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A.

POSTMODERN *KING LEAR*:
A STUDY OF FOUR *KING LEAR* PRODUCTIONS

by

MOONKI KIM

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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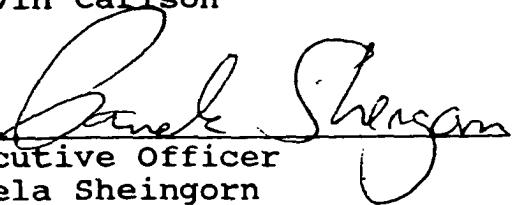
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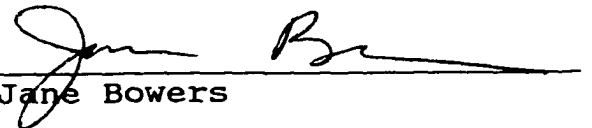
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Abstract

POSTMODERN *KING LEAR*: A STUDY OF FOUR *KING LEAR*
PRODUCTIONS

by

Moonki Kim

Advisor: Professor Marvin Carlson

In the last two decades of the twentieth-century, not only all the major British theatre institutions--the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal National Theatre, and BBC--but also some of the most renowned avant-garde film and theatre directors have staged *King Lear*. *King Lear*, having been habitually dismissed as unstageable, became the Shakespeare text for the postmodern stage. The dissertation explores the phenomenon of the proliferation of *King Lear* productions on the postmodern