role of Edgar in Shakespeare’s play seems both clear and more vital. As Graham notes, Lear’s decentralization of power in the play’s first scene destabilizes his society, suggesting that Shakespeare may have felt a separated England and Scotland was wrong for Jacobean Britain, particularly with one ruler for both realms (59). Even at the play’s conclusion, Shakespeare very intentionally disallows a split rule by having Kent refuse Albany’s offer of joint leadership between himself and Edgar. This leaves Edgar, the youngest and most able to lead – particularly with the wisdom he has gained through the ordeals of Lear and Gloucester to which he bore witness – to represent the unity that must be brought to a divided Britain. King James hoped to unite England and Scotland, which is just what the pre-historical King Edgar was said to have accomplished.

While Nahum Tate preserved Edgar’s status at the end of the play, there is something lost in the character’s growth and what he has learned when Lear and Cordelia are spared their tragic end. Since its premiere in 1605, the history of King Lear and Shakespeare’s intentions for it is blotted, for better or worse, by Tate’s 1681 revision, which held sway around the world for over 200 years. Great actors like David Garrick, Edmund Kean and William Charles Macready all took
on the mantle of the mad king during this time and, while each expressed interest in restoring Shakespeare’s text, none completely reverted to the original for a variety of reasons; in Kean’s case, it was because the diminutive actor was unable to carry his Cordelia onstage at the end (Hadfield 376-7).

But in the twentieth century, particularly after World War II, Shakespeare’s restored Lear was performed more frequently than in any previous century. The role may have been John Gielgud’s most famous, after first taking it on at the ripe age of 26 in 1931, then again in 1940, 1950 and 1955. Peter Brook’s interpretation of the drama in 1962 with Paul Scofield was noted particularly for its embrace of the play’s darkest elements and his version hit the big screen in 1969 with Scofield again in the title role (378-9).

While contemporary artists tend to reject and dismiss Tate’s “softening” of Lear, the perceived absence of hope in Shakespeare’s text, not to mention the playwright’s departure from the original story, provides understandable rationale for the revision. But Rosenberg argues that Tate’s version omits something far more valuable found in the bard’s words: complexity and truth about the human condition (8). But Rosenberg also refuses to find much optimism or brightness in the work, going so far as to insist that Edgar has malicious and vengeful motivations throughout. It is my contention that, while it is true that Lear is primarily Shakespeare’s comment on the frailty and occasional futility of humanity, it can also offer, through Edgar, a lesson in how great leaders are sometimes shaped.

The ‘Riotous Knight’

In his first two on-stage appearances, Edgar is something of an enigma as presented by Shakespeare. In just 10 short lines, we learn only that he is in the habit of speaking with his father for two hours, that he is dubious of Edmund’s apparent preoccupation with astronomy and that he is clearly a little too trustworthy of his younger brother. In the character’s first scene, Edmund
confirms this credulity by telling us that his older brother’s “nature is so far from doing harms that he suspects none” (1.2, 166-67). Then, once Edgar has dashed away in stunned fear in Act II, scene 1, Regan tells us three brief but important details: Edgar is Lear’s godson, Lear named Edgar and Edgar associates with the “riotous knights” who serve Lear, a fact that Edmund confirms, or simply agrees with, spying a potential ally in Regan (2.1, 104). Editors Wilbur Cross and Tucker Brooke note in the footnotes of The Yale Shakespeare: The Complete Works edition of Lear, that Regan’s line, “He whom my father named,” may suggest that he was named after Lear. If the two kings share the same first name, the parallel Shakespeare may have intended between them becomes that much stronger.

It is certainly possible that Regan is exaggerating or fabricating the “riotous knights” accusation in order to paint Lear’s knights in a bad light for her own purposes, or even to aid Edmund in his gulling of Gloucester, forming an early alliance between them. Naturally Edmund, eager to further smear his brother in front of his father, affirms Regan’s query about the company Edgar keeps, whether the claim is true or not. But there is further evidence later in the play to suggest that both villains’ reports are accurate. In his challenge to Edmund, Edgar, still in disguise, lists the wrongs done him by his younger brother. But he also refers to knighthood as his “profession.” True, Edgar is still technically in disguise, but why would he fib about his being a knight but speak truthfully about his name being lost through Edmund’s treachery (5.3, 143-45)? If Edgar does indeed begin Lear as a philandering knight, the transformation and growth that can occur over the course the play would be far more dramatic and dynamic.

By applying the theory that Edgar, rather than being introduced as a bookish nobleman or the proverbial Boy Scout, actually begins the play as something of a drunken lout, we can all the better see both the need for life lessons and the impact they will have on him throughout the drama. James P. Lusardi and June Schlueter observe in their book Reading Shakespeare in
Performance: *King Lear* that a flawed Edgar is better equipped to recognize the value of what he learns from the king and his father’s suffering:

Edgar is the one character in the play who has lived through the deepest agony of both Gloucester and Lear, serving as mad witness and spiritual guide on both the storm-beaten heath and the Dover shore. If his heart seemed to break at what he saw, it has also had to absorb the treachery, privation and pain he has himself known. (136)

A naturally heroic or seemingly flawless Edgar may learn life lessons from what he witnesses over the course of the play, but he himself has no need of change and improvement, making his transition to king far less significant.

But an imperfect Edgar might also realize that it was in a drunken stupor that he allowed himself to be conned by his brother, which could give more rationale for his debasing choice of disguise once banished. The question of why Edgar chooses to become a mad beggar is one that Bloom pondered: “There is something so profoundly disproportionate in Edgar’s self-abnegation throughout the play that we have to presume in him a recalcitrance akin to Cordelia’s, but far in excess of hers” (480). In fact, not only does Bloom see Edgar as pivotal to the play’s theme, he also views the character as so much of an enigma, that, in performance, he has, “never once seen a passable Edgar” (480).

This darker past adds a new layer to Edgar’s supposed confession to Lear and his party once he has revealed himself to them as Poor Tom. The speech could even be seen as further evidence of Edgar’s former debauchery and foppery. As Rosenberg observes, “If his early character was visualized as dissolute, given to drink, careless, Tom’s Puritanism, however calculated, can now function as a transition toward the stern, austere man Edgar finally becomes” (221). Rather than just further nonsense meant to throw his listeners off the trail, the speech now resonates with the depth of self-punishment and regret.
As the play proceeds, the nakedness and vulnerability Edgar needed to adopt in order to purge himself of his former habits gives way to clothing he earns in conjunction with his decision to serve as his blinded father’s guide. That act alone is further explained by a less honorable past for Edgar, as his guilt and shame help him to see past the anger he may still feel toward Gloucester for believing Edmund’s lies. Shakespeare rewards the character for his clear growth by clothing him and giving him the company of his estranged father. As Robert Heilman observes in his book, This Great Stage: Image and Structure in King Lear, “Both as a man upon whom are thrust the responsibilities of protector and as a son who knows that he has regained his father’s love, he gains strength and defenses; he is no longer the unprotected wanderer” (80). Instead, he assumes the roles of protector and guide.

Next comes the character’s boldest and most complex action of the play: his own deception of Gloucester at what he claims are the cliffs of Dover. Upon first glance, it might appear that Edgar’s act here is nothing more than a cruel trick, revenge for Gloucester’s forced banishment of him. Rosenberg is convinced of it, in fact: “Edgar is fooling a blind old man, deceiving his senses: his cruelty is mysterious and provoking to a naïve spectator. Why lie to the suffering father? (263)” But Rosenberg, in a detailed chapter in which he argues point by point for Edgar’s maliciousness in this scene, ignores Gloucester’s unsolicited professions of love for Edgar, as well as the most telling and poignant piece of dialogue. Near the height of his ruse, Edgar tells the audience in an aside, “Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it” (4.6, 41-2).

Sure enough, after Gloucester has “fallen” and Edgar assumes another identity to assure his father that his life is a miracle, the blind man agrees and vows never to let despair afflict him again. Just as Edgar needed the extreme disguise of Poor Tom to rid himself of his past indiscretions, he takes his father to a beautifully tragic extreme and the plan works. This is a deep
and dangerous act of love, “protecting his father against himself, normally a function performed by parent for child” (Heilman 52). It is also a revealing one about Edgar’s journey:

It shows that he has renounced his passivity and is now, for the first time in the play, working out his own destiny by helping someone else, acting rather than reacting. . . .

Through Edgar’s wily reversal of roles we witness the making of the future king, and come to accept him as such. (Reibetanz 65)

Is it any wonder Gloucester’s fatal reaction when he finally sees – though not literally – the man his prodigal son has become?

Much has been made, particularly by Rosenberg, about why Edgar chooses not to reveal himself to Gloucester once they are traveling alone. Surely he must be safe from capture and anger now, especially since he has heard his father recant his earlier condemnation of Edgar? But what happens when he finally does reveal himself to his father? Gloucester, overcome with joy and grief – perhaps from severe guilt – actually dies at the news. Is it inconceivable that the perceptive Edgar would not already fear this kind of response, especially considering the fragile state his newly blinded and suicidal father is in? Better to help nurse Gloucester back to emotional health in disguise than risk further damage through revelation. Of course, faced with the prospect of dying himself in battle with Edmund, Edgar does decide to finally tell his father the truth in order to reconcile with him and receive his blessing. While the old man’s death is tragic and Edgar admits his delay as a “fault,” how fitting that Gloucester’s son was able to rescue him from a despairing death to one in which his heart, filled with joy, “burst smilingly” (5.3, 225, 232).

Bloom wonders why Shakespeare chose not to dramatize the reunion scene between Edgar and Gloucester, having allowed the audience to witness the similarly emotional Lear and Cordelia reconciliation. He ultimately concludes that, whatever Shakespeare’s reasons, hearing the story told by Edgar rather than witnessing it places more emphasis on the young man and the
dynamic change that has occurred in him: “We learn even more about Edgar’s personality and character than we would have known, though we know a great deal already about a role that exemplifies the pathos and value of filial love far more comprehensively than Cordelia’s can” (481). Edgar immerses himself in pain and humiliation out of love but perhaps also out of the guilt he feels for his former dalliances.

Finally we come to the famously cryptic closing words, spoken by Edgar in the Folio and by Albany in the Quarto.

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. (5.3, 384-7)

Critics cannot seem to agree on the meaning of these two couplets and James Calderwood called it a “band-aid on a gaping wound,” implying the speech is an insignificant flicker of hope following so tragic a scene (Lusardi and Schlueter 136). Spoken by Albany, the words hold even less weight coming from a character we still know very little about and have not had time to invest in. But as Edgar’s words, they suggest a new beginning for him and the country he now rules, as well as the morals he and the audience have absorbed from this tragic end.

Perhaps the greatest lesson Edgar has learned is one he gleaned from Cordelia’s bold honesty: to speak what he feels, that which is authentic, true, and honest, rather than the prideful trappings of flattery – “what we ought to say” – as Lear’s elder daughters spoke. Edgar’s time as Poor Tom has taught him to appreciate the elemental man in his authenticity. The final lines reflect Edgar’s connection to Lear and how the old king’s tragic story is one this new king will learn from and respect. As Heilman notes, “An epoch has passed; the next stage in the cycle will be quieter and less searching” (63).
King Lear is indisputably Lear’s story and Edgar cannot be its central focus. Rather, “We look through his eyes, as Gloucester did, and we gauge the distance between ourselves and that ultimate vision. Edgar is our Virgil, the well-meaning guide who can take us only to the threshold of the highest truth” (Reibetanz 122). For Edgar himself, the journey to find that truth takes him down the curious and disturbing path of a fully realized character known as Tom o’ Bedlam or simply Poor Tom.

Bedlam, Toms and Madness

Although Edgar’s coming-of-age journey in King Lear and his complex familial relationships are fascinating components of the play, it is his curious and disturbing disguise as a lunatic beggar that proves the most intriguing and striking aspect of the role. The “Poor Tom,” or “Tom o’ Bedlam,” persona has both enticed and challenged actors throughout the play’s history. His significant stage time and lengthy speeches (or rants) constitute a rather complex character both a part of and separate from Edgar himself. The obvious physical and vocal demands of portraying feigned madness on stage coupled with the rich history of actual mental patients in Shakespeare’s England warrant Poor Tom his own distinct research and analysis.

To begin with, it is important to note that Shakespeare was neither the first nor the last of his era to represent insane persons in dramatic form. Playwrights in Elizabethan and, particularly, Jacobean England, found several opportunities to incorporate depictions of patients and former patients of Bethlehem Hospital in their works, such as John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi or Thomas Middleton and William Rowley’s The Changeling. The popularity of these characters most likely grew out of the common practice of the general public visiting the real patients at the actual hospital for entertainment purposes. As Robert Reed observes in his book Bedlam on the Jacobean Stage, “The lunatics offered, in brief, better and more spectacular entertainment on the stage, where selection and exaggeration were possible, then they did at Bethlehem Hospital” (39).
In effect, citizens could either see the real thing in a kind of zoo atmosphere, or watch actors pretend to be mad in the more civilized arena of the theater.

In the book **Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth Century England**, Michael MacDonald points out that we have very little documentation of the history of mental disorders in England to base conclusions on. “Historians and literary scholars have mapped its most prominent features and identified some of its leading figures, but we still have very little information about the ideas and experiences of ordinary people” who suffered mental illness (1). What is known, however, is that, in the years leading up to the English Revolution, private entrepreneurs began to attempt scientific studies and care for those considered mad while responsibility for mental illnesses shifted from the family to incarceration in asylums (MacDonald 2).

Bethlem Hospital, located in south eastern London, was initially established in 1247 as a priory known as St. Mary of Bethlehem and was first mentioned as a hospital – though still not an asylum – in a royal grant signed by Edward III in 1329. The grant allowed the establishment to collect alms in care for the sick (Reed 13). Near the end of the fourteenth century, the hospital began its long history of housing and caring for the mentally ill, a tradition it continues to this day (14). Although Jacobean playwrights filled the stage with Bethlehem’s inmates, only about 30 patients ever occupied the small establishment at any given time. “Bethlem (alternate spelling) Hospital was the only institution of its kind, and its inmates languished there for years, living in squalid conditions without adequate medical treatment” (MacDonald 4).

According to Reed, a report titled “A View of Bethlem” from 1598 published by an inspection party provides us with the most detailed portrait of the hospital under Queen Elizabeth’s rule. The passage below gives us an idea of why Shakespeare describes Edgar’s Poor Tom disguise as being so filthy, as well as explanation for how the playwright may have had first-hand knowledge of these patients:
Not only does the report inform us that twenty insane persons were in residence, but the inspection party’s conclusion was that the insane ward “was so loathsomely and filthily kept that it was not fit for any man to come into said house.” If “said house” was actually as revolting as this report suggests, we are led to wonder why the hospital and its mad folk during Elizabethan times were considered one of the chief amusements within the immediate environments of the city of London. (Reed 16)

This suggests that, not only would Shakespeare potentially have a first-hand knowledge of a Bedlamite, but his audience would also recognize the type as easily as modern-day audiences can identify a stereotypical “nerd” character.

By the time King James I took the throne, the name of Bethlehem had been transmuted into the term “Bedlam,” which became colloquial slang understood across England for meaning madness. The hospital’s inhabitants gave birth to a host of stock characters and archetypes that came to be known as Bedlamites, Mad Toms, or, in the case of people who merely pretended to be inhabitants of Bethlehem, Abraham Men (MacDonald 121). “The popularity of stage lunatics and real madmen and the proliferation of words and phrases describing or invoking insanity are important because these phenomena reflect the diffusion of generally understood stereotypes of insanity” (122). In other words, the caricatures of lunatics seen in drama soon came to be accepted as truthful depictions.

As characteristics of insanity became widely understood – or perhaps misunderstood – the practice of feigning madness to avoid prosecution for certain crimes began to increase as well. Fictitious “Abraham Men” – a category that Lear’s Edgar belongs to, of course – were often used for comedic effect on stage but, in real life, determining whether symptoms of mental illness were genuine became a difficult business. One documented 1655 case illustrated this point when a woman named Alice Child was arrested and restrained simply because it was her neighbor’s
opinion that she was feigning insanity; the court in this case chose to accept the community view rather than consult a doctor’s opinion of the woman’s mental health (MacDonald 125).

This example helps to illuminate the importance of Edgar’s commitment to his disguise and that it be authentic and believable to those around him if he is to avoid capture. After all, if the fools and madmen that resided on the Renaissance stages were not prevalent enough, Bethlehem Hospital was, like a modern day zoo, an “attraction” that the average Londoner might visit once or twice a year. As MacDonald writes, “The Jacobean stage teemed with idiots and lunatics, and popular writers and ballad makers populated their works with natural fools, counterfeit madmen, Mad toms, melancholy gentlemen, and distempered lovers. . . . (But) in the greatest age of English drama, the longest running show in London was Bedlam itself” (121).

Reed warns that the reports of Renaissance physicians and journalists offer little in the way of accurate descriptions of Bethlehem inmates. Instead, the stereotypical depictions in drama and the documentation of eighteenth century journalists like Ned Ward provide our best clues as to the behavior of the people who inspired characters like Edgar's Poor Tom. Ward observed five patients in the early 1700s at Bethlehem: one who was delusional, a second who played demented pranks on visitors, a third who suffered from severe melancholy, a fourth who shifted from raving to violently trampling on an imaginary “conscience” and a fifth who, perhaps most tellingly, “spoke vehemently against the monarchy, then intelligently explained that only within Bedlam and by the mad folk could the truth be spoken with immunity” (28). This last depiction supports Shakespeare’s habit of using allowed fools and madmen to combine “madness with reason” by functioning as soothsayers in plays like Lear, Hamlet, Twelfth Night and Julius Caesar.

Another account that is consistent with Shakespeare’s depiction of Poor Tom is the seventeenth century physician Richard Napier’s observation that 33 of the disturbed patients he treated had “reduced their clothes to shreds” (MacDonald 131). Poor Tom and Lear in their different forms of madness strip themselves symbolically. As MacDonald explains,
Madness stripped men of their reason, the essential accoutrement of humankind, and nakedness was the natural symbol for stark insanity. . . . By reducing his apparel to rags, the lunatic repudiated the hierarchical order of his society and declared himself a mental vagrant; by casting away all artificial coverings, he shed all trace of human society. These gestures appeared to normal men and women to be acts of self-destructive violence, a kind of social suicide.

(130-31)

In attempting to disguise himself for fear of capture, Edgar is certainly committing “social suicide” as Poor Tom, a poetic foreshadowing of his father’s actual attempt later on.

Despite the fifth patient in Ned Ward’s observations, who may have been more of a political prisoner than truly disturbed, the one aspect of Shakespearean lunatics like Poor Tom and Ophelia that does not seem consistent with accounts of actual Bedlamites is the role of prophet or wise sage they also serve. MacDonald tells us that the mentally ill “were not treated with superstitious reverence” and their raving speech “held no peculiar authority” (147). Rather, they were seen more like a hybrid of beast and man and, in that sense, perhaps Lear speaks most accurately when he says to Edgar as Poor Tom, “Thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art” (3.4, 103-5).

In essence, Poor Tom is the elemental man. While the actor assuming his role must always carry the layer of Edgar behind the mask along with an awareness of the truth buried within Tom’s speech, no amount of physical or vocal histrionics will serve the character better than the sheer vulnerability and unfiltered speech of a man who, like Lear, has stripped himself of all that formerly made him a man.

**Godfather and Godson**
Edgar represents a unique composite if for no other reason than this: he is so easily paralleled and contrasted with virtually every other main character in the story. Like his brother he is young, charismatic and in search of his own identity. But unlike Edmund, most obviously, he is ultimately noble, honorable and fiercely protective of the older generation rather than eager to replace it. Like Cordelia he has been wrongfully banished but nevertheless rescues his father in a time of need. But unlike her, Edgar has a dark past that he must overcome; he shares none of her purity or innocence. Like Gloucester or Kent he is punished for his loyalty and love. Unlike these characters, who are blinded and set in stocks respectively, he has the wherewithal and youth to escape any scrape or challenge he encounters. Like the Fool he uses nonsense rambling to hide and reveal brutal truth. But as the Fool weakly fades from the play, Edgar emerges, growing stronger.

There is no comparison, however, that proves stronger or more resonant than that of Edgar and King Lear himself. Bloom points out that Gloucester’s eldest son speaks more lines in the play than anyone other than Lear. Besides their symbolic connection of being godfather and godson (as well as possibly sharing a first name, as some scholars suggest),

Lear and Edgar have shared enormous bewilderments of identity, which appear to be further manifestations of excessive love. . . . The serving love of Edgar prepares him to be an unstoppable avenger against Edmund, and a fit monarch for a time of troubles. (Bloom 483-4)

Put simply, Lear serves as a lesson and warning about the dangers of misguided rule, while Edgar serves, eventually, as a symbol and example of an ideal monarch.

But both kings, the fading and the future, see the devastating effects of their well-intentioned love, Lear in the needless death of Cordelia and Edgar in Gloucester’s death from melancholic joy. They share in the tragedy and in the insight that Edgar references in his final lines. We know from the calming speech Lear delivers to Cordelia before they are imprisoned
that he too has learned from his mistakes. Bloom further links the two by noting that, “When Edgar says of Lear, ‘He childed as I father’d,’ the tragedy is condensed into just five words” (485). There is only love between Lear and Cordelia and between Gloucester and Edgar yet, Bloom tells us, both stories end tragically. Bloom supports the argument that Edgar’s Poor Tom disguise is a rite of passage in his coming-of-age story:

Without Edgar’s stubborn endurance and self-abnegation, the avenging angel who strikes Edmund down would not have been metamorphosed out of a gullible innocent. We can wonder at the depth and prolongation of the self-abasement, but then Edgar would not have been Edgar without it. And there is no recompense; Cordelia is murdered, and Edgar despairingly will resign himself to the burden of kingship. (485)

While I disagree with Bloom’s assessment of early Edgar as a “gullible innocent” (rather than a drunk with bad judgment), Edgar is certainly filled with both despair and resolution in his acceptance of Lear’s crown.

The most specific thematic links between the play’s titular king and its concluding one are those of loss and of madness. Here again we see both similarities and striking differences. Where Lear loses his kingdom and all its trappings perforce, Edgar *chooses* to strip himself of those things that make him royal, albeit as a means of escape. Similarly, Edgar feigns madness – though, like Hamlet we may question if his “antic disposition” is always “put on” – but Lear falls into it while simultaneously raging against it. Both characters’ losses are wrapped up in identity and their potentially shared name. Edgar tells us, “Edgar I nothing am” once he has resigned himself to the Poor Tom disguise (2.2, 21). But Radhouan Amara writes in *The Fragmentation of the Proper name and the Crisis of Degree* that, “Lear starts questioning his very self, after realizing that everything that distinguishes him – his title, his social position and his name – is lost . . . Lear’s being is carried away by the disintegration of his own name” (17).
A loss of identity is the symbolic loss that Lear and Edgar share, but they also shed a much more physical commonality: their clothes. Put simply, “Edgar is driven to a nakedness that is a symbol of his defenselessness and yet itself a kind of defense. Lear finally tries to tear off his clothes to be like Edgar” (Heilman 70-1). Yet this shedding of attire is itself highly symbolic as both men do it to remove themselves from the high society of courtly life. Edgar says as much in Poor Tom’s speech about his past indiscretions, describing the foppery of wearing gloves in his cap, shoes and silk (75). Lear, too, hopes to join his newfound “philosopher” in retreating from the privileged life he has known by taking off his “lendings,” so-called because he now knows they are only borrowed and not as substantial and real as he and Tom’s bare skin. Now the two men, naked on the heath in wicked weather, also share in the theme of physical mutilation, present in Edmund cutting himself, Kent being shoved in the stocks and, most gruesomely, the removal of Gloucester’s eyes (Amara 24).

In the context of losing sanity, Lear and Edgar’s first on stage meeting is most significant. Rosenberg notes that many famous Lears have agreed that the aged king is beginning to return to himself again with Kent and the Fool at his side, but the sudden appearance of Poor Tom sends him spiraling back toward lunacy. “A terrible irony attaches to this turning point, as the precise moment when Lear is least distorted by self-interest, when he is most sane, has purest insight – in his prayer for the poor, naked wretches” (214). The Fool forms a triad with Lear and Edgar when he notes that, “This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen” (3.4, 80). Edgar affects his madness to avoid danger, Lear deliberately retreats to madness to escape reality and the Fool hides behind his nonsensical truth (Heilman 192). Amara goes so far as to argue, “Madness itself does not really occur within the minds of Lear or Edgar . . . but in their discourse and above all on their bodies” (25). Perhaps both characters represent the effects of madness without ever actually enduring it.
Regardless of the authenticity of Lear’s lunacy, it is clear that one of the most significant losses suffered as a result of his decision-making is that of his status and authority as king. “Lear does not, and cannot, resume his old shape. Hence on, his kinglyness will show itself only in his moral force among his followers” (Heilman 219). Here is where Lear and Edgar’s paths diverge and instead run contrary: as Lear falls, Edgar rises. Historically, Rosenberg notes, *King Lear* was not performed in England during the rule of King George III, who was thought by some to be mad. Clearly the play strikes a nerve when it comes to the pride and fragility of monarchs. Even in his own lunacy, Lear often reminds those around him of his kingship, as if to will himself back to the throne. “Lear does not entirely give way, as Edgar does in pretending the conventional madman. Lear struggles backward toward sanity, and has glimmers of it even in his hallucinations” (Rosenberg 232). Meanwhile, Edgar struggles forward against the glimmers of temporary insanity caused by his increasingly difficult circumstances.

But Lear, for all his bitter raging at Cordelia in the opening scene, loses his kingdom through the passive act of handing it over to Goneril and Regan. Similarly, Edgar is partially responsible for his own predicament in his passive acceptance of the danger Edmund tells him he is in. But where Lear can never recover from his irrational early decisions, Edgar learns from his – and Lear’s and Gloucester’s – mistakes and transforms from an undisciplined lush to “a man of resourceful activity” (Heilman 303). In the play’s final scene, both Lear and Edgar finally take decisive action, Edgar slaying Edmund and Lear slaying the captain. But both are too late to stop Cordelia’s murder. Lear’s heart breaks at the failure while Edgar’s sadly fills with his newfound responsibilities.

Bloom concludes that, while *King Lear* is unquestionably Lear’s play, “it is also Edgar’s play” (489), because he functions as its conscience, audience confidante and dramatic parallel to the tragic figure in its foreground. Any actor undertaking the role of Edgar must also pay close attention to both the role of Lear and the actor playing him.
Edgar’s Bodies and Voices

As much as Edgar’s journey is about his own identity, transforming from youthful rascal to noble king, it is also about disguising that identity, transforming from a mad beggar to a country bumpkin and finally to a faceless and nameless warrior. Each of these various “characters” that Edgar takes on will require both physical and vocal dexterity, especially considering the many asides to the audience Edgar takes as himself while disguised as someone else. To better understand the task of embodying this complex character, past performances and productions on stage and screen are useful references and tools.

Rosenberg provides a very beneficial guide in his book The Masks of King Lear. Taking the reader scene by scene, the author relates as much information as he can about previous choices made by actors and directors of the play, all the while exploring the rationale for those choices. For example, Rosenberg describes in great detail the variety of first entrances made by world-renowned Lears like Tommaso Salvini, Edwin Forrest, John Gielgud, Michael Redgrave or Paul Scofield (22-3). Rosenberg’s passages describe the titanic presence of actors like Salvini contrasted with the aged movement of others, like Redgrave, without identifying a more successful choice or even personal preference. The book simply attempts to explain the logic behind any given character choice in production.

Taking the play, then, chronologically, the first major problem arises in Edgar’s brief first appearance with his brother and unknown nemesis Edmund. As Rosenberg puts it, “Shakespeare pieces out the clues sparingly, in jagged bits, so ambiguously that he has provoked a critical notion that Edgar is not at all a character with any psychological or ‘mimetic’ unity, but simply a dramatic device” (91). A closer look, however, reveals that this first appearance provides the only real opportunity for the actor portraying Edgar to personify who it is that the character will transform from. Only here can the audience see who he is in order to compare it with who he
becomes. The scene also allows the two brothers’ personalities to be contrasted, as Peter Brook demonstrated in his 1962 production by having the lounging Edmund jump up and busily dust as his elder brother entered (Hadfield 379).

Who this elder brother is, however, depends entirely on the actor’s interpretation of Edgar’s starting point. As mentioned before, Regan’s comment about Edgar’s association with Lear’s “riotous knights,” coupled with the regret expressed in Poor Tom’s speech about his past, makes a strong argument for a lusty, loud and even sloppily inebriated lout who might enter in the company of a few aforementioned knights or on the arm of some tempting young women. Certainly not every past Edgar has chosen this kind of entrance. “Edgar has been acted here – to emphasize what he will change from – as: naïve, dreamily bookish, bewildered, submissive, uncertain, drunk, wenching, a fop” (Rosenberg 91). But to see a flawed, unworthy reveler in this first scene not only helps to fuel Edmund’s bitter resentment and entitlement, it also gives Edgar room to grow and mature (not to mention potential intoxication helping to explain his gullibility and impulsiveness early on).

Edgar’s second appearance is even swifter and less revealing. Nevertheless, Rosenberg points out important details, like the possibility of shaking the head “no” when Edgar is asked if he has spoken against Cornwall and addressing the question of how the drawing of swords between the brothers should be handled. Rosenberg notes that, often, Edmund goes so far as to draw Edgar’s sword for him (142). But he also raises a far more important question: does Edmund try to quickly kill Edgar in this brief exchange? Why not? He could then claim self defense and his father’s title would be his. But if he does attempt a fatal thrust before bidding his brother flee, does Edgar parry the attack easily, demonstrating the skill he’ll use to overcome Edmund in the final scene? Or should Edgar look weak and helpless with the sword to bring greater contrast to his ultimate dominance later? It is an interesting question that warrants exploration in rehearsal.
The next scene is Edgar’s alone. Act II, scene 3 consists of the banished brother’s soliloquy on some part of the stage separate from Kent who has just been locked in the stocks for the night. Rosenberg suggests the effectiveness of seeing armed men running in the background searching for Edgar and indicating his imminent danger (151). The scene and Edgar’s speech also calls for a stripping of clothes that both foreshadows Lear’s behavior and represents the true beginning of Edgar’s symbolic rebirth. In past productions, Rosenberg has seen the newly disguised Poor Tom “take his place among other wandering outcasts . . . steal a scarecrow’s castoffs . . . (or) try out his new identity – perhaps on one of the pursuing men who may surprise him, scrutinize him, finally pass on” (151-3). Here Edgar, like Hamlet, plots his feigned “antic disposition,” but Rosenberg reports that Brian Murray, who played the role opposite Scofield’s Lear, found “many more differences than likenesses. Where Hamlet vacillated, Edgar was active, non-reflective, met crises with decisions. ‘With Hamlet you say, “Wait, wait, don’t act on impulse.” But with Edgar, it’s all impulse; he acts on the moment’” (153). In this way, Edgar is more like other Shakespearean men of action like Laertes or Tybalt, both of whom have a darker edge to them.

When it comes to the physical and vocal choices available for the character of Poor Tom, the problem tends to be zeroing in on the most fitting of a myriad of choices. One helpful aid is the list of behaviors listed in MacDonald’s book on Renaissance era Bedlam, initially collected by Nicholas Culpeper in a medical guide. The descriptions provide clues for both movement and voice of the character:

“Sometimes laughing, sighing, then sad, fearful, rash, doting, crying out, threatening, skipping, leaping, then serious, etc.” . . . Their moods could be changeable as quicksilver and they noisily expressed them in weird laughter, horrible screams, continual babbling, and furious raving. . . . Sometimes these fits of giggling alternated with terror or anger, as Culpeper remarks. Master John
Browne, for example, would “laugh and clap his hands upon his face and at other times will be sullen and mopish.” Sibyl Fisher’s malady was described like this: “By fits will laugh and be merry, and anon after will cry out that she is damned.” (139)

From an acting standpoint, it would seem prudent to consider any and all of these behaviors as possibilities for the character, experimenting and testing each of them in rehearsal.

The first real opportunity for the actor playing Edgar to display Tom’s symptoms of madness is in Act III, scene 4, when he encounters Lear, Kent and the Fool on the heath. Rosenberg stresses the importance of Edgar’s commitment to his character in order to avoid recognition and capture. He cites Robert Stattel, the Edgar in Lee J. Cobb’s Lear, who entered beating himself with a weed whip for more shocking effect (206). Rosenberg goes on to emphasize that not all of Edgar’s “performance” is acting. “He does hunger, the winds that blow through the hawthorn do freeze his bare limbs. He really does dream of a warm bed. He must be visualized as outfacing a truly bitter sky in near nakedness, as Shakespeare stipulates” (217). Even if Edgar’s histrionics are comical at times, his animal agony must be visible and central. Alexis Minotis played the role in Greece and describes Edgar here as, “A desperately humorous and purposefully exorbitant creature” (217). In effect, fool-like.

This scene on the heath offers endless opportunities for actors and directors and Rosenberg highlights several striking choices from past productions. When Laurence Olivier played the title role, he “sheltered Tom’s shivering nakedness with a fatherly care,” while Gielgud simply faced his new tormentor in stillness (218). As for Poor Tom’s frantic rants about the “foul fiend,” Rosenberg cited a Norwegian Edgar’s proclivity for running back and forth across the stage to escape his perceived “demon” and Minotis’ choice to cover his half-naked rear end to prevent the devil entering there. Other Edgars have beat at their brains, pulled at the pricks in their arms or pretended to fence with the fiend, foreshadowing the fight with Oswald and the
duel with Edmund (Rosenberg 218-9). Perhaps most important for any actor playing Edgar is Rosenberg’s point that the audience see occasional retreats from the Poor Tom character back to his normal self. “The worst theatre Edgars have been those so determinedly mad that their lunacy seemed as genuine as Lear’s” (219).

Gloucester’s entrance to this scene is an intriguing prospect for Edgar. How does he feel about his father at this point in the story? Edgar may suspect that Edmund has plotted against him, but he has no way of knowing that Gloucester has also been duped. Upon his father’s entrance, Edgar, as Poor Tom, immediately accuses the old man of being “the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet” (3.4, 111), a devil from Samuel Harsnet’s Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures of 1603 (Cross and Brooke 1113). This, coupled with the list of punishments Poor Tom tells Gloucester he is forced to endure, indicates some animosity remaining between Edgar and his father. Soon, however, he might overhear Gloucester telling Kent how much he loved his eldest son and regrets his actions toward him, even though Lear has announced his intention to take Tom aside to speak in private (3.4, 154). Perhaps Tom’s nonsense prophecy about smelling the blood of a British man is directed maliciously at Gloucester who he sees as a tyrannical “giant,” or perhaps, forlornly, as Edgar senses some foreboding danger hanging over his father’s head.

Next is the famed “mock trial” scene, surprisingly omitted from the Folio edition considering its substantial theatricality. In the Minotis production, Lear, Edgar and the Fool moved around the imaginary daughters in a ritualistic, rhythmic movement that included spinning lights (Rosenberg 234). Lusardi and Schlueter suggested that Edgar might join in Lear’s delirium for his own enjoyment or for the king’s appeasement on the lines, “Want’s thou eyes? At trial, madam” (3.6, 23-4)! “According to the way Edgar, by gesture or delivery, nuances a line, he may project for the audience a woman who is primping or one who is frightened or one who is blind and struggling to see” (97). Edwin Booth’s Edgar threw his straw hat at the invisible dogs that
taunted Lear but, in Solomon Mikhoel’s production, Edgar stopped the mad Lear’s hand from stabbing the Fool in his rage (Rosenberg 236). Through these examples we see how the wild Tom and the compassionate Edgar may coexist in this scene, no more so than in the note that Edgar/Tom has often mimed closing the imagined drapes that Lear requests be shut (237).

Edgar’s journey becomes significantly more complicated the next time we see him. After entering the stage alone and taking comfort in believing that his life can only get better from here – “The lamentable change is from the best; the worst returns to laughter” (4.1 5-6) – he is immediately contradicted by the disturbing sight of his newly blinded father being led by an old man. Rosenberg reports that past Edgars have painfully refused to take in the sight, or inspected closely, passing their hand over Gloucester’s eyes to make sure he could not see, if not gently touching the wounds with trembling fingers, as in the Cobb production (248). This initial meeting, in all of its emotional complexity, is merely a precursor to the sad and beautiful scene at the “cliffs” of Dover.

In director Jonathan Miller’s filmed production of the play for the BBC-TV in 1982, the scene at the cliffs begins with Edgar carrying his father on his back against the horizon, in a long shot that tells us immediately that the son is not actually climbing though he tells Gloucester that the ground they travel is “horrible steep” (Lusardi and Schlueter 114). Conversely, in the 1969 Peter Brook film version of the play, the director employs only close-up shots of the actors throughout the scene, allowing Gloucester’s “fall” onto soft ground to be a surprise revelation to the audience who may have believed he and Edgar were actually at the edge of a cliff (Rosenberg 265). In some productions Edgar has circled around to catch Gloucester as he falls, though this choice seems useful only if abstract scenery makes location unclear to an audience or actually dangerous to Gloucester (264-5). Lusardi and Schlueter relate the story of actors David Rintoul and John Burgess experimenting with the scene in an acting class by exploring the choices of Edgar physically looking over a precipice to string the audience along, or making it clear from the
start that there is no immediate danger by walking downstage into the imagined abyss he has just described for Gloucester (110).

A unique problem is created after Edgar has assumed yet another disguise – this time of a passerby who informs Gloucester that his life has just been miraculously spared after falling hundreds of feet unscathed – and the delirious Lear enters the scene. Should Lear recognize Edgar, now clothed, as the Poor Tom he took for his “philosopher” the night before? Should Edgar be worried about recognition from the babbling king? Scofield studied this new Edgar hard before dismissing the thought while James Dunn’s Lear attempted to force Edgar to the ground with a staff (Rosenberg 270). In that same production, Dunn commanded the blind Gloucester to read his written challenge so violently that the actor playing Edgar “moved between to protect his father” (275).

Finally, after Edgar has shown his combat mettle by defeating Oswald in preservation of Gloucester, we move swiftly to the final scene and final confrontation between the blind man’s two sons. When Edgar appears, a variety of costumes have been employed to conceal his identity, at least from Edmund and Albany. In Brook’s film, Edgar has stripped a dead knight and comes appropriately dressed in armor, considering Edmund’s line, “Since thy outside looks so fair and warlike” (5.3, 168). But in director Trevor Nunn’s 2007 production, Edmund’s line was sarcastic as Edgar entered dressed as a peasant with a burlap mask (Rosenberg 304). As this scene represents the culmination of Edgar’s growth journey, a warrior uniform befitting his true rank – and knighthood – puts him on level status with his brother and proves all the more surprising when he reveals his identity.

The battle itself remains wide open to possibilities for fight choreographers and actors. It may be a brief exchange if the director sees the result as a foregone conclusion – good guy defeating bad guy – or, as in Brook’s production, it may be a suspenseful match in heavy armor that confuses the audience and leaves it wondering which fighter is which. In any case,
Rosenberg insists, “there must be a fight, not merely swordplay” (305). Traditional fights have been long and formal, with soldiers perhaps forming a semi-circle around the fighters. In the Dunn production Edgar repeatedly stabbed Edmund and had to be pulled off, which feels contrary to the noble warrior and leader he has become. Naturally the choreography and staging of the Edgar and Edmund duel is at the discretion of the director, but it seems to me that the battle needs to straddle the line between the formality of Edgar’s challenge and the raw brutality of brotherly animosity.

Finally we reach the dramatic closing moments of the play. Edgar’s closing speech has already been discussed, and Rosenberg, who so vehemently argued for Edgar’s unflinching maliciousness, sees them as a dreary epitaph. In a Japanese production the living figures remained kneeling in sorrow, Brook had Edgar drag Edmund’s body slowly off, and other productions have had the character staring at the heavens before leaving the stage (Rosenberg 323). If, however, the role of Edgar is seen as the one remaining hope for a brighter future, perhaps his final words should be spoken with strength and resolution, looking across the land he now rules, possibly even placing Lear’s crown of twigs and leaves upon his own head – or the real crown via Albany or Edmund – in symbolism.

This play need not end in pure despair, but rather, through the character of Edgar, should conclude with a note of somber resilience and fortitude. Despite this host of tragedy, death, and sorrow, humanity will survive, press on, and certainly in Edgar’s case, will do so with a far more substantive character and moral compass than before.
October 8, 2009

After turning in the first draft of my thesis research yesterday, it was a little difficult to even focus on the fact that tonight was our first night of rehearsal for *King Lear*. The pressure of finishing the research portion has made me feel at least 10 pounds lighter, but realizing that we’d finally be diving into the actual play with the cast tonight put at least five of those back on.

Luckily even some of that relieved once we began the rehearsal. I thought the first table read went very well and it only boosted my enthusiasm for the project. I feel like, after about five months of thinking about the role of Edgar – and another two years thinking about the show in general – starting to write a journal documenting all my thoughts about the process now is a little overwhelming. Here’s one positive note on which to begin: unlike many plays I’ve worked on in the past, so far, *King Lear* has failed to disappoint me in the slightest the deeper I’ve delved into it. Instead, the more I read, think and explore the play and the character – even before rehearsals began tonight – the more it continues to surprise me and entice me. I’m sure that’s something that not every graduate student can say about the subject of his or her thesis project, so I feel very lucky on that front.

Also, the role of Edgar has already proven more appealing and challenging than I even initially thought when I realized it was the part I was most interested in before auditions last spring. My research has only enlivened my interest in the character and I think that the physical, vocal and especially emotional challenges it presents are just what I need to gauge my growth these three years in grad school.

Now, as for tonight’s first meeting and read-through, as I said, it left me even more pumped to get started. It was great to meet Steven Patterson, our Lear, and he definitely seems like he’s coming from a rich background of experience with lots to offer and learn from. I was
excited to see some of what the designers have been working on and it was just great to hear the play for the first time. I think we’ve all got our work cut out for us in terms of pacing and storytelling with this play. It really is, as Steven put it, “a mountain to climb.” But I’m really ready to start climbing.

October 9, 2009

We read through the play a second time tonight and tried to iron out even more of the textual cuts. As Virginia has said, the script will – and should – remain a flexible document, but it’s nice to start to see it really taking shape. Without question, I have some strong opinions about what is important to the story and what’s not and they don’t always jive with Virginia’s. Interestingly, I don’t think I have any real quibbles about the cuts she has suggested for Edgar and I think we’ve already collaborated very nicely on his dialogue (tonight we bartered and traded a few restorations and cuts and I think we were both happy with the result).

But, as one small example, I’m concerned about a cut on the first page of the play in one of Gloucester’s lines. He tells Kent that he has another son (Edgar) who is about a year older than Edmund, but that he has equal affection for both boys. I know Daniel has expressed some concern over not letting the audience know that Gloucester loves his sons equally, and Virginia tried to accommodate that concern tonight by putting back in a later line that mentions it (though not as clearly as this line does, I think). But my concern is actually more along the lines of the age difference between the brothers. Later, Edmund soliloquizes that he is “12 or 14 moonshines lag of a brother,” but I think that wording is a bit too obscure to be completely clear to the average listener. So I do wish that Gloucester’s line could be restored to let the audience know that my character is older and therefore even more entitled to the earldom than Edmund’s.

Nevertheless, I’m really gaining appreciation for the fact that, as Virginia has often said, we’re discovering the play together and that means compromises and conflict of opinions. I think
ultimately that’s healthy for the project. On a performance level, as we get ready to start rehearsing on our feet on Monday (Sunday for other folks), my greatest concern right now are Edgar’s voices. I think my Poor Tom voice is getting there (though I know I need to find some lighter versions of it for later in the play), but I don’t have a solid bead on his peasant voice yet (after Gloucester’s attempted suicide). Virginia hasn’t liked the two options I’ve presented yet very much, and I’m worried that the reason few actors who play Edgar do much vocal variation is because people believe the emotional content of what he says is too important and powerful to be covered up by an affected dialect or tone. I don’t want that to be the case for me, so I’m going to keep searching for something that will work.

October 12, 2009

Our first official fight rehearsal was tonight. The combat opportunities in King Lear just make it all the more appealing to me as a thesis show. It feels very fitting that both Daniel and I get to have a significant battle in this project as I think stage combat has become very important to both of us in particular from our graduate class. The fact that I get the bonus fight killing Oswald is just icing.

While working on the Edgar v. Oswald and Edgar v. Edmund fights tonight was a lot of fun and I’m excited about where they’re going, I would be lying if I didn’t express some trepidation and disappointment at this time. During our first read-through, Virginia had answered my question about weapons saying that she believed we’d be fighting with rapier and dagger since those would suit the period as well as what is generally called for in the text (both Edmund and Edgar talk about their swords prior to their final duel).

But tonight, Harris let us know that he didn’t want to use swords in general in the show, preferring instead to have the major fights be fought with daggers and knives. I completely see his rationale for the choice: a knife is more brutal and visceral than a rapier and he wants to keep
the show gritty and earthy in that way. I’m all for that, actually. But at the same time, I do worry a little that the smaller weapons will diminish the great military pomp that Cece and Virginia have trumpeted so much as being central to this production. Everyone will be in grand military uniforms and fighting with daggers. That strikes me as odd. In addition, I really like the idea of Edgar’s final entrance being very “knight-like,” since he is there to vanquish the foe and assume his true place as a knight and future king. That seems more difficult to suggest when we each draw knives rather than full-length blades (it also seems to take some of the formality out of the very formal duel and challenge that gets established).

Having expressed these concerns let me say right now how glad I am that Harris is working on the fights for this show. I think he provides the perfect mix of expertise and guidance, while really allowing for a collaborative choreography process. Our input is more than welcomed, it’s encouraged and utilized quite often. At the same time, I trust him completely to fix whatever needs fixing and reject any ideas that don’t work, with solid rationale to back up why. He always leaves room for real acting moments in his fights and, while they may not always be as flashy or theatrical as others, they’re always solid, logical and nevertheless exciting with good actors performing them. Hopefully we can live up to that description.

October 13, 2009

First staging rehearsal tonight, coupled with a full-cast movement rehearsal. Actually, we were unfortunately missing a few cast members as they were needed for a performance of You Never Can Tell tonight, and their presence was definitely missed. Particularly Trent as the Fool, since we explored quite a bit of relationship dynamics in our movement work and that was one element most glaringly absent from the process. I’m sure we’ll all get to make some discoveries with Trent about the Fool’s interaction with our character through the rehearsal process, but it was too bad he couldn’t be a part of the work tonight.
Beyond that I found the exercises pretty informative and helpful. Occasionally it’s hard to give yourself over to the improvisational interaction as characters before we’ve even so much as blocked a scene, but eventually it starts to feel more comfortable and rewarding. I particularly enjoyed answering some questions for myself concerning Edgar at the beginning of the play, since so little information is given about him and there are such brief opportunities to show who he is before being banished by Gloucester. So it was nice to see how I could relate and rouse with the knights (messing with Oswald and hitting on female attendants) while also having a place at court among my father, Edmund and even Lear. Edgar can be a fun-loving slacker who doesn’t do any harm, but isn’t particularly motivated or upwardly mobile either. It’s important that, as Edmund says, he is “noble,” but also still be starting from a flawed place to help motivate his transformation to regality.

Then we blocked Act I, scene 1. Textually it doesn’t say that Edgar is in this scene but I’m thankful that Virginia has decided to include him. It gives me a chance, however brief, to introduce the audience to the character by showing up late to the processional, responding good naturally to the king’s early jokes, and then offering a glimpse of the man to come with my astonished and disapproving responses to Lear’s treatment of Cordelia and Kent. I can also exchange glances from my position with both Edmund and the knights, establishing (hopefully) Edgar’s disregard for status. Of course, none of this should ever really be the focus in the scene, but it’s helpful to me and maybe subconsciously helps plant a seed for the audience who will get to hear me speak (again, however briefly) in the following scene.

October 14, 2009

Tonight proved to be my favorite kind of rehearsal. It was a typical blocking or staging rehearsal of a few scattered scenes in Acts I and II, but what I enjoyed most about it was the successful collaborations that happened between Virginia and the actors. In particular, I really
appreciated her willingness to hear several of my ideas and allow me to try and implement them in the process.

To begin with we really helped solidify some nice moments between Edgar and Edmund in the quick exchange they have in the play’s second scene. It was nice to feel like my suggestion for entering on the arm of a lady felt both justified and effective in introducing the character as a fun-loving but harmless playboy. There was also a nice moment that Daniel and I found of Edmund taking Edgar’s booze, insisting through the action that he sober up and take this “threat” from his father seriously. Little does Edmund know that getting Edgar to sober up will ultimately help undo his plotting. It’s one of the great dramatic ironies in the play that the man Edgar ultimately becomes was at least partially created by Edmund.

Next we hashed out the somewhat confusing staging of Edgar and Edmund’s faux sword fight before Edgar takes off in fear of his life. It was an important sequence to figure out and it was great that Virginia really trusted Daniel, Jason and I to kind of hash out the details so it made sense. We still have to figure out exactly what our exchange with the blades will be, but I think we can come up with something that’ll be effective.

Finally, at the end of rehearsal, I got the chance to work on 2.3, which consists entirely of Edgar’s first soliloquy and includes his decision to become Poor Tom. I’ve been thinking about the speech for a while, and have been interested in the accounts I’ve read of past performances. The rehearsal really left me with a great feeling when Virginia listened to the ideas I’d read about and together we kind of came up with what I consider to be a rather original idea. She opened the door by letting me know that I could acknowledge Kent locked in the stocks on the other side of the stage and I used that as motivation to cower next to the rake stage left. Then, once Edgar has begun to grime his face and knot his hair, instead of “trying out” his Tom voice to the audience, it occurred to me that he could test it out on Kent to see if it was believable. I think there’s some
poetry in Edgar auditioning his disguise on Kent, who himself is already in disguise, and it’ll hopefully be a nice brief moment for Robie and myself.

It’s always encouraging when you feel like you can really work with the director and fellow actors to discover unique solutions and innovations for the script.

October 16, 2009

It was fight rehearsal again tonight, so it was refreshing to focus on a different part of my brain somewhat (in that the text becomes much less of a focus for a while). Things went pretty smoothly for the two major fights I’m involved with as Daniel and I worked for the first hour or so on our climactic duel and then we spent some time on the swift killing of Oswald. The Edmund/Edgar knife fight isn’t completely choreographed yet, but I’m liking that it’s already pretty sizeable and still has a little ways to go. It’s nice to be able to give the audience a significant battle at the end of the play. Plus, Shakespeare makes it easy on us this time in that Edmund doesn’t die right away, so we can both be out of breath and Daniel never has to try and appear dead since he gets dragged off stage to die. Much nicer than when I played Tybalt and had to die on my side so the audience couldn’t see how hard I was breathing.

Interestingly, the dispatching of Oswald proved far trickier to work out than the Edmund battle. It wasn’t anyone’s fault, really, we just couldn’t settle on the best way to actually stab and kill Oswald for quite some time. I’m really happy with what we settled on eventually, though. Nick will be good to work with and I really appreciate that Harris welcomes my input and always finds a good solution to problems.

The primary reason that we had some trouble with the Oswald killing has to do with Edgar’s character. I think it’s pretty clear from his lines – albeit written in a strange country dialect – that he has no automatic malicious feelings toward Goneril’s servant (in fact, he may not even recognize him until after he’s killed him) and hopes to get out of the scrape without anyone
dying. So the fatal blow needs to either come out of self-defense, in protection of Gloucester,
because Oswald just won’t give up or some combination of all three. I think what we ended up
going with is kind of that combination, which is nice. We also wanted to somewhat highlight
Edgar’s fighting abilities here to preview his skills fighting Edmund, and I think we were able to
do that too. Of course I’m always a fan of finding flashy theatrical choreography, but it’s not
nearly as important as telling the story clearly and believably, and I think that’s Harris’ strong suit
as a choreographer.

We’re about to go on Fall Break now, so I hope I can just retain everything we learned
tonight. I’ll have to find some time to go over it before we come back from break.

October 20, 2009

Well, we returned from break tonight and blocked the two first Poor Tom scenes. Quite a
way to pick up again. I drove back from Minnesota today, which gave me ample time to work on
lines in the car. While tonight's rehearsal was by and large very productive and rewarding (I'm
especially happy with the final moment in the scene where Lear stabs the Fool), I re-discovered
something tonight that I had learned in undergrad and had confirmed once again now.

One of my directors in undergrad encouraged us to get off book as soon as possible on a
show and even required that we be off book for a few shows at the first rehearsal. I’m extremely
grateful that he helped instill this habit in me because getting memorization down early has
proven very advantageous for me for artistic, professional and general state-of-mind reasons. But
one small detail that I came to realize about myself through some of those undergrad rehearsal
processes was that I can sometimes get in trouble by coming in memorized to the first rehearsal
of a scene.

Here’s what happens. As I’m working on the lines, I begin to see the stage in my mind. I
can’t help myself. If I already know a little about the set, that helps a lot, but even if I don’t, I
tend to picture my entrances and exits and, pretty soon, I’m imagining where I’m moving on
the stage with each line – where I might sit, stand, etc. What’s more, I inevitably start to get these
little “ideas” about nearly every line. Sometimes it’s just a delivery or timing thing, sometimes it
involves movement and sometimes it even involves the assistance of another character. I truly try
to resist these ideas and just keep a wide-open mind, focusing only on the language, but they
always creep in and it gets very difficult to push them out.

So then what ultimately happens at that first blocking rehearsal is, lo and behold, the
director didn’t have the exact same ideas I had about each of these moments in the scene.
Shocker. Sure, sometimes my ideas work out great and the director is grateful for them. But
there’s always a few that don’t mesh well with what he or she had in mind or aren’t nearly as
effective as I thought in mine. Often I have no problem letting these go (especially if I recognize
that they simply don’t work), but too often I find myself getting disappointed or frustrated when I
feel like, because of a conflict that the director had no way of knowing would be there, my idea
doesn’t get used or even introduced.

So I got myself in the habit of postponing the solid memorization until after the blocking
rehearsal of a scene. It’s my hard and fast rule that I will always be off book on a scene the
second time we work on it but rarely the first. This way, not only is my memorization helped by
having the stage patterns in my mind to help me, but the ideas I come up with now fit into what
we’ve blocked and worked on much more symbiotically.

Anyway, since I had this long drive today and knew we’d be running through the first
three acts of the show tomorrow night, plus I knew that the Poor Tom scenes tonight would
involve a lot of movement on my part and it’d be nice to not have a script in my hands for that, I
decided to go ahead and throw caution to the wind. Sure enough, all sorts of little moments and
ideas kept popping into my head, too many of which involved the help of other actors. The good
news is, Virginia was very receptive and welcoming of most of what I came in with tonight, and
it was definitely helpful to work without the script in my hands for these scenes. But, as I should have known, for perfectly legitimate reasons, we couldn’t keep and use all of the ideas I’d discovered while memorizing either because lines were cut or entrances were different, or whatever.

Anyway, like I said, it was a good rehearsal. But it re-taught me a lesson: stick to what works and, if you have to change things up, be flexible and patient.

**October 21, 2009**

Although I’d like to focus these journal entries exclusively on the actual rehearsal process, it’s difficult not to write about some very significant news we all received today and how it is and will be affecting the show and me. Jason Francis, my fellow grad student cast as Gloucester, learned this morning that he has a malignant cancerous tumor in his colon and while he and all of us are extremely hopeful that a combination of surgery and chemotherapy will eradicate the threat, the decision was made that he will need to bow out of *King Lear*.

First and foremost Jason is my friend and I am concerned and deeply saddened for this incredibly difficult next chapter in his life, though I remain completely optimistic that, with his amazing spirit and strength, he will come away from this safely and healthy. In a strange way I’m even somewhat envious of just how more compelling of an actor he’ll be – as talented as he already is – with the new “colors” this unfortunate ordeal will provide.

But in regards to the play, I have to say that my heart is really breaking for my friend, who I know would have been truly wonderful in this role. I was really looking forward to our scenes together, so vital to Edgar’s story and so memorable to me from my first reading of *Lear* in high school. I knew that Jason was someone I could implicitly trust in a scene to be supportive and open. I think we have really helped to “up each other’s game” in the scenes we’ve gotten to work on in class, but I’m in a bit of my own mourning at the thought of not getting to work
together on stage with these complex and powerful characters. In fact, though we’ve acted together in four plays on stage, we’ve never really gotten to have any kind of significant scene with each other in any of them. As much as my primary concern is for Jason’s health and his family, there is certainly some significant disappointment at losing this opportunity to work with him.

I know that we’ll be able to find a suitable replacement for the role, and I’m relieved that Virginia is looking outside the department for someone in the appropriate age range (though it’s too bad there isn’t any money in the budget to pay an actor). Sam Hartley, Jason’s understudy, is a very gifted young actor, but I think this is a huge burden to put on his shoulders (more so than simply filling in for a night or two due to an brief illness, which was the main reason for having understudies), plus I think he’ll make an even better Albany and we’re early enough in the process that it makes sense to look for someone new.

Still, as we worked through our first act tonight (Shakespeare’s Acts I-III), there was a big hole for me not having Jason there and it’ll be tough to try and form the kind of emotional bond I think we would have had with someone new. I spoke to him today at the hospital and it was the only topic that really caused him to break down; I know how much this project meant to him. I’m hoping there might still be some way we could help him perform the role later on this year – even if it’s just a performance of selected scenes from the play or something. I don’t know.

We’re all just kind of in shock right now and, although tonight’s rehearsal proved that we will certainly move forward and are still in pretty good shape, there’s just no denying that there’s a significant and sad loss to the show we might have had. Hopefully we can just do Jason justice by having an equally strong, but different, show without him.

October 22, 2009
It was a full evening for me tonight, as we worked on three scenes that I’m in for the entire rehearsal. The first two were particularly significant, 4.1 and 4.6, which is my encounter of the blinded Gloucester and then the lengthy “cliffs of Dover” scene. I won’t spend this journal talking about updates on Jason’s condition (though we still know very little at this point), but the biggest piece of news we learned today is who would officially be replacing him in the show. I feel a little sheepish after reading what I wrote yesterday, but it turns out that Sam Hartley, the undergrad understudy who had been playing Albany, will take on Gloucester.

My disappointment and concern remain the same and they have very little to do with Sam. I actually think he may be the most gifted and mature of all of the undergrad actors in the cast and one of the most talented students in the department. But it’s nevertheless a let down for me to not have the immediate bond and trust with him that I would have had with Jason, let alone my regret that Jason won’t be able to fulfill the promise he had with this part (something we all feel). Beyond that, there really is something to be said about the actor playing Gloucester being able to convey a certain age, which is a major challenge for Sam (who’s younger than both Daniel and I, who are playing his sons).

Having said all that, rehearsal went well tonight and I began making efforts to talk and get to know Sam a little better (plus he had to get comfortable real quick with me touching him seeing as I become his guide in these first two scenes). We didn’t spend as much time discussing the Dover cliffs scene as I thought we might, and that’s probably a good thing. I think the possibilities in staging that scene are so wide open, in terms of what you’re letting the audience in on and how to physically block the “fall.” The most important thing to me is that it be clear and not comical – although I do think there is a degree of dark humor in the whole thing, mixed in with the powerful poignancy of it. I think we’re on the right track with what we set tonight, but I still need to decide for myself, moment to moment, whether I need to sell to the audience some of my visual descriptions or just sell to Gloucester with my voice.
Speaking of the voice, I’m still not 100 percent certain about the peasant character voice that Edgar takes on after Gloucester has “fallen.” The two that I tried during the read-throughs didn’t work for Virginia but she seemed more receptive to the raspy voice I tried out tonight. It’s not the easiest thing on my throat, but that’s something I can work with. It’s also certainly not my favorite of the ones I’ve explored so far, but I’m really just not sure where else to go with it. I may need to ask her soon what she thinks she’d like it to be, rather than just hearing what she doesn’t want it to be. I just hope we don’t decide to abandon a voice altogether because I think it’s far more interesting and compelling for an audience to hear Edgar’s various characters.

October 23, 2009

A pretty light rehearsal this evening. The only scene I was called for was Act V, Scene 1, where Edgar briefly stops Albany to give him Goneril’s letter to Edmund and instruct him how to summon “a champion” to defeat Edmund. It’s nice to see Peter Swanke get a shot at a meaty role like Albany, though there continues to be a bittersweet feeling about the role that would have been Sam’s had Jason not had to drop the show. A pall continues to hang over the show as Jason keeps getting worse and worse news.

But on a lighter note, Daniel and I took the opportunity of rehearsal ending early to work some more on our final knife battle. This proved the most rewarding segment of rehearsal, as we came up with a conclusion to the fight that we were both really happy with. Even better, the choreographing was truly collaborative, with each of us building off of the other one’s ideas. It’s only a few brief moves, but the stage management team that was still around seemed pretty impressed with the somewhat flashy ending. We’ll have to have Harris take a look at it, of course, but he encouraged us to come up with an ending to show him and I’m sure his input will only enhance what we have.
So we’re at the end of two weeks of rehearsal now and we’ve almost got the whole show blocked. It’s strange to realize that we’re almost into the next phase of rehearsal. I feel like I haven’t talked much about my process of discovering the character. In many ways that’s because I feel like I haven’t started. I know that’s dangerous to admit, but since we’ve been focusing on blocking for these first two weeks, it’s been difficult to truly explore and experiment with movements and vocal varieties for Edgar. Having said that, this is how I prefer to work, and it just means I’m looking forward to getting more in depth next week as we start taking apart the show and working more intensely on each scene.

October 25, 2009

The show is officially blocked now, though, as with any production, it’s certainly subject to change. And not just to the patterns on stage either – cuts are still being made and most likely will continue to be. It’s a necessary evil as none of us want a three-hour show on our hands. I’ve been satisfied with the text I’m losing and keeping so far – many of my cuts I’ve suggested myself. In fact, there’s still a chunk of speech in the final scene (which we blocked tonight) that I think can go and I plan on addressing it with Virginia tomorrow.

One thing was clear to me as we staged these climactic moments tonight: the set really was designed for this last scene – and that’s a great thing. Even without platforms yet, the image of Lear carrying Cordelia down that huge staircase with Albany downstage left, Kent downstage right and me slowly and defeatedly walking in behind him is incredibly powerful. I was thrilled to see back when we first received our scripts that the stage directions specify that it is Edgar who runs off with Edmund’s sword to try and save the king and Cordelia. In the Folio, it is just an anonymous gentleman who is sent off. But the poignant irony of the new king being saddled with the guilt of being too late to save Cordelia is so potent. After running through it a few times tonight, I could literally feel the weight of that shame as I hung my head and walked on behind...
Lear as he screamed, “Howl! Howl!” Afterwards I realized that there was even one more awful condition I’ll need to play for the exit: in our fight, Edmund has wounded Edgar’s arm and leg. So not only will he be too late, but he also has to desperately limp a little as he exits.

I’ll probably talk about the show’s final moments more later, but, suffice to say, even this early in the process, the emotions during Lear’s final words and Edgar’s reluctant acceptance of the crown was already palpable. If we pull it off, it’ll be a very moving and – as I’d hoped in my analysis – painfully hopeful conclusion to the drama.

October 26, 2009

We ran our second act tonight, which consists of Shakespeare’s Acts IV and V. I didn’t give myself enough time to get off book on the scenes today so it was a frustrating evening for me. I got through it fine, but had to call for line far more often than I’d like to, which meant I was in my head far too much and unable to focus on characterization and listening as I’d prefer. I’m trying not to beat myself up about it too much, but this is my thesis performance and I need to give it more attention, no matter how many 112 papers there are to grade and job applications need to be completed.

Despite those frustrations, it was a reasonably productive rehearsal and encouraging to see, at least in my perception, the second act moves fairly swiftly. I do have some concern over letting everything get too heavy and somber in the second act. Obviously we’re dealing with some very heavy and somber content, but I also think there’s some dark and light levity in scenes like Gloucester’s attempted suicide, Lear’s encounter with Gloucester and Edgar, and even the sister’s treachery in the final scenes. I’m already naturally finding some of those lighter moments with Sam, Steven and Robie. Hopefully that trend will continue.

The journey Edgar makes in the second act, brief though it will hopefully be, is certainly the most dynamic and extreme. While he gets to turn into Poor Tom in Shakespeare’s first three
acts, in the final two, he goes from Poor Tom, to a more eloquent version of Poor Tom, to a nameless peasant, to a mysterious warrior, to a noble and stately king, all the while popping in and out of the narrative voice of the Edgar who’s observing everything in horror and fascination. There’s a lot more for me to explore here, but tonight really gave me a feel for that arc and just how far he needs to go before he’s ready for that crown to rest on his head.

October 27, 2009

First full run-through of the show: check. It was a long night, but on the whole, I feel pretty good about the shape of the show and the arc for Edgar. Our first act in particular is definitely too long right now, but tonight was the first night a lot of people were trying to be off book, so there was quite a bit of line calling, stumbling around for blocking, and even resetting when things really got derailed. Thankfully, not much of that in my scenes. In fact, after feeling relatively unprepared at last night’s rehearsal, I was proud of how solid I felt tonight. Only called for line once and I don’t think I had too many flubs beyond that. Still need to go back over the script and make sure I’m saying “thy” when I’m supposed to and “your” when I’m supposed to – that kind of thing.

So what did I learn from this first full run? Well, for one, although the load is pretty light for me on the front end (a lot of time off-stage for the first half of the first act), I found myself pretty pooped by the final lines of the show. In other words, starting near the end of the first act, I get pretty active and, except for a somewhat sizable break in the second act, I stay pretty active from there on. What’s more, after my “I heard myself proclaimed” monologue (where Edgar decides to disguise himself as Poor Tom), I pretty much have some kind of costume or makeup change that has to take place during every one of my breaks (with the exception of intermission – I’m not looking forward to sitting around half naked in caked-on fake mud for 20 minutes before the second act).
I also know I need to keep working for clarity on Edgar’s various characters. I’m getting more comfortable with his peasant voice, but I still want it to be more distinct from Edgar’s normal speaking voice and the slight affectation he uses when he appears as the disguised warrior in the final scene. Speaking of which, my one line drop happened upon that entrance and I know it was at least partially because my head was preoccupied with the bandana I was wearing around my face. I think the general look will work, though a simple mask with eyeholes might be better. It was a little tough breathing in fibers during the whole fight and, of course, the thing started to slip down and I had to adjust it mid-way through the fight. The most frustrating thing, however, and the main reason I got flustered enough to drop a line was because as soon as I appeared, I heard snickers both on and off stage. I hope that kind of thing ends real soon.

**October 28, 2009**

We reviewed Shakespeare’s Act I tonight. It was very helpful detail work and a shortened night for me as I’m only in the first two of the four scenes in the act. Once again, I’m so grateful to Virginia for putting me in the first scene, even though it’s not specified in the script. Not only is it nice to be there for the banishing of Cordelia and Kent (which foreshadows Edgar’s own and sets all of the events of the play in motion), but it gives me some great opportunities to establish his character through reactions to everything happening, as well as setting up the relationships with Gloucester and Edmund. Sure, we’re not the focus of the scene at any time, but hopefully my rushing in late, conferring with Edmund, and putting my hand on Gloucester’s shoulder all give a subtle introduction without distracting from what’s really important.

It was also nice to be able to talk about the show today in Virginia’s Detailed Scenes class. We raised any issues, questions, or concerns we had and a lot of that came into play tonight at rehearsal. For example, I mentioned that it seemed to me that the court does not necessarily know how Lear is going to react to Cordelia’s explanation for why she can’t match her sister’s
flowery speeches of love. By the time she finishes her very reasoned rationale, we might even expect the king to reluctantly accept her truthful explanation. That discussion in class led to a small eruption of applause from the gathered crowd once Cordelia finishes, which Lear quickly cuts off. I still think that maybe when Lear says, “Let it be so,” we might all breathe a sigh of relief – as if it would seem he was going to accept her speech – until he continues with, “Thy truth then be thy dower.” But the applause is a nice start.

As for my first speaking scene, it seemed to go smoothly enough tonight and we moved on from it without spending much time on it, which was fine with me. I do wonder, however, whether we’re able to effectively communicate Edgar’s rakishness and drunkenness in the brief exchange and my entrance with a pretty girl hanging on my arm. I’ve made it so important to his transformation over the course of the play; I just hope the impression lasts with the audience.

October 29, 2009

Moved onto Shakespeare’s Act II tonight, which meant it was an even lighter night for me. Nevertheless, it was also plenty productive. In the first scene for me, I enter at Edmund’s call and he convinces me to defend myself against him for Gloucester’s benefit then sends me off in fear of my life for slights I supposedly spoke against the Duke of Cornwall (who is conveniently on his way to our home). I only have one line in the scene (“I am sure on’t, not a word.”) but it proved a key moment as we decided to cut one of Daniel’s “Have you said anything against Cornwall” lines, which meant moving my line earlier than it was. It’s an interesting challenge to convey Edgar’s confusion and blind trust in Edmund in such a short window, with the audience still not sure what to make of him. Plus, I think we found an interesting dimension in me attempting to exit off stage to talk to my father and Edmund stopping me with the faux sword fight. All Edgar and Gloucester want to do is talk to each other to figure out what’s going on, but that’s certainly the last thing Edmund wants.
The only other scene I had tonight was my soliloquy in 2.3. It was encouraging to have Virginia say, after I ran through it once that it was working for her and ask if there was anything about it I wanted to look at or do again. Of course there was, and we were able to clarify somewhat where I would strip my shirt (the exact logistics will have to wait until we actually have costumes), as well as acknowledge, to a small degree, Lear, Kent and the Fool’s entrance upstage just as I’m exiting. I really like that we’re playing the scene in a shared space with Kent in the stocks. It’s not often done that way – Edgar is usually in a perceived “other” part of the stage, in a different time and space than Kent. But having Kent there gives me someone to hide from upon my entrance, someone to test my “Poor Tom” disguise out on (something I really wanted to try after reading about it in my research) and a way to convey that Edgar has not left as he was instructed to; he’s sticking around to clear his name – he’s just going to do it in disguise.

**October 30, 2009**

Shakespeare’s Act III is a much bigger hurdle for me and it was nice to spend some significant time on my two scenes in it tonight. The good news is the Poor Tom stuff seems to be working pretty well and, what I like most about it is that it feels new and different every time we run these scenes. I think that’s as it should be – gives everything a great sense of immediacy and the Tom “character” really allows me to be in the moment in a way that doesn’t come as easily with most other characters. I still need to work on when and where I can let the audience see Edgar peeking through, and there’s also some line sections that aren’t as solid as they should be, but so far the most challenging scenes in the show for me seem to be working all right.

There has been one thing that worries me a little, and it came up again tonight. Virginia mentioned a while back, the first time we blocked these scenes, that she thought Tom’s laugh sounded too much like something she’s heard me do before. I took the note and made a conscious effort to find a different sounding laugh for Tom the rest of that rehearsal. But as I thought about
the note later, it occurred to me that the comment was not so easy to just accept. First of all, I realized what character Virginia had heard me do that kind of laugh for. It was Michael in a scene from Martin McDonagh’s “The Pillow Man” that Aaron Sawyer directed last spring. Both characters are suffering an ambiguous kind of mental illness and that’s where that laugh comes from. But what really struck me was this: so what? So what if Virginia has heard a similar laugh before from a similar character I’ve played? What I really need to know as an actor working on this show is, “does it work, and, if not, why or why not?” It’d be even better to get some specific ideas on how to make it better, but I can handle that part, if at the very least I can be told why something’s not working.

To me, “I’ve seen this once before” isn’t a very helpful reason for why it doesn’t work for this character. Don’t get me wrong, I certainly see the value of trying not to play the exact same character for different roles in different plays, but we weren’t talking about my entire characterization for Edgar – we were talking about his laugh. I hope to work for a long time as an actor. While I hope I will have a different characterization for every role I ever play, I think I will severely be limiting myself if I don’t allow some of them to have very similar walks, laughs, vocal tones, etc. Never mind the fact that “The Pillow Man” scene was only viewed by about a dozen people in the department and not the public at large – I can’t dismiss an idea I have simply because a similar one worked for another character I played. I need more justification than that and it needs to be based on the needs of this character in this play.

Luckily Virginia and I were able to talk about this briefly tonight when she made the observation again (this time in the context of saying that she thought everything was working well despite still feeling like the laugh was similar to something she’d seen before). She seemed even more assuaged when I explained that I thought it was “The Pillow Man” scene she was thinking of. That’s pretty much where the conversation ended. But if the topic comes up again,
hopefully we can discuss it at more length so I can get some more specific feedback on why a choice isn’t working.

November 1, 2009

Moving right along, we tackled Shakespeare’s Act IV tonight, which is the first half of our second act. This may be my most difficult or at least most compelling act of the five. It begins with a brief soliloquy of Edgar’s followed by his discovery of Gloucester being led by an old woman (in our production) and blinded. After Edgar decides to lead his father to the cliffs of Dover (without revealing himself), my second scene in this act is the most significant scene in Edgar and Gloucester’s storylines – the scene at Dover.

The rehearsal went smoothly enough. Sam is getting off book and experimenting with using a blindfold, which is useful but also presents unique challenges. Most notably, it really becomes my responsibility to keep Sam from wandering off the stage or into something he shouldn’t. We worked out a physical signal to let him know when he needs to back up because he’s too close to the edge of something. Not an issue I’ve encountered before, but a fun one to figure out.

Because of some of those logistical things, as well as the epic length of 4.6 (which includes the cliff deception, Lear’s conversation with Gloucester, Lear’s retrieval by Cordelia’s soldier, and the encounter and fatal battle with Oswald), I feel like we didn’t really get the chance to discuss this scene at the kind of length I would have liked to. It’s such an incredibly intriguing scene and, as I’ve mentioned earlier in this thesis, is the scene that has stuck with me since my first reading of Lear in high school.

There’s just such a twisted beauty to Edgar’s methodology here. I’m not sure yet if Virginia is on the same page as me here, but I feel like, while the scene is absolutely not comic, if it elicits some uncomfortable chuckles from the audience, that is completely appropriate and
maybe even desired. I mean, here’s a son who absolutely loves his father, especially after hearing Gloucester profess his love for Edgar and regret at having banished him. But, in the scene where he decides to lead him, he realizes what Gloucester’s intentions are for going to the cliffs of Dover (how could he not? Gloucester says, “From that place I’ll no leading need”). I think Edgar realizes that to save his father from this despair, he needs to bring him to an emotional extreme, i.e. believing he’s miraculously survived a suicidal fall.

I’m not pulling that motivation out of thin air, of course, but Shakespeare does only give us one brief line to indicate Edgar’s intentions: “Why I do trifle thus with his despair is done to cure it.” Such a simple sentiment, but an incredibly complicated action to play. It’s why the moments after the fall are so crucial. First Edgar fears that his plan has backfired and that maybe Gloucester has died anyway out of sheer mental belief. But after he revives, Edgar desperately tries to convince his father (in yet another voice) that his “life is a miracle” and that the gods “have preserved thee.” The plan works, if only temporarily, as Oswald’s entrance potentially brings back Gloucester’s despair (“Here’s an opportunity to have someone else kill me since I can’t seem to do it myself.”) Then Gloucester’s conversation with Lear brings back his resolution to not die before the gods please, only to have the despair creep back in during 5.2 after Lear and Cordelia are captured.

It’s no wonder than that Edgar doesn’t reveal himself to this manic and precariously emotional wreck. The shock might kill him and, in fact, ultimately does.

Anyway, I realize this is a lot of analytical thoughts, but it’s helpful for me to work it out on paper because transferring these thoughts to the stage is difficult. But I’m finding my way (even if I feel a little blind myself sometimes).

November 2, 2009
We finished up the show tonight by working in detailed fashion on Shakespeare’s Act V. I think we need to really keep working to take the air out of our last scene, especially with so many melodramatic deaths and emotional moments happening. It can get pretty deadly real quick. But I find myself genuinely getting swept up in the mood every time, which is nice (and rare for me).

The best part of the night was sitting on the stage and discussing things as a cast (at least the principle roles that were still there) with Virginia. It was kind of a “checking in” discussion and seemed immensely reassuring to everyone, myself included. The finale of Shakespeare’s plays – particularly with comedies – can be so tricky, because so often you’re telling other characters information that the audience already knows. My example in this play is my explanation to Albany about where I’ve been and what I’ve been doing all this time. Luckily, I do get some very crucial new information I get to tell the audience in this speech. After running through the story of disguising myself as Poor Tom, I explain that the revelation of my identity to Gloucester ultimately was too much for him to bear and he died from it. I haven’t quite found the pacing of that speech yet (it’s still a little fresh on the brain), but I know that the key is to get to that piece of information cleanly and quickly.

The final fight between Edgar and Edmund is coming along. I’m mildly disappointed that we’re not adding some more moves in there as we had been told we might, but the more we work on it, the more I think the shape we have is really strong on its own (plus, I don’t know how much more Daniel and I could handle – we’re pretty winded by the end of it as it is). I just hope we can bring even more shape and tempo to it in the coming weeks. It needs to be really dangerous – especially since it’s a knife fight.

November 3, 2009
Turns out we have a long play on our hands. We did a run-through of the whole show tonight and it’s a doozy. Unless we cut some time off, it’s definitely going to be three hours long. I think we can all expect to have some line cuts tomorrow. It’s a little daunting to be getting lines cut at this stage, even though we still have a little over two weeks left. Not because it’s necessarily hard to get the lines out of my head or anything, but because at this point something close to a character arc has been fairly developed for me and chopping out moments can sometimes put a roadblock in terms of the overall performance. It’s hard to explain, but it’ll just take some adjustments depending on what happens tomorrow.

The only other observation is that, even with less to do in the first act until very near the end, the run-through tonight was a healthy reminder that this show is fairly exhausting for me. It requires quite a bit of energy to get all the way through the final Edmund fight and Lear’s death to those last four lines. I really need to get myself a water bottle to have back stage. I can feel my voice getting tired by the time I enter to challenge Edmund, which is when I’d like to have it more supported than ever to use a commanding, deep and – I’d like to think, though probably not – mysterious tone. But it’s nice to feel that kind of tired by the end of the show.

I do think that we could shave a significant amount of time off of the show simply by playing every moment with more urgency and less self-indulgent pauses. That goes for all of us with significant stage time and lines. I know I’m going to take a close look at my more “emotional” scenes and try and see which moments can have some air taken out of them. It’s always a big realization I have whenever I do Shakespeare that you truly do need to “act on the line” rather than between the lines. If we all start doing that, this show could and should feel like a surging storm that never lets up until the final lines – the ones I have to say (no pressure).

November 4, 2009
Well, there’s really only one thing on my mind tonight: the chunk of lines I lost from the first act tonight. As I wrote yesterday, I expected things to be cut after our three-hour run, but I don’t think I expected my Poor Tom scenes to be such a big part of the problem. Looking at it now, it really just comes down to the bulk of my second of two big speeches in 3.4, and a few short lines and one slightly longer one in 3.6, the second Poor Tom scene. But, as much as I don’t want it to, and as much as I’m kicking myself for even feeling this way, the cuts kind of hurt and made me start to really question my characterization for Poor Tom.

Because I’ve done a fair share of directing myself, I can truly understand from that point of view why the cuts were made and certainly why we need to be trimming for length. Anything that doesn’t move the plot forward needs to be examined to see if there’s a good reason to keep it. What kind of stings is that, while these Poor Tom moments clearly don’t move the plot forward, they also must not be either entertaining or compelling enough to keep. Of course, in my completely biased opinion, I had thought that most of what was cut really built on the character and gave the audience an insight into Edgar/Tom that was valuable to the story. But, even with my fresh perspective, I can recognize that a lot of the reason why I liked most of what was cut was because they were just fun lines to do.

Maybe I should have paid more attention to the comments Virginia has made about feeling like she has seen this kind of character from me before. I think it has made a significant difference in her feelings about the characterization. What makes the whole thing a bit tougher is watching scenes with Trent’s Fool and how very little of his “bits” of entertainment have been sliced away. I don’t note this with bitterness or resentment – Trent’s doing a wonderful job with the character and filling those moments. It’s just disheartening that what I’m doing isn’t as effective. It may also have something to do with the placement of the Poor Tom scenes in the structure of the show. They’re right near the end of the first act and, if the first act is running
ideally at an hour-and-a-half, I’m sure it starts to feel a little strange to essentially introduce a new character to the audience.

I will absolutely get over the loss of these lines, but right now it really gives me some pause over what I’ve been doing. I need to re-examine things with Poor Tom, I think.

November 5, 2009

After sleeping on the cuts from last night, I came in tonight with a much better attitude and perspective. I was able to talk to Virginia right away at the beginning of rehearsal to both apologize for my surely apparent frustration (sometimes I really hate being such an open book) and even to suggest a couple of small cuts for the second act. I did have one restoration to request from the previous night’s cuts, just a single sentence that I think adds clarity to the response Tom is making to Lear’s question, “What have you been?” After talking with Stephen (who had suggested we cut his question), it was decided that we could put it back in, which made me feel much better. The additional cuts Virginia came up with for second act didn’t bother me at all and hopefully I can incorporate all the changes without too many hiccups.

I did that well enough tonight as we worked on the second act. We actually finished a little early since it’s a shorter act than our Act I, but it deserves as much or more attention. I think we’re devoting a decent amount of time to it, which is good, because I find that the end of Shakespeare, unfortunately, doesn’t get as much attention as it should. It’s the age-old problem of the audience knowing all the information that all the characters don’t. Luckily, like Hamlet, this is a fairly action-packed conclusion and, as long as we continue to pursue what we want or need, and tell the story clearly, we should be able to keep it from dragging.

I’m still struggling with the first scene of the second act, where Edgar discovers his blind father for the first time. I’m starting to figure out that the problem is vocal: my Poor Tom voice, which I use periodically throughout the scene, sounds very emotional and primal. When I play
Edgar’s lines (as himself) as weepy or emotional, the two voices blend too much and the whole scene sounds the same. The next time we visit this scene I’m going to see what happens if I play more disgust and anger at what has happened to my father (of course, I won’t actually “play an emotion”, but you get the idea – Edgar will be cursing his father’s woes rather than bemoaning them).

November 6, 2009

I’m exhausted. I know I’ve talked about how getting through the whole show, as we did tonight, is a tiresome task, but I think this must have been a particularly long week. We all seemed beat down and running on empty by the end. Even Stephen said he felt like he wasn’t speaking English and that his mouth had betrayed him by the end. I knew how he felt, though I felt like it was my focus, concentration and emotions that abandoned me by the end. The good news is we made good time on the run – shaved more time off the show. The bad news is, it didn’t feel like it at all and Virginia was surprised to learn that we had cut any time at all.

We get to have two days off now, which will be a welcome break for me. I have plenty to think about until our next rehearsal on Monday. There are small adjustments I want to make, like Poor Tom’s first entrance and the first scene of the second act (taking the angry route really didn’t work, so I talked to Virginia after rehearsal and we agreed that more of a sustained breathy shock might play better and create a nice difference between Tom’s voice and Edgar’s). I can’t believe we have less than two weeks now, but at the same time, I’m feeling good about everything overall and know that we’ve hit a few moments very strongly (not every time, of course, so we need to work on consistency). It’ll be interesting to see how an audience responds.

Virginia was right to point out how tired we all were and that, the Friday of our first weekend will come following tech week, so we need to work on our stamina and keeping our energy and intentions up. I know that, personally, I’ve let too much of my non-King Lear life
creep into rehearsals. I find that I generally do need off-stage tasks to keep me busy during long rehearsals (or I go mad), but I’d prefer that my activity be reading a book or magazine, instead of grading 112 papers. Luckily, I should be done with that next week.

November 9, 2009

Having two days off was a nice break. I was ready to jump back into things tonight – especially since we were slated to work the first act tonight, which, in my estimation, needs the most work. Unfortunately, I didn’t feel like we got the kind of painstaking work I was hoping for. It was simply a problem of time. We spent a lot of time on the top of the show – time well spent, too – and by the time we got to the Poor Tom scenes, the ones I would have liked to have taken apart a bit more, we were quickly running out of time. Virginia had said at our last rehearsal that she really wanted to work on some blocking changes to 3.7 so, as we neared the end of the act (and the end of rehearsal), she actually skipped over much of Poor Tom’s first and second scene.

The other problem with taking our time working through the act is that we quickly lose the energy and urgency I think we need to barrel through the story at the pace it needs to be told. Finding that balance between speaking clearly to be understood and with quick energy to keep the story moving is one of the big challenges we face right now. The other thing I noticed tonight is that, no matter how much I warm up and get focused before we start the show, it’s very easy to lose that focus since, after standing and listening for the lengthy first scene, I have a brief appearance in the second scene and then an even briefer one several scenes later. It’s about 45 minutes into the show before I have a significant scene: my monologue in 2.3. So I need to work on staying focused when I’m off stage and making sure my voice and body stay warm.

November 10, 2009
Tonight we were released around 9:15 (instead of the usual 10:30). It was a nice bonus and, as Virginia said, our reward for being much stronger on the second act than on the first. But to me it highlighted the difficulty of where our act break is. Don’t get me wrong, I like where it is – it’s nice sending the audience off to intermission after they’ve just watched an old man get his eyes gouged out, a brief sword fight and two deaths. The problem is, the first act is quite long and the second act is just under an hour. That means when we reserve four hours for each, it’s an uneven distribution. As much as I appreciated the extra time tonight to take care of other errands, I might have preferred to spend some time on the scenes we didn’t get to work the night before.

Having said that, the second act is going a lot more smoothly than the first. I didn’t feel like I was very focused throughout, but it seemed to have gotten by Virginia for the most part (I didn’t get any specific notes, other than the mental ones I gave myself – i.e. remember to bring on Oswald’s letter for 5.1, dammit!). Our final brother battle seems to be going pretty well, though there are some little detail things we could continue to perfect (we keep failing to make connection on our kicks to each other’s guts).

I’m realizing that I haven’t spent much time talking about the experience of working with Stephen, our Lear. That’s a shame, because it’s been a very rewarding rehearsal process, due in large part to his example and attitude. First of all, I just really appreciate a consummate professional – he’s practically been off book since day one – who comes into a Midwest college campus production and doesn’t assume any kind of airs or exhibit any kind of diva behavior. He seems very eager to work with us to tackle this role. He’s also done the show twice before – playing Kent and Cornwall – so he has a singular understanding of the play. Not to mention his many years working at Shakespeare festivals really shows in his incredible voice control and projection. It’s fascinating to see up close a stage whisper that can be heard all the way in the back row and I wish I had the kind of vocal variety he’s showing in the huge emotional scenes.
Not to mention that I’m really excited for his performance to be seen by an audience. He’s really imbued his early scenes with the carriage and delivery of a former soldier, rough, solid but past his prime. Then, as the show progresses and his madness grows, he explores several different personas, from childlike innocence, to weepy whiner, to goofy prankster, to wise sage. I love getting to be on stage with him for most of this as the witness to the descent and downfall of this great but tragic man.

**November 11, 2009**

We had the first of three straight run-throughs tonight. It ran relatively smoothly – no major mishaps or train wrecks – but it still felt a bit like walking through mud both doing it and listening to it from offstage. We’ve lost much of the urgency and swiftness of story that we had found after we’d made our final round of cuts. There are some fairly self-indulgent pauses going on and I’m probably guiltier of them than I’d like to admit.

I think we added something close to 10 minutes back onto the first act in particular (the second act seems to be holding fairly steady at just under an hour). It’s a discovery I find myself making every time I do Shakespeare: in modern drama and even in most modern productions plays as far back as Chekov and the like, our Stanislavskian training has us filling our non-verbal moments with rich subtext and reactions. The words themselves are often very secondary to their true meaning, which tends to come through during the pauses. But with Shakespeare, all of the emotion, meaning and – if there is any – subtext comes through directly on the lines themselves. He virtually always has his characters speak whatever it is that he wants acted or done. Therefore, performing Shakespeare for modern audiences becomes a tricky proposition. They and we are so used to spacing out our language with grandly filled pauses, but that’s death in Shakespeare.

There are exceptions, of course. While it may not have been true in Shakespeare’s day, I think there really is some value in contemporary productions to finding the illuminating or
augmenting moments or bits that can happen between the lines. Obviously in comedies these
are physical lazzi or clever pantomime, but even in drama, there are often beautiful little moments
(like Cordelia bidding the Fool farewell in our production) that can really heighten Shakespeare’s
intention if pulled off. This is where the classic technique and modern interpretation can meet
happily. But it’s always a danger to let yourself fall into the habit of acting with a capital A
between the lines rather than on them. That’s something I’m really working on, especially with
my emotional scenes with Gloucester.

**November 12, 2009**

I proved to myself tonight yet again that it’s never too late to try something new, even if
it turns out to be a failure or bad idea. This morning, when I was going over my lines, it suddenly
hit me that there was one voice that I’d never really experimented with or varied: my Poor Tom
voice. Back when we auditioned for the show last spring, I came up with a voice that I thought
was unique and would catch Virginia’s attention if nothing else. It’s this deep, strained, almost
mentally challenged sounding voice placed in my lower belly (or “double bass” placement, as
Stan would call it). There’s an innocence and modern familiarity to it – I even have a slight East
Coast accent in there if you listen – that I liked playing with.

But now that I am using a low raspy voice for the peasant character and a low booming
voice for “masked warrior Edgar”, it occurred to me that all of my voices are in my lower
register. I had played around with a higher, more nasally voice for the peasant during our read-
throughs, but that was nixed early on. So, as I went over my lines, I decided to see (with some
trepidation) what would happen if I tried Poor Tom’s voice with the same low body placement
but with a higher pitch throughout (I tried nasally too but that really didn’t work because it totally
changed the character, and that’s not what I wanted to do). To my surprise, it didn’t sound too
bad to me and I liked that it gave me more range and variety for the whole play, I thought. I knew
the downside was that I have a little less flexibility with that pitch (since it’s not where my natural speaking voice sits), but the experiment was successful enough that I resolved to try it out tonight if Virginia was OK with it.

Of course, she was totally open to me trying something new and even rightfully reprimanded me for apologizing that I was making a change so late in the game. Then we did the run (unfortunately, failing to shave those extra 10 minutes off again) and trying the new voice did give me a new urgency that had been missing before. After the run, however, Virginia and I talked and she let me know that she thought my old voice was ultimately more effective. She gave lots of good feedback for why she liked it, which is probably what I subconsciously needed all along. It was very reassuring to hear that what I’d been doing was on the right track and that I should go back to it. So, what’s the moral? It’s always good to try something new, even if it doesn’t end up working at all.

November 13, 2009

The last rehearsal before tech Sunday always means the last chance to really explore acting beats without the benefit and hindrance of technical elements like costumes, lights and sound. Obviously the process of discovery needs to continue all the way through closing night, but tonight was still the last time that Virginia’s full attention and ours would be on performances only, so that’s significant in the realization that, by the end of the run, I needed to feel relatively solid in what I’m doing and what kind of arc Edgar is experiencing. As to whether or not that happened, the answer is: sort of.

It’s a blessing and a curse to not get a whole lot of feedback and notes at the end of the night. There are many moments in the show that I expected to get a lot of input on but they’ve never been discussed between Virginia and I. Examples would be my speech explaining Gloucester’s death in the final scene (lengthy, mostly expositional information that the audience
already knows and dangerously emotional), my asides to the audience during Lear and Gloucester’s conversation at Dover (potentially flow-interrupting, but vital to Edgar’s “witness” status) or my final speech at the end of 3.6 where I’m carrying the Fool off (difficult to relate what I’m saying to the dead Fool and potentially hard to understand). Of course, I should ask about these things if I’m really concerned about them, and I have asked about other moments that were even bigger concerns, but I guess I’ve just been counting on the philosophy that, if you don’t hear anything, it must be working OK.

Anyway, all this is by way of saying that it was nice to have Harris watching tonight because he did provide a little more feedback than I’ve been getting. Mostly it was just physical things for everyone in the cast, since that’s kind of his thing, but he did mention specifically to me that he thought I could sell how miraculous and amazing Gloucester’s survival from his fall is. It wasn’t something I was expecting because I felt like I’d been pushing that pretty hard, but I’m glad to hear it because that’s one of the most important things to me in this show, so I’m going to take a close look at those lines and see how I can up the amazement factor and really stress to Gloucester how he needs to believe this act is a sign from the gods that he’s meant to go on living.

**November 15, 2009**

Overall, this may have been the smoothest and most productive 10-out-of-12 tech rehearsal I’ve had since coming to UNL. Which is surprising considering how epic and tech-heavy this show can be. It’s a credit to Amber Naylor’s stage management, as well as Virginia’s insistence on results from the designers. When we were able to run the show this evening (which certainly wasn’t a guaranteed thing coming in), I sat in the house when I wasn’t on stage to watch scenes that I hadn’t seen in weeks. It really reinvigorated my excitement to share this story with an audience, as cheesy as that sounds. Of course I would have loved to see the costumes as well,
but even without them, I think there are lots of great moments that we’ve created, made all the better by the lights, sound and other scenic elements. One concern I have is the several blackouts that have been inserted to bring in some scenic things like drapes for the storm. Not only do they not really look great in the lights, but the blackouts also really interrupt the flow of everything.

The other big observation from the rehearsal is that, as is usually the case, I think I gave one of my best performances if not the best during the run tonight. It’s frustrating to a certain degree, because I’m certain that what made it possible is the relaxation that comes with knowing the focus for the rehearsal is on technical elements. I just felt more connected to what was happening in the moment and particularly felt like the Poor Tom scenes were coming from a more real and grounded place than they have before. Hopefully I can keep that relaxation and freedom in mind as we go into this tech week and opening night (three days away!).

November 16, 2009

Turns out, costumes make a big difference. I’m not talking about finally feeling like the character or suddenly discovering how you should walk or carry yourself, because all of those kinds of observations, in my opinion, are signs of a lazy actor. No, tonight, the costumes really made a difference in that they created countless new obstacles and problems to overcome. They are gorgeous, beautifully crafted and a pain in my neck.

I won’t spend too much time going into the specific details, like how my boots don’t stay up with my pants but I can’t wear tights underneath them because I don’t have time to put tights back on during my second act quick-change (oops, guess I did go into some unnecessary detail there), but I do have to focus a bit on the problem of Poor Tom. It’s a unique situation – one that I’ve never had to face before, and I’ve played Toto, a giant ant and Rikki-Tikki-Tavi before. But for Tom, most of the costume consists of brown liquid makeup, which we discovered at the last
minute tonight before the run-through began. What little there is of my actual clothing are a rag-like loincloth and a toga-type of sash.

Now don’t get me wrong, it’s really not the near nakedness that bothers me. I mean, it has been on my mind for weeks if not months, but I’ve resigned myself to the fact that, whatever shape I’m in, that’s the shape that Edgar’s in and it won’t be anything that’ll distract the audience too much (hopefully). It wasn’t even getting into the Poor Tom look that was the problem. I had plenty of time to smear the brown paint all over myself, muss my hair up and make sure there’s a decent amount of mud mixed in there too (the bit where I smeared the mud on my face on stage worked pretty well tonight, considering it was the first time we had tried it with real mud). No, the problem I had was getting out of Poor Tom’s outfit and back into regular peasant clothes. We had long talked about me showering in the dressing room to get cleaned up, and so I did – as fast as I possibly could. I was about halfway dressed when I heard the voice come over the intercom: “Uh, where’s Edgar?” I’d missed my entrance. The good news is it drew attention to a problem. The bad news is, it really threw off the rhythm of the show and my personal rhythm for the scene, which was, of course, the all-important cliffs of Dover scene.

We’re going to try something new tomorrow that’ll hopefully work a little better (I’m only going to wash off my face, neck and hands, which will be a little gross under my costume, but should give me enough time for the change). But I definitely left tonight feeling a little flustered when it came to the costumes and all the little things that are hard to account for.

November 17, 2009

Last night I talked about “the little things” that are difficult to plan for in tech week. Tonight felt like one “little thing” after another. I continued to have numerous costume problems, all of them relatively minor – my boots not staying up, clasps coming off, etc. – and the Poor
Tom change proved problematic yet again. I managed to make my quick change, but it was very close. And the bigger issue came later.

I’d been told that, since I missed my entrance last night due to showering, obviously we were going to have to try something different. Well, tonight we did, and it turns out there’s a bit of a problem with that too. By just washing off my face and neck, that leaves the rest of me still covered and, particularly wearing the lovely but very heavy jacket they’ve made for me for the peasant costume, lo and behold, I sweat rather profusely through my shirt. So by the time I removed the jacket in order to fight the knife duel, my sleeves looked almost as brown as my arms were underneath them.

Despite some setbacks like these, tonight did feel like a step up from last night, and an exhausting one at that. We took some publicity shots after the show (meaning I had some majorly quick cleaning up to do) and I’m just totally beat now. Things seem to be coming together all right. I’m discovering new things every night in very small moments. Things like making a noise with my stick in the Dover scene so Gloucester knows I’m still there to say farewell to me. Or helping to indicate what the “murmuring surge” is by gesturing the waves crashing onto the shore. It’s really detail work, which is a nice place to be. Basically, I feel like I’m ready for an audience tomorrow (even if it is almost entirely 112 students), although I really have no idea how they’re going to respond to everything I’m doing.

November 18, 2009

Tonight was definitely a mixed bag of a first night with an audience. In many senses it was our opening night. But it was also (and primarily) our last dress rehearsal. The notes we got after the run were very helpful, I think, and based in part on some of the audience response. Now, as for that response, I can definitely say hands down that this was one of the worst crowds I’ve ever been in front of. However, I also can’t blame them too much.
It was a 112 night, meaning the audience was made almost entirely – if not entirely – of students from Introduction to Theater, the Gen Ed lecture hall classes. They were all working at several key disadvantages: besides the fact that this is Shakespeare and already difficult to follow, there was no synopsis included in the program tonight and the pictures we took of each of the families was not on display in the lobby. Couple all that with the fact that we are still technically working out some kinks with it being a dress rehearsal and them being our first audience, and I really could understand why, after two hours, we started getting quite a bit of uncomfortable laughter in inappropriate places.

In a strange way, I was actually encouraged by a lot of the responses. See, I think, for the most part, the students were listening to the show – hard. I think, maybe because they all have to write response papers and maybe just because we were actually engaging them to some degree, they were trying pretty furiously from the beginning to follow what was happening. By the time we got well into the second act, I think they just got exhausted and punchy from working so hard to listen that anything that struck them as particularly theatrical really got them tittering. As characters started getting killed off in droves, there were more and more laughs that, while flustering to most of the cast, was oddly reassuring to me. I felt like they were watching and listening and, on some level, having a rather visceral response to something that was very much out of their comfort zone and challenging them in a way they weren’t used to.

Having said that, there were still lots of cell phone lights out there and unnecessary talking at times, but it was nice to see how so much of that dissipated quickly at powerful emotional moments, like Lear’s final entrance, or exciting moments like the dagger duel. I’m still not sure whether we’re telling the story as clearly as we could be, but I think we have something that people – even 112 students – can’t help but pay attention to.

November 19, 2009
Opening night. It’s very difficult to say how things went tonight. On past opening nights, I’ve had a very clear idea of how the show was for me and for the cast as a whole. Tonight is much more of a mystery. Overall I’d have to say that things felt relatively successful. I think we stepped up from last night and kept the whole thing sailing along fairly smoothly without too many bumps. But the brief reactions I got from some friends and audience members after the show was difficult to read and not as encouraging as I was hoping for.

On top of that, I really didn’t feel as connected personally to the character and the story as I have in the past. I think the lack of feedback I’ve been getting the last few nights (I’ve received virtually no notes at all except for technical costume/prop/makeup kind of stuff) has messed with my head in the sense that I really felt myself trying a bit too hard tonight. And trying too hard at the wrong stuff too – rather than clearly telling the story, I think I was trying so hard to get into the physicality and vocal histrionics of Poor Tom. I have such a small window to convey who Edgar is at the beginning of the play, and then just brief appearances before I’m back on as Poor Tom – who is himself a very odd creature to get across. My first act, especially, felt less than successful, although I do enjoy getting the first real laugh of the night (both last night and tonight) when I imitate Edmund’s poutiness in our first scene.

That’s not enough, of course, and I need to try and figure out what it is that I’m missing in the first act to make the audience connect with who I am and what I’m trying to do. One small thing that occurred to me too late tonight was that, both last night and tonight, I have forgotten to address the balcony during any of my soliloquies to the audience. It’s something that I know Daniel does very well in his direct addresses and I’m generally pretty good about it, but I’ve neglected it so far and will have to make sure I do it from now on.

So, overall, not a life changing or even slightly altering opening night. But a place to grow from, and certainly not a train-wreck. I think I prefer those, actually.
November 20, 2009

Following a less than favorable review in the Lincoln Journal Star for myself (but, thankfully, a very positive one for the show), as well as a personal feeling of disappointment with my own performance on opening night, tonight’s show went much better. It never ceases to amaze me how huge leaps can be made even after a show’s opened and you’ve rehearsed something for six weeks following months of preparation and analysis (well, granted, I’ve never actually done all that on another show before, but it just proves the point even more).

Basically I made one overall adjustment that really helped me feel more connected to what I was doing: tell the story clearly and simply. It occurred to me that, especially after my emergence as Poor Tom, I was getting so caught up in physical and vocal histrionics that the audience probably wasn’t following or understanding half of what I was saying and doing in that first scene. And if I lose people right away in Tom’s first scene, it’s pretty tough to get them back. So I focused tonight on how I could be as understood as possible without scaring the audience off from Tom as being merely a babbling loon and too foreign and confusing to be regarded as anything more than a distraction.

As far as what was specifically written in the review, I’m not too worried about it. In fact, the review actually confirmed that my aim for the character worked – that of transforming Edgar from a lout to a hero. It’s just that the reviewer didn’t seem to really care for that approach to the character. To each his own. An actor’s relationship with reviews is always a tricky tightrope to walk. You don’t want to seem to care very much and can remind yourself all you want about how it’s just one person’s opinion and blah, blah, blah. But the ego is fragile, especially when you’re committing so much effort and emotion into something (the more you care, the more it hurts). Luckily, I felt tonight like all the pieces were finally really coming into place, or at least I was starting to relax enough to give the kind of performance I’d been trying to build up to.
November 22, 2009

We had last night off due to the Husker game, which is certainly a unique circumstance of studying theatre at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. But today’s matinee helped to build upon what I was able to find on Friday, so that’s encouraging.

There are a few moments in the show that aren’t hitting consistently the way we’d like them to every night. They generally seem to have everything to do with timing and the audience. Obviously this was our first matinee crowd and that’s always a more subdued affair (especially with a rather lengthy Shakespeare play). One moment that stands out for me is my first interaction with Edmund in our scene together. I mimic and mock Edmund’s “pouting” before saying my first line and it’s a bit that has generally always gotten a laugh. Since there aren’t many Edgar moments that get laughs, I’ve tried to be especially conscious of the old adage of not asking for the laugh or trying to re-create a time that worked too much with this bit. But it’s proving to be more of a timing issue than anything else and a lot of it is out of my control.

While Daniel is talking, we want the audience to be conscious of my entrance with Katie Gell (as a random bar wench) above and maybe see me smooch her and pat her on the butt as she’s leaving, but they also have to hear what he’s saying. Especially for my “pouting” bit to work. But if they spend too much time watching us above, they miss what he’s saying, and then the bit doesn’t work. It’s probably one of those things that I’ve already thought way too much about and now it won’t land the way we want it to ever again as a result. Luckily it’s in no way vital to anything, but sometimes it’s hard to let those kinds of little things go too.

December 1, 2009

Tonight we had our “brush-up rehearsal” coming back from our time off from the show. I feel it necessary to place quotes around that term simply because there was nothing typical about this “brush-up”. Due to the outbreak of the H1N1 virus this semester (also known as swine flu, to
the chagrin of pork producers), *Lear* has been understudied throughout the cast. In one unfortunate instance the understudy system has already been notably utilized in Sam Hartley replacing Jason Francis as Gloucester (and Peter Swanke replacing Sam as Albany, and other people picking up Peter’s servant lines). But Virginia, rightly, wanted to give the understudies a chance to actually perform the roles they were tasked to learn. Not only does this ensure that the actors will actually have to learn their roles, but it’s also a fitting reward for that effort.

Unfortunately, in my opinion, circumstances have led to all of this happening in a difficult time slot. There was never any appropriate rehearsal time for the understudies to perform the show because we were all too focused on getting the primary show ready to open. I’m glad, for their sake, that a few weekends back, the understudies all got together with Virginia and Steven for a rehearsal of the whole show. But other than that, these actors have had absolutely no time to work with the roles they were understudying on stage in rehearsal. It was decided that the best time for the understudy performance would be tonight’s slot reserved for our brush-up rehearsal. This is understandable but also regrettable because it means that the actors actually cast in the roles do not get a brush-up rehearsal (only Steven really gets that).

Nevertheless, what I wanted to focus on in this entry was how impressed, proud and thrilled I was to watch the undergrads performing tonight. First of all, it was truly fun to sit back and watch the realized show with lights, sound and costumes – a perspective I almost never get to have. Secondly, some of the actors – like Cale Yates, Katie Gell and Jessica Elwell – were truly astonishing in the work they’d done learning their lines and blocking. But I can’t even begrudge the actors who struggled with memorization, considering the circumstances they were forced to learn the roles under (true, this is how professional understudies work, but that makes it all the more impressive for the amateur college students who pulled it off). Nate Ruleaux played Edgar and I thought he did a very admirable job. Sure, he didn’t have all the lines or blocking down perfect (mostly there were a lot of skipped and omitted lines, so he helped make the show
shorter), but I thought he did a nice job of offering my performance with his own stamp on it. It was helpful to me, also, to see how some of the movement and characterization works in context from the audience perspective. Overall, I’m more encouraged by what I’m doing watching this and I think the understudies definitely deserved the standing ovation I helped give them at curtain.

December 2, 2009

It’s always a tricky recovery coming back for the second weekend of performances after a few days off. Not simply because you’ve had a few days to let the movement and text leave your head if you’re not careful, but also because there are weeks and weeks of rehearsals and tech rehearsals leading up to opening night and you need to come back to that first night of the second weekend with the same energy and focus, in theory, that you had built up to for opening night. In some cases, I’ve found it to be easier and more rewarding because I’ve learned and grown over the course of the first weekend and I’m not as exhausted as one can sometimes be on opening nights thanks to those aforementioned weeks and weeks of long rehearsals.

But tonight was a very unique experience. First of all, we had much more than a few nights off. We had Thanksgiving break in the middle of this run, meaning we’ve had a full week-and-a-half off before coming back to the show. I’ve actually been in a situation like this before and usually the only saving grace is having a brush-up rehearsal the night before the second weekend starts. But in our case, our brush-up rehearsal from last night consisted of the understudy performance of the show, so those of us actually playing the roles were coming in without any kind of run-through. To try and avoid coming in totally cold, I came in tonight early and walked through the entire show with my lines. I don’t know how helpful it was, but it was enough to convince me that I’d be better prepared.
Overall the show went pretty well. It felt a little stilted at times and I think it ran a bit longer than it had been, but it’s nice to be back in the saddle again, as it were. I’m looking forward to this final weekend of performances.

December 3, 2009

Well, it appears that the understudy idea really was smart thinking. Tiffiney Baker, who plays Regan, has come down with really bad virus (not the H1N1, thankfully) and it was decided that, since Katie Gell did such a fine job with the role the other night for the understudy performance, she should step in for tonight and give Tiffiney the chance to rest and recover.

The change didn’t mean a whole lot for my performance as I literally never speak a word to Regan and am only on stage with her in the opening court scene. However, Katie usually plays the tawdry wench that is hanging on me when I enter with my chalice of wine in the first act. So her understudy, Catherine Dvorak, filled in tonight. Catherine did a fine job and it didn’t affect things too much (the timing of the moment with Daniel was off again, but we’ve continued to have troubles with that moment anyway). It’s just interesting to get to make adjustments to changes like that and I think, overall, it helped add some freshness to the show.

I’m feeling more and more comfortable every night with the role, even though I’m still not sure how well its landing with the audience. I can really feel and see firsthand what makes Edgar a unique challenge. As my research argues, he really is the hero of the play, but is nevertheless – through stage time and Shakespeare’s choice of which characters to focus on – a secondary character to Lear, Gloucester, Edmund and, in some ways, Cordelia. Finding that balance continues to be a welcome challenge every night.

December 4, 2009
I’ve started grading the *King Lear* review papers from the two Introduction to Theatre classes that I’m a teacher’s assistant for this semester. Luckily the “reviews” for my performance have been largely positive, which I can never, with any real certainty, chalk up to sincerity or simple teacher buttering. But some of the other observations and comments have been very illuminating for me in an objective assessment of our production.

The reviews for Steven’s performance from these mostly inexperienced theatergoers have been decidedly mixed, but almost vehemently so. I believe most of the students really enjoyed his Lear and were very impressed with his commanding presence and the clarity of his portrayal. These fans are very verbal in their appreciation of Steven’s work. But those who were not as favorable have been equally adamant with their opinions. These folks tend to complain that they couldn’t understand Lear often enough – that his delivery got too quiet and swallowed up in the large theater, and that he took too many dramatic pauses in his speeches. Interestingly enough, I agree with both these groups in some way.

Steven has truly blown me away with the consistent high quality of his work, how emotionally committed and – again – consistent he can be, and what a great professional example he’s given all of us. I really enjoy the grizzled and angry old warrior approach that he’s taken with Lear and I think it’s a very valid interpretation of the character. As for the complaint about his delivery, I also tend to agree with that in several moments of the show. However here, I have to fault both actor and director. As much as Virginia has done a great job of letting the cast know when she’s having trouble understanding and hearing us as well as when we really need to pick up the pacing, she’s really stayed pretty hands off with Steven in this regard. For whatever reason, I think many of Steven’s slightly too indulgent pauses and overly hushed whispers have gone unaddressed, which I think he would have appreciated being brought to his attention.

I realize that none of this entry really addresses my performance of the role of Edgar, but this project has been a unique experience because of its involvement of a guest Equity actor, so I
think watching and learning from him has been a very important part of my learning experience as well.

December 5, 2009

Closing night. A very long strike. A great audience and a reasonably solid performance (there’re always things you’d like to go back and have go a bit better but, on the whole, this felt like one of the better nights – even if we managed to make it one of our longest running times, I believe).

It’s difficult at this point to truly reflect on this whole experience clearly and coherently. I’m definitely grateful for so many aspects of this project. Firstly, for the script selection itself. I was hesitant at first about *King Lear* when Harris intimated it to us our first semester two years ago. If I’m being completely honest, that trepidation was mostly for the selfish reason of feeling that there would be no leading role available to play. But what I ended up with was by far the most complex, compelling and challenging Shakespearean role I’ve played to date (and that’s including Romeo, Tybalt, Laertes and Malvolio, among others). Not to mention getting to research and analyze arguably the greatest play in the English language and its undeniably greatest playwright.

The other benefit that *Lear* brought which may not have been possible with a different script was the casting opportunities for our class, which, in my opinion, ended up being doled out perfectly. Personally I enjoyed the chance to have some substantial scenes with Daniel, Robie and Trent, as the Fool, almost as much as I enjoyed going toe to toe with Steven. While it would have been great to get to work more closely with Lucy, Tiffiney, Beth and Kyle, I’ve been able to work with each of them pretty closely in some of our past productions.

By far the biggest bittersweet aspect of this whole experience is the loss of Jason Francis from our class. I truly can’t express how much I would have loved and cherished the chance to
play Edgar to his Gloucester, let alone to simply see his Gloucester as an observer. Sadly it
wasn’t to be, but for what little it’s worth, I dedicate my whole performance and this entire thesis
to him – one of the greatest actors and people I’ve ever had the privilege of working with.
Ryan Kathman: What are some of your initial thoughts about Edgar that you have from your own reading of the play and past productions you’ve seen. In other words, what was your take on the character prior to seeing our production?

Stan Brown: That he, like Lear, had to be propelled into a hero’s journey. That he, like Lear, had to have the illusion of his reality shattered. That he, unlike Edmund, was pampered and protected from the things that would have made it impossible for him to be fooled by Edmund.

RK: In general how did my performance match up with those expectations or your interpretation?

SB: I’ve trained myself over the years never to come to the theatre to have my pre-existing expectations matched. It takes one out of the moment and focuses him more on the play in his head than the play on the stage. Besides, the last Lear I saw was at the RSC when I lived in the UK. Linus Roache was Edgar and Ralph Fiennes was Edmund. I remember not liking that one.

RK: Again, staying pretty general, what are the biggest challenges you see for an actor playing Edgar?

SB: Convincing the audience that he can be manipulated by Edmund and still be smart enough to do all that follows his manipulation. Also, tolerating the possible costume choices for Poor Tom.

RK: And how did I meet or miss those challenges?

SB: You knocked two out of the park. It appeared that Edmund’s greatest advantage was being able to talk faster than your Edgar could think. I ultimately decided that Edgar felt guilty about the way Edmund had been treated by their father and, to compensate, had developed boundary issues about saying “no” to Edmund.
RK: Specifically regarding my character voices, what did you observe about Edgar at the
beginning of the play and what did you think of Poor Tom’s voice, particularly during Edgar’s
“transformation moment” into that voice?

SB: The major difference I detected was that Edgar’s voice was less melodic than Poor Tom’s.
Staccato into legato would be two dynamic terms to describe the transition. I assumed (since it’s
impossible to truly know this about another actor’s work) that the bridge between your two voices
was the character’s emotional response to betrayal, abandonment and displacement.

RK: How about the “peasant” voice used on Gloucester and Albany late in the play? Did it
function? Was it distinct from the other voices?

SB: I remember thinking that it could have been better exploited for humor since the convention
of disguise and transformation had already been established.

RK: Finally, did you notice anything specific about the voice Edgar found in the final moments
of the play?

SB: Not really. I remember thinking that there was a sense of authority present for the purpose of
bringing the story to a close.

RK: In terms of my voice work through the whole play now, what did you hear regarding
consistency and growth of character arc?

SB: I appreciated your presence with regard to voice work. I believed that the task of acting more
than one person invited a quality of voice work that made the concept of “arc” more interesting to
explore. That one, specific adjustment of consciousness gave your work a very noticeable
increase in overall quality.

RK: As I move forward in my career, what do you think are the biggest lessons I should take
from my Lear experience in terms of personal successes and failures?

SB: Never let your voice become fixed in terms of a vocal identity. Allow it to remain as
malleable as water so that you can embrace and not resist change.
**RK:** Anything else I’ve forgotten that you want to touch on?

**SB:** Thank you for being in the program.
Ian Borden Interview Transcript

December 16, 2009

**Ian Borden:** I’m going to ask you a question to start. What were you happy with in your performance?

**Ryan Kathman:** Well, my two major goals were to be more emotionally open, more connected emotionally to this character and what he goes through, and the other goal was to have more spontaneity on stage and feel more like I was in the moment and not always quite so rehearsed. What I’m happy about is that I felt like I had several good moments of that through the run of the thing. I don’t think that I was consistent and that every night was great in that way or that I was in those places throughout the entire show, but I had moments where I really felt like I got there. And the other thing for the character itself was all that stuff you read in my thesis and the arc of the guy starting from this place of being kind of the playboy, lush guy and getting to a place where we believe him as the king. This is what I really want everyone’s feedback on but, for me, I was really happy that Virginia supported that idea and that we were able to, at least on paper, do the things I wanted to in order to convey that. How well it worked, I don’t know but, you know, I was glad were able to do what I was hoping in terms of actions.

**IB:** Actually I would say you were very successful at communicating Edgar’s journey. To the point that it actually almost became more about Edgar than Lear. Edgar’s journey was more clearly defined, and it’s partly the way Virginia directed it. The moments of connection, I think you were successful in getting some of those in there, but remember nobody’s connected all the time, in and out, in every show, unless they’re insane. I mean it’s almost impossible for the run of a show to be perfect. That’s where the technique comes in. And you have those moments, you know, when you’re doing a beautiful job, when you go, “Hey, it’s going great tonight.” And that’s the moment it’s gone. And then the technique comes back in. And you always have strong
Now one of the things you wanted me to talk about is the physical side of it. I saw less of what I call “Ryan schtick”. I think I’ve asked you about pantomime blanche?

**RK:** Yeah, you’ve talked to me about that.

**IB:** You know, where you do little physical indications and you’re very good at it. And it’s probably something you learned somewhere along the way that kept getting you work. There was less of that. And there were some really nice moments when you were doing Poor Tom, especially when your father came in, of losing the Tom physicality, suddenly being as Edgar, and then recovering. Some of them were a little “hammer on the head” moments, but some of them were beautifully subtle. So I enjoyed that. Remember I saw dress rehearsal and I saw second week. I think some of the things you did in dress rehearsal had more clarity than what you did in the second week. And I think that was a universal thing for the company. Other actors sort of got into playing what had happened before instead of being in that moment. I think you were less guilty of that, but it’s so easy to do. And you know, the next night I might have come back and it might have been all refreshed again. I’m not sure. So that’s not too much of a worry.

**RK:** It’s funny you mention the pantomime blanche because I was specifically thinking about that – the scene where it really came to mind was the Dover scene when I’m talking to someone who I know is blind, but I’m describing all of this stuff and I want the audience to get it but there’s no reason to be saying, “A ship!” (making sailing motion with hand) So I started from a place of not doing any of it and it was nice because Edgar has no reason to. But then as we went through rehearsal Virginia made one comment at one point about not really getting what I’m describing, so then I started to put only what I thought was really helpful, just a couple things. But it was good to limit myself like that because otherwise I think I would have been like, “The fishermen that are walking upon the beach!” (making finger-walking gesture)

**IB:** Right. So that’s good instinct. I mean, you have a nice voice, you’re really quite strong vocally. I think you could allow yourself more vocal range, pitch-wise particularly, and
occasionally I still hear the cloudiness, but you’re very expressive vocally. You’re very audibly clear, you have the skills with annunciation that’re automatic so you don’t have to focus on that. So I think you can trust that more and more. That’s probably a good discovery, that you can trust that more and more. Here’s part of the problem doing Shakespeare, particularly for the audience here, which is so much the 112 students: they have no vocabulary. It’s not that they don’t get the words that are 400 years out of date, they don’t get at least a third of the words because they’ve never heard them before. And these are basic words for most of us who are regular readers.

RK: Yeah, believe me, from reading the 112 papers –

IB: It’s quite shocking, isn’t it?

RK: Yeah. Not only does everyone think it’s “old English”, but everyone thought we had accents. And I gave some of them credit because I think some actors had such an affected speech that it really sounded like an accent.

IB: That’s what I’m talking about, focusing so much on the enunciation and all they heard was this different sound and it’s not how people actually talk. That’s what was going on with that, I think. How’d you feel about the fights?

RK: Good and disappointed in different ways. As far as Daniel and I went, what I really enjoyed was that once we had the thing blocked, he and I worked it and we tried to concentrate, at least in a couple rehearsals on breaking it up moment to moment and the tempo of the thing, and I think we found some good stuff. We came up with the end sequence, the kind of ridiculous jumping off the platform. That whole kill sequence was ours and we were just trying to come up with something exciting. But now hearing some of the reviews of that I kind of have mixed feelings about it. I was disappointed that the last fight was daggers to start off with. I ended up enjoying it a lot because I’ve never really done a knife fight so it was fun to do a long extended knife fight like that. But I felt that the fact that we had swords on us, the formality of it – I felt like the whole story was kind of lost as to why we used knives.
IB: Yeah, it didn’t make sense to go to that. The tempo and shaping of the fight was good. The rest of it was shit. And I can break down a lot of what was going on with that. If you think of a fight as being physical lines of dialogue, you’re past the place where words work and you’re now ready to kill somebody or hurt them badly. You’re emotions have gotten to that place or the situation has driven you, as in this case, where you have to fight. Words are no longer working. If Hamlet can go, “Hey Laertes, sorry about that.” “Oh, that’s OK Hamlet”, we have a different play. So what you guys did in that sense of physicalized dialogue was do a lot of mumbling and half-hearted delivery. Now, it won’t work for the recording but I have to kind of show you a few things. I don’t have any daggers so we’ll just use pens because pens work beautifully. So let’s just go out in the hallway here. *(Exit to the hallway outside Ian’s office where Ian explains and demonstrates how we weren’t reaching with our attacks enough to tell the story of the fight.)*

RK: *(As we re-enter the office)* That’s interesting because I kept pushing us closer together.

IB: Every fight was too close.

RK: That’s interesting because I wanted that danger to be there but, I agree with you now, I think the reaching is what was missing.

IB: Well, you can still be this close *(demonstrates distance)* and then it turns into a different kind of fight. Or it reaches in and then it closes up and expands again. So that’s where you guys lost connection is that absolute total physical intention. The clarity of physical intention. So if you can remember one thing with that, that’s the thing to remember. And if you had been there the whole fight, then [the jump at the end] would have been a wonderful climax. Because it was a great moment, it was a great picture you guys were creating. Don’t feel bad about that. Why people thought it was kind of hokey was because you guys weren’t physically, absolutely invested before that point, so that it becomes a logical next step. “I’ve gotta do something so extreme so I can kill this guy.” And you were the guy who did the double punch from the ground?

RK: Yeah.
IB: OK, because all I got there was – (demonstrates a weak punch). That’s how it read. There was nothing behind it. And again that’s you finding a way to sell from the ground that you’re punching him hard enough – you guys lost the dance a little bit. So it’s what I call physical mumbling. Does that make sense?

RK: Yeah, absolutely. I had one student say about the punches, “I could tell that he was stopping his fist an inch short of actually hitting him.”

IB: Were you?

RK: No!

IB: Yeah, I didn’t think so.

RK: But I think what you’re saying verifies that. I was absolutely making contact –

IB: Yeah, I heard it. You just didn’t have the physicality behind it.

RK: Yeah.

IB: It’s just a little moment that needed that extra bit of technique. But consider what you did pretty much eminently successful. And I think you’ve already recognized some of the things that you want to work on. Don’t beat yourself up about not being absolutely emotionally invested in every single moment. The fact is you got some great ones. The other thing that I think is very difficult in that space is that Edgar addresses the audience a lot. And those addresses are designed to be to the audience which is all around the stage in close proximity, and all of a sudden, you’re doing this: “Edgar I nothing am-am-am-am!” (echo effect) And it was really interesting, that was the one line I think that changed the most. In the dress you were doing it as Poor Tom, and that was one of the things I suggested to Virginia. That moment is, “My life has changed.” Next time I saw it, it was much clearer there.

RK: Yeah, she passed that note on and I liked it too. I think the decision to do it the way I did at first was coming out of my concern that people need to remember the voice. I don’t come back as
Poor Tom for a while and I wanted to make sure people remember this characterization and recognize me when I come back sort of thing.

**IB:** We recognized you. The other thing that I think was a costume mistake was in the scene where you’re leading your father to the shore, you’re already dressed again. I know that’s there in the script [the old man brings Edgar garments] but, what we got was, you got a new set of clothes, he didn’t. “Oh, look clothes, they fit me. I’ll put them on.” I would have cut her line because what I wanted to see, knowing this play so well, was you in penury, your father in penury, Lear in penury. All three of you together. And then out of that you guys, like phoenixes, to arise again.

**RK:** Yeah, if I had my druthers it would have been a change of clothes so I wouldn’t have been in the rags or the toga exactly but they would have still been very much peasant clothes. And what I had didn’t read as peasant-like at all to me. So I would have preferred a little more clothing because that was the important thing Gloucester was saying, “Help cover this guy.” But they didn’t have to be nice duds.

**IB:** Yeah, it didn’t read quite as well as it could have. Do you have specific questions for me?

**RK:** Well you’ve covered a lot. One thing I was curious about was your initial thoughts about the character from your reading and productions you’ve seen. So what did you think about Edgar coming into it and then the follow-up would be how did what you saw from me match up and differ from that?

**IB:** What I hadn’t considered before was the dissolute Edgar to begin and the journey it takes for him to be regal and kingly, and that was a nice change. And I thought you did that extraordinarily well. I don’t think I could imagine the play without that now. So that was super and probably the most successful thing in the play to me. … Sometimes he comes out with a stick up his ass from the very beginning. “I am the good son.”
RK: The other thing in terms of movement, I guess, is I’d love to talk briefly even more about the three different characterizations. Specifically Poor Tom, which is probably the biggest physical risk that I’ve tried to take since I’ve been here. So I’m always eager to hear how it pans out.

IB: Physically, you almost had your everyday body for the first person and that’s that little bit of slouching you have. Sort of the standard American in his twenties. And then [for Poor Tom] there was sort of a rolling forward, a covering and the hands were actually sort of a shielding, you know, “This is my space, fuck off.” Did you model that on any sort of crazies or beggars you saw?

RK: Yeah, a little, you know more of it came from the research, reading about who Shakespeare may have had in mind in terms of the people who were at Bedlam hospital and how it was like a zoo. People would go and watch them and they were entertaining and different doctors recorded symptoms that they were seeing and it was a lot of the cliché stuff you think about in terms of seeing things that aren’t there and talking to people that aren’t there. Also a lot of animalistic, self-protection, keep away from me but then manic changes too.

IB: There were a couple of nice moments of that. If I had been directing I would have put you in a little less extreme physicality, I would have brought you back maybe about 20 percent. But that’s my vision not Virginia’s vision. But it was clear. The things you were doing were sharp, particularly those moments of when your father came in and you became Edgar again. I saw those. I don’t know if other people did, but those were there. The covering of the face, there was some nice stuff. And it looked like you sort of brought a new body out with a much more raised chest, more of a centered body for that third position. So, yeah, I think you were successful in creating those three things. The one thing I would say though, talking about wanting the audience to recognize you, if you have done your job right as Edgar at the beginning, and we see the beginning of the stripping away, we will recognize you. I mean you have a really nice presence
on stage. It’s not, you know, “Look at me!” You’re not a Natasha Richardson light-drinker. I couldn’t take my eyes off her when I saw her do Closer. But you are there, you’re in character, you’re clear, you’re doing everything solidly from the moment you’re just behind the curtain and getting on the stage. So you never have to worry about that. We recognize you. We’ll follow you.

RK: So as I’m done with Lear and moving forward now, what would you identify from your perspective as being the lessons I could take from this experience in terms of failures, successes, whatever?

IB: Trust your simplicity. I don’t think you’ve ever quite trusted that you can be simple out there and be engaging. Remember last year I had that thing where I said, “You’re good. And I think sometimes you worry about being entertaining.” You have the capacity to be fucking awesome. To be profound. You’ve got so much in your skill set that if you really start to find those moments of simple, absolute connection and involvement in the play, you can really hit stuff out of the park. You should have a career doing these great mature, physical big tough guys. I mean, you could be Coriolanus. Now, really getting that sense of soldier, you might want to work on your physicality a little bit. You’re soft right now. It’s not that you’re not strong just a little more weight than you’d want to be working in Hollywood, shall we say. On the other hand, you’re human and actually have a relationship and a life outside of here to have much gym time because of too many projects. So, that would be the thing. You might want to just settle down and focus on yourself. I sometimes wish that there was another person closer to who you are in your class who would have pushed you a little bit more. But I mean, I’ve seen you in auditions, you know how to prepare for an audition. You can go further with that. But you definitely have the skills to have a successful if not very successful professional career and there are some of us who really hope that’s what you do.

RK: Thanks, Ian. I really appreciate it.
**Steve Buhler Interview Transcript**

**December 18, 2009**

**Ryan Kathman:** First I just wanted to know what night did you see the show?

**Steve Buhler:** It was the last Friday.

**RK:** Well, to begin with, what were some thoughts you had about Edgar going into the play from your knowledge of it and productions you’ve seen?

**SBu:** Well, I’ve seen Edgar done a range of ways. The ones that I find most interesting are the ones that have him in some ways not that far removed from Edmund in the beginning. That he’s a flawed, sometimes deeply flawed individual. And that usually goes with the sense that, well, they’re their father’s sons; Gloucester, who’s a deeply flawed individual. And I’ve seen him as the kind of naïve sort of easy gull. And there’s some reason for that because that’s what Edmund says but Edmund isn’t always the best judge of other people’s character. And I was particularly interested in seeing what you would do with the theatricality of Edgar’s role where he has to become a performer. He has to put on different roles, he has to become an actor. Especially in that superb moment where he’s kind of an early modern actor where everything happens just as he says with the abortive suicide attempt. And also I was interested in how this production would handle the conclusion. Is Edgar willing to take on the responsibility or is he simply resigned to it? And of course when you have both the Quarto and the Folio to work with, is it going to be the one where Albany’s the remaining king so let’s let him do the summing up. So, because of the textual history, the stage history, there are always surprises that come up because people have to make decisions when they mount this play.

**RK:** So the obvious follow-up is how did you feel what you saw matched up with those expectations or interpretations?
**SBu:** Well, I think you tackled the problem of Edgar’s readiness pretty nicely by presenting him as part of the problem. Those that are closest to Lear really are not disciplined. Lear thinks that he’s the great exception to everything and that extends to the people that he likes and prefers. And I think you did a very nice job of suggesting that, when the accusation is made, “Does he hang out with the riotous knights?” Well, yeah he does. You may have noticed in my comments on your initial notes that I was more interested in, not so much impaired judgment just from the drinking but more impaired judgment from where he thinks it’s a good idea to hang out with Lear’s mob. And I think you did that ultimately.

**RK:** Yeah, back when we first found out our roles and I re-read the play, that line, Regan’s line, is the one that stood out to me. And I know there’s obviously been productions where either that’s cut and not dealt with or –

**SBu:** Or she’s just lying.

**RK:** Yeah. She’s lying and Edmund goes along with it because they both have agendas of sorts. But looking at it there’s really no reason for her to be lying about Edgar at that point. She wants to point out the knights are riotous and we hate the knights, but there’s no reason for her necessarily to alliance against Edgar at this point. Edmund obviously would jump onto it –

**SBu:** And does. But then as it turns out, you presented evidence that, yeah, Edgar’s part of the problem and Lear has not been a very conscientious leader.

**RK:** Right, and I’d even love to see it taken a step further that when Lear comes back from hunting that Edgar’s there with the group and that he’s really part of the knights.

**SBu:** You’d have to sort of rearrange some of the scenes.

**RK:** Right, because just before that Edmund’s like, “Get out of here.” But I’d love to see that messed with somehow. I mean, Edmund says something like, “He’s too noble to see other people doing him wrong,” but, you know, he can be that and still be fun-loving.
SBu: Yes, and accomplished and capable. I mean, this is an individual who’s able to face the, perhaps not great challenge of Oswald, but the definite challenge of Edmund in single combat. And again, different versions stage that where it’s just dumb luck that Edgar survives but there’s no need to go that route.

RK: So were there any things that you saw that really didn’t meet up with what you were thinking or expecting or didn’t work?

SBu: As I mentioned before I was kind of intrigued by how you as an actor would play Edgar the actor. And yet there seemed to be some moments when the approach to theatricality seemed a bit schticky. There were some “Ryanisms.” “I remember when Ryan gave this look to the audience.” And that’s partly deeply unfair because I’ve seen you lots of times. And I thought, oh I wish he had shared that with us in a different way. There is this kind of nice self-effacing manner that you have in life as well as on stage. And yet given the approach that you were taking to the character that didn’t quite fit in with the sort of rough and tumble hell-raiser. They would have been better suited to the naïve Edgar that you were rejecting. Those were the kinds of moments – and there weren’t a lot of them – but occasionally when you were reacting to being found by others in your Poor Tom guise the way that you brought the audience in to your predicament I thought, “OK, you got the laugh but, you know, there might have been other ways of making that connection with the audience.” But part of that was the whole production, how madness was presented as humorous to us and therefore humorous to the people in the world of the play. You and Gloucester were entertained by the mad Lear. Which is why many of your lines that talk about how horrible that is got cut. I mean, you kept some of them, but nevertheless. Some of that I think may have affected your own approach to Poor Tom’s madness, instead of pivoting on that humor and finding it the more shocking and shameful. But again it’s difficult, we don’t have the same kind of early modern sense of it as hilarious and shameful simultaneously. We just don’t. So it’s very, very challenging for present-day productions and performers. I also noticed that a lot of the
lines that could be played more for laughs in Edmund’s role were cut because this production didn’t want a terribly funny or charming Edmund, because that was being done by other roles. It was being done by you, it was being done by the mad Lear.

**RK:** That brings up another question that I was going to ask later but I’ll ask now. In terms of the text and what we kept and what we didn’t, were there things that you missed or things that particularly struck you as, “Oh, that’s a good cut,” you know what I mean? … That’s getting really specific.

**SBu:** It is and for the most part I wasn’t sure that they were good cuts. Edmund’s sneer of legitimate kids being conceived twixt sleep and wake got cut. And the wonderful building of the confrontation building between Kent and Cornwall with, “What’s the argument?” “Well, I don’t like his face.” To not have the kind of chest bumping from Cornwall and Kent to where Kent finally says, “Oh what the hell, I don’t like the looks of any of you,” to just have Kent jump to that, it was problematic to me.

**RK:** Yeah, I hear you. And yet it was almost a three-hour show.

**SBu:** Oh, exactly. I mean you’ve got to make some cuts. But there were some jumps and leaps that I found somewhat curious. That applied less to your role. But there were places where I was puzzled.

**RK:** So now, just in terms of delivery, especially in moments of soliloquy, how did you feel about how I handled the verse and scansion and rhythm?

**SBu:** With the verse you were confident, it did not come across either as artificial or as purely naturalistic. I think you showed the evidence of years and years of work and learning how to make use of the verse as one of you primary tools as an actor doing Shakespeare. Your lines were deliberate. Your voice was able to manage some of the acoustical challenges of the set. I mean, I love Pat [Vendetti], but I don’t think that was an ideal space for the show. And especially as people went further up those steps, the voices simply disappeared up above and didn’t quite come
out to where we were. And you were one of the few that consistently made the adjustment where we got to hear. There was a clarity in your delivery of the lines that was impressive given the kind of physical challenges.

**RK:** So in terms of understanding now, in sort of a broader sense, following me throughout the play, how well were you able to follow what I was saying and how well did the meaning come across?

**SBu:** The meaning came across very, very well and was particularly impressive given the kind of really effective emotional overlays to different lines. I mean your Edgar really did learn lessons about compassion very, very powerfully. Part of it was kind of the approach of the whole production to the Fool and to have you anticipate Lear with Cordelia with your cradling of the Fool and your own affective response to these developments and to have you communicate those capacities for empathy and compassion in your character without losing the clarity of the lines was impressive.

**RK:** Great. You know from reading my research that Edgar learning lessons was very important to me. And with the Fool thing, I don’t know if you heard that our adjudicator, who I thought gave a really great response to us, said it had been a long time since he’d read the play said he was kind of freaking out saying, “Have I forgotten that the Fool gets killed? Did I miss that?” It doesn’t have a whole lot to do with me other than I was a big part of that scene and it changed –

**SBu:** Yeah, what are the consequences of choosing to do that?

**RK:** My whole opening of our second act was altered severely, my soliloquy after Lear and Kent leave [after Lear killed the Fool] was altered significantly. So how did you feel that whole thing worked?

**SBu:** Some of my colleagues were not very pleased with it. But I know of several productions, I’ve seen one and read about others, where the Fool is a casualty of Lear’s insanity. That makes more sense with a scarier Lear. This production didn’t really provide a scary Lear. And I think
that led to it not being convincing to some folks. Similar to – I’m sorry, you heard the laughs –
the knife-wielding women, because there wasn’t a context for that. I know the production was
aiming at some startling moments. But there are some startling moments where you can look back
and say, “Oh, that was really set up though. I shouldn’t have been surprised.” And that was a
surprise that wasn’t wrong in and of itself, it just wasn’t prepared for. I think that was one of the
reasons why it didn’t work as much. I didn’t have as hard a time with it because I know about the
stage history. I think the one that was closest to what you guys did was the Royal Shakespeare
Company production with [Michael] Gambon as Lear and [Antony] Sher as the Fool but I think
in that case it was more of his neck getting snapped kind of thing, which is of course what would
happen with a massive figure like Gambon.

**RK:** So kind of a Lennie from *Of Mice and Men* kind of thing.

**SBU:** Yes. And I saw another production where Lear didn’t directly kill the Fool but the Fool dies
of exposure.

**RK:** Yeah, I’ve read that a lot too. So one thing specifically that I’m interested in hearing about
because it was a big challenge for me were the Poor Tom scenes and his mad rambles, you could
call them. A lot of them were cut and I expected that. I went in figuring these things would be
really short.

**SBU:** And I saw that this was a survival strategy. It’s very clear, “I need to do this, this is the one
way I can survive is if there’s no trace of me and if I just assume this and do it well enough, I can
buy time.” And there’s the old early modern artificial fool, and then there’s the natural fool. You
put on the natural fool but you’re not one, you’re artificial and then you discover just like an
allowed fool that you can use that position to provide commentary. So it was just lovely that
when Lear is starting to critique his own past rule, you were able to jump in just as much as the
Fool was able to jump in. And I also thought coming through at the very end and becoming the
“zuthern” man, all of that was good. Although I have to say, because of the nature of the project, I
wish the production had not gone Napoleonic or, if it had, that poor characters’ clothing looked poorer. It made you wonder how this poor woman had a set of clothes that nice for you to put on. Or, “Gee, is that the best Kent can do in terms of dressing down?”

**RK:** Yeah, as I said with Ian, it’s helpful for what Edgar has to do for him to be more clothed for the end of the play, but it doesn’t mean he has to look like a gentleman again. Now, we’ve touched on a lot of this already but were there any specific interpretation decisions on my part that stood out to you either because you enjoyed them or disagreed with them?

**SBu:** Well, I’ll jump to the end. The self-coronation was a little bit at odds with the way you were playing or at least the way your voice was negotiating. Kind of, “OK, if nobody else will do it, I will.” And yet, I don’t know, there seemed to be a kind of eagerness in the way Edgar was accepting the crown. Visually it was like somehow Edgar is being rewarded because he has endured all of this. He is now ready to be a better ruler than Lear was. All of that. And he feels, “OK, I’ve got to step up, I’ve got to pull everything back together again, and I’m ready for this.” And that was not the way your Edgar was feeling. And so there was a little bit of dissonance.

**RK:** It’s good to get that response because I can say that that ultimately was a choice. It was a combination of Virginia and me, I think, but in terms of the movement, that really was Virginia. But I guess in a way I was shooting for dissonance to a certain degree. That he’s kind of forced into the crown by Albany, he’s going to offer it to Kent, Kent’s going to say, “Nope, no way”, and so, after a desperate look around, the realization that, “It’s me, but I don’t want to, but it’s what we need right now, but I’m …”. So I’m glad that it came across that I was reluctant and not eager. But to actually put it on, that was certainly a final image that Virginia wanted, the crown on someone’s head.

**SBu:** And for me, though, what seemed problematic to me might have been solved if you had put the crown on after the speech. So it’s like, “I’ve gotta talk myself to the point of [accepting this].” And then you would have the image and it’d be like, “OK, he is stepping up, yet …”
RK: Yeah, absolutely. Well, wrapping up here, in terms of a character arc, what did you see Edgar do?

SBu: I saw a child of privilege and somebody very comfortable being only a child of privilege. Not because of a personal flaw or lack of development but because this is how the older generation has presented the perks of nobility and aristocracy. Here is somebody learning that there are alternative approaches, that there are actual responsibilities that most aristocrats don’t accept, perhaps, but that really should be accepted. You suggested the possibility for the kind of rule that Lear himself realizes that, “Oh shit, I should have been doing this instead of what I was doing.” And you provided kind of a parallel learning process for the audience: “OK, I will be this caretaker, I will take on my responsibilities and I will actually fulfill the ancient social contract that, I will receive all these perks but, in order to earn them, although I don’t have to, I will provide these services to the nation and the people of the nation.” So that’s the kind of arc that I saw, somebody who is very much interested in his own rights, and somebody who is gradually brought to a sense of individual empathy and a kind of social responsibility.

RK: All right, well the last thing I wanted to ask was, as I’m moving forward and coming away from this, what do you think are the lessons I should take away from this as an actor; personal successes and failures that might help me in the future?

SBu: Well, I think seeing you tackle this role in this way makes me think that as an actor you need to continue thinking in terms of the big roles. I’m seeing an Antony and probably somebody who doesn’t learn those kinds of lessons, I’m thinking Coriolanus.

RK: Ian said the same thing, actually. Coriolanus.

SBu: But I would say, perhaps, as you tackle these roles, you might want to be aware at some point in the process that there are shortcuts that you don’t need to take. Again, there were some occasional moments where, “OK, Ryan wants us on his side. He’s doing it the way that he did it
in other shows. And he could have done that differently.” That was fine with Sir Hugh [Evans from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*].

**RK:** It’s very similar to what Ian said. The way he put it was simplicity. Just trusting in simple presence.

**SBU:** From within the situation not importing things that have worked elsewhere.

**RK:** Yeah, I absolutely do that. So the last thing then is just, anything I’ve forgotten to mention?

**SBU:** Nope, I think we’ve covered it.

**RK:** Thanks, Steve.
Virginia Smith E-mail Interview

February 24, 2010

Ryan Kathman: What are some of your initial thoughts about Edgar that you have just from your reading of the play and past productions you've seen (in other words, what was your take on the character prior to seeing our production)?

Virginia Smith: I remember thinking of him as more of a wraith. When he is forced to run, he becomes almost a haunt, reacting to a world that's out of control rather than a world that he has any control over. Finally beginning the journey to reluctant hero after her realizes that he does have some control over the fate of his father, by tricking him to live.

RK: In general how did my performance match up with those expectations or your interpretation? 
VS: When I cast you I knew that I wouldn't get a wraith. You are earth and light, not water and wind. Since I always cast the people who I would be most interested to watch on the journey that was fine with me. I enjoyed the exploration that we took together with the rest of the cast.

RK: And how did it differ?

VS: By the end who can remember the original thoughts, we created a beautiful production of King Lear by pooling our individual gifts. I'm much more interested in that than recreating the vision in my brain.

RK: Again, staying pretty general, what were the biggest challenges you see for an actor playing Edgar?

VS: Edgar is most difficult as Poor Tom, as he leads the audience through the story using the antiquated language and obscure allusions. Making us hope for his success whatever that may be, at the same time worrying about the King and how this won't just be a distraction.

RK: And how did I meet or miss this challenge?
VS: I think you met it, by being really specific in your choices. For example, making "do de, do de, do de" mean something. And it means something to me now that when I repeat it – it still resonates. Working in that specificity is an excellent tool, and you use it well. If you had not worked out the meaning of the language, what it was intending to communicate, how it built relationship and furthered intention, we would have worked that out together in the rehearsal process. I prefer to work the way you do. Having the actor bring in the world that they have concocted, and I will interpret the world and help shape it. I think this process worked quite well for us on King Lear.

RK: With the unique perspective of watching my process unfold through rehearsals, at what points were you concerned about the character and at what point did you think I was going in the right direction?

VS: I was never concerned. There is a waiting and watching and nudging process at work. I can see when something feels wrong as you're doing it and I know that will probably change. I can also see when a tactic doesn't work with the other players and I probably will see that revised. I almost always want to see things ripen, unless choice is really off what I think is going on. We had a pretty similar idea about the important aspects of the character. I enjoyed watching the details accumulate, but I was always herding you in the right direction.

RK: How did you feel you and I collaborated in the process and what can I do to better my communication with directors?

VS: Probably because we've worked together before, we know each other's preferences. I care about pictures, and the play of movement throughout the whole piece, you want to cover the whole stage in every scene. I want to see the characters unfold in a journey that makes a powerful statement. So do you. I think you do well at communicating with directors. Though, I'm not sure how you'd do if someone really disagreed with you and tried to put you in a box that seems wrong to you. Best resign.
RK: How well did I handle the verse and how well could you understand what I was saying?

VS: Quite well in both instances. Tom was the only one who could get hard to understand. Playing the false voice and madness in the dark with thunder sometimes is tricky. I think you were right and facing forward will make some audience members miss some language.

RK: How well did you feel I handled the various iterations of Edgar's physical characterization?

VS: Again, I think you did well. Your choice to make him a happy-go-lucky dallier in the beginning gave you lots of opportunity for becoming taller and broader as the responsibility of your nobility became clearer. Rounding your shoulders and making yourself smaller as Tom was also successful as a physical characterization. I especially appreciated the quickness of Tom. That probably surprised me the most about the work you brought in. I hadn't expected him to be so light on his feet. Perhaps lead feet would have added to the tragedy, but it wouldn't have added to our production. I thought it was very effective. You had the most problem with the man who finds Gloucester after his apparent miracle landing at the base of the cliffs of Dover. You needed to continue to mask your physical identity from others who knew you, but also to mask your voice from your father. I didn't offer much help but I think this persona might have been more clear. We might have helped you some with a costume piece or pieces when you were setting up the duel with Albany, but that wasn't something I actually thought of until writing this. Your journey as a whole worked very satisfactorily, however. I was pleased with how your story unfolded.

RK: How well did you feel I handled the various iterations of Edgar's vocal characterization?

VS: This answer is very similar to the one above. I approved of all your vocal choices and found them each to be effective, except for the same last disguise. I know you offered me a number of voices that I rejected, because I wanted this last disguise to be the closest to the noble Edgar. It wasn't completely successful, but as I said above, I think I could have helped you more. Perhaps as an actor you should remember that sometimes another element of the production can help to
solve a problem. If it had been darker, if you'd had a hood, or even a hat, one of the voices you'd offered might have worked better.

All in all, Ryan an excellent example of research, rehearsal process and performance!
Conclusion

When I began this process, I set out to explore and discover what I could in Edgar, while pushing myself to risk more as an actor and be more emotionally open on stage. I’m happy to report that, while I would still like to have gone further in these areas – and certainly ran into some obstacles along the way – I feel like in many ways I achieved my goals for this role and feel content with the performance delivered.

In the end what I have enjoyed about Edgar is that, for all his manic character shifts – particularly with the interpretation I layered on him for the beginning of the play – he is ultimately a kind of “everyman” character. Edgar is not only who we hope we would be if placed in his situation, but, in my eyes, he is also a deeply flawed youth who overcomes impossible odds to emerge a stronger, wiser man ready to lead. Who doesn’t enjoy both an underdog and coming-of-age story?

I know from this experience that I still have plenty of room to grow as a performer. I hope to continue to hone my concentration and focus on stage, as well as my physical and vocal control. I made strides in these areas with Edgar, but those strides also helped reveal to me how much further I’d like to go. The experience has given me a much deeper appreciation for Shakespeare and cemented my belief that classic literature can still touch and change modern audiences.

Finally, I’ve come to discover more about myself as a person through this exploration of Edgar. Some of our striking similarities are our occasionally over-willingness to trust others, our penchant for using metaphorical masks to disguise our true selves (particularly when times are tough) and, ultimately, our ability and desire to lead. In other words, I leave this process believing – to paraphrase a line – “Edgar I something am.” And always will be.
Appendix A

Bibliography: Works Consulted


Appendix B

Media Reviews

Review: University Theatre offers impressive 'Lear'

By Larry L. Kubert/For the Lincoln Journal Star | Posted: Thursday, November 19, 2009 11:45 pm

One of the finer more recent productions of a Shakespearean play is playing the University Theatre stage.

In “King Lear” — Shakespeare’s homily to the bane of greed, power and ambition — director Virginia Smith, her cast and crew have produced an effort that smacks of intensity.

Immediately impressive is Patric Vendetti’s monolithic, multtiered set design, which both channels the viewer’s eye and allows for a variety of playing areas.

The technical side is further magnified by Angela Sharman’s impressive lighting and Max Holm’s well-suited sound.

But the tragedy would be little without a strong Lear. In this production, Equity actor Steven Patterson crafts a title character whose declining mental stability is presented with deliberation and delineation.

Patterson’s Lear is a compilation of emotions, organized and dispensed with tightly measured skill.

The university production also possesses a trove of superb performances from its major supporting cast.

Robie Hayek is excellent as Kent, offering a controlled nontraditional image of a heroic figure.

Initially less pleasing is Ryan Kathman’s Edgar, but by the second act, the actor’s intent of character growth is demonstrated.

Equally accomplished are Sam Hartley (Gloucester), Trent Stork (Fool), Daniel Gilbert (Edmund), Kyle Broussard (Cornwall) and Tiffney Baker (Regan).

The University Theatre performance of “King Lear” is a majestic and masterful effort.
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Review of 'King Lear' at the University Theatre
By Sarah F. Sullivan

Considered by many to be one of William Shakespeare's greatest works, King Lear was definitely given its due on the stage of the Howell Theatre in UNL's Temple Building Thursday night.

The classic play revolves around two noble families, families whose children keep their treachery and greed close to the chest and disguise it as loyalty. Lear (masterfully played by guest Actors’ Equity Association Actor Steven Patterson), King of Britain, prepares to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. The daughter who shows the most love for him will receive the largest portion of the land.

While daughters Goneril (Beth King) and Regan (Tiffney Baker) gush and spout off empty words, Cordelia (Lucy Lockamy), her father's favorite, chooses to speak honestly. It is a meager attempt in contrast with her sister's fine speeches and Lear is so angered that he disinherits Cordelia and divides the kingdom between his two silver-tongued daughters. Lear quickly realizes that the daughter he cast off was the one who truly loved him and through a series of events, quickly descends into madness.

Alongside this plot are the events surrounding the Earl of Gloucester (Sam Hartley) and his two sons, Edgar (Ryan Kathman) and Edmund (Daniel Gilbert). Edmund, Gloucester's vengeful illegitimate son, quickly rises in the ranks as he betrays both his father and brother in order to gain their positions and power, spinning a web of treachery and lies around them both.

Shakespeare is a tricky craft to master. It requires a great deal of talent to confidently deliver the dialogue and emotions so that even those in the audience who have never seen Shakespeare will understand what you're saying. In addition, timing is everything and casts easily run the risk of dragging a piece down without it. King Lear has both an extremely talented cast and impeccable timing. Though the play ran a solid two and a half hours, it flew by, thanks to the sound acting presented by the cast and smooth, well-timed transitions that easily maintained the pace of the piece.

The set, designed by Patric Vendetti, is an impressive one. Imposing gray and brown stone steps extended upwards with excellent symmetry, giving it the illusion of great height. Its only flaw seemed to be that the sound didn't carry so well
from the very top of the stairs. Often the actors’ voices were slightly muted when standing in that place. However, it seemed less noticeable in the second act.

Though the entire cast put forth very strong performances, there were standouts among them. Trent Stork as Lear’s Fool was a joy to watch, especially as he bounced and danced easily up and down those stairs without even a fumble. Completely immersed in the part, Stork joked and teased the cast unmercifully, putting forth some amazing facial expressions in the process. Robie Hayek offered a jocular and resilient Duke of Kent, while Beth King and Tiffney Baker delivered wonderfully wicked performances as Lear’s greedy daughters.

Daniel Gilbert pulled off a malicious and scheming Edmund—his monologues throughout the play displayed a real connection with both the character and the audience. Ryan Kathman was equally impressive as brother Edgar, moving easily from cheery nobleman to a convincing madman.

And of course, there is King Lear. Steven Patterson brilliantly led the cast and his delivery was both consistent and painstakingly crafted. Patterson was just as comfortable as a sane Lear as he was when the king descended into madness. It is obvious by the second act that Patterson’s Lear is at ease in his insanity, lounging on the stage in his cape of greenery, proudly wearing his crown of woven flowers and ferns. It was a truly excellent performance.

In closing, this show is one that must be seen by both Shakespeare fans and people who aren’t usually crazy about it. Director Virginia Smith wrote in the program,

“It is my hope that the journey has made you think or caused a discussion or has touched your heart.”

King Lear definitely fulfills those hopes and in some ways, exceeds them.

The show will be presented in a split run, due to the Thanksgiving holiday, November 19-20 & December 2, 3, 4, 5 at 7:30 p.m. and November 22 at 2:00 p.m. in Howell Theatre, first floor Temple Building, 12th & R streets.

Tickets are $16, $14 seniors and UNL faculty and staff and $10 for students. Tickets are available at the Lied Center Ticket Office, 301 N. 12th Street, 11:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday through Friday and one hour prior to performances in Temple Theatre’s Lobby.
UNL’s ‘King Lear’ enjoyed by few

By Noah Ballard

Published: Friday, November 20, 2009
Updated: Friday, November 20, 2009

“King Lear” is Shakespeare, which makes it long and boring, right? I mean, probably.

I don’t feel like I have to defend Shakespeare. I’m pretty certain he’s made his mark and is generally regarded as a genius. But as a college audience, nobody seems to respect or agree with this member of the theater canon.

The lighting designer for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s production of the tragedy could have left the work lights on for as many cell phones that were out and about, lighting the audience as well as the stage with their extreme presence.

The sound designer could have left all those thunder noises out, the audience took care of it with post-H1N1 hacks and moans and the restlessness of not being able to go the bars as earlier as planned.

Hell, the actors didn’t really have to say anything, really. Most of the audience was so preoccupied with their own conversations and mini-dramas that Shakespeare was the least of their worries.

(At one point, an audience member – whose sticker on his flat-billed baseball cap kept catching the light in a distracting manner – who was bored with all the text messaging he’d been occupied with and announced, “I have no idea what this play is about,” slapped five with his bro sitting next to him and walked out about 45 minutes in.)
Take that, Shakespeare, with your theater defining dramatics and your drama of... whatever! I have far more important things to worry about, like pre-gaming for the game on Saturday (it's already Thursday for heaven's sake!) and making sure my friends have secured the answers for my French test tomorrow and making sure my girlfriend is primed and ready for me to saunter home from O Street ready to do work.

Who cares if theater is supposed to be a break from our sad realities, a momentary displacement from our consciousness into a magical world? This is supposed to be entertaining, people!

"King Lear," now playing at the Howell Theatre in the Temple Building, will never be as good as "Gossip Girl." "Gossip Girl" is about the dramas of being in rich and powerful families and the lying that goes on to protect power and romantic interests.

"King Lear will never be as enthralling as "24." Kiefer Sutherland gets in all those intense, sticky situations with violence and torture and all the stuff that gets my heart going.

Plain and simple, "King Lear" is boring, not like "The Office" that takes place in the same location every episode. Watching the same people doing stuff that we'll probably end up doing is so goddamn funny.

"King Lear" will never be as interesting as our own lives. Today, I thought I had a tumor, so I went to the Health Center. They told me I didn't. It was a pretty intense ordeal.

For those of you, (especially you flat-billed man, you will be found) who haven't realized how sarcastic I'm being, maybe theater isn't for you. Perhaps all forms of entertainment aren't for you. Perhaps you should have a long conversation with your family over Thanksgiving Break about dropping out and going to SEC for a semester, just to get your life back on track.

Not enjoying this play had nothing to do with this play.

The Johnny Carson School's current main-stage production of Shakespeare's "King Lear" has that thing. It's that ease of suspending of disbelief that is a dream for a theater reviewer. I didn't stop to think, "Oh man, I'm going to tear that guy to shreds when I get back to the office, and then my editor is going to cut it out because I called them a mean word and crushed their dreams."

No, "King Lear" is above all my petty criticisms about not being able to see in the Lab Theatre. It's above the bad British accents that have plagued this theater season at UNL. It's beyond my careful wording about the actors who I'll probably have to see for the next few semesters.
It's really, really good.

King Lear, the title character, is played by a farmed out professional Steven Patterson, who's had his Actor's Equity card since before I was born. He vaguely resembles Charleton Heston circa "The Ten Commandments," and once I got over my secret desire for him to raise up a firearm and recite those five little words ("From my cold, dead hands"), his performance was riveting.

Lear is a father who made the tragic and all too familiar mistake of letting his spoiled children take over his kingdom. When they turn out to be Blair and Serena from "Gossip Girl," (Holy shit, did you see how full circle this has come?) the situation gets real.

Patterson handles the heartbreak of a father and a man with a nuanced performance and restrained choices. When he goes crazy, we expect it, but we're still surprised.

The most impressive part of the show was the incredibly well choreographed fight scene toward the end of the show. Ryan Kathman and Daniel Gilbert are alarmingly in sync, carefully blending the notion of actors and two angry animals fighting for survival. The fight is elaborate and lasts a while, which only adds to the impressiveness of the feat.

This rendition of "King Lear" is set in Napoleonic England, but it's not particularly consequential. The only reason I really knew that for certain was the program that told me exactly that. This could have been pushed a lot harder by Virginia Smith, the director, but she instead chooses to spend her time focusing on the performances of her actors which is a fair trade-off.

The company on the whole is consistently on the same page, celebrating each other instead of fighting for attention on stage. The scenes act as elaborate living paintings, geometrically and aesthetically making "King Lear" all the more poignant.

Shakespeare is a standard. This production doesn't break any new ground, but it already has. This is merely a safe reimagining of a classic: art for art's sake. Those who enjoy Shakespeare and theater in general will find this show very impressive.

Those who have to go for class... well I'm sure you can find a pirated version of "Glee" on the Internet.

noahballard@dailynbraskan.com
Appendix C

Production Photos

Edgar, Act I
Edgar as Poor Tom
Edgar, Act V
Edgar, Lear and Gloucester, Act IV, Sc. VI

(Steven Patterson as Lear, Sam Hartley as Gloucester)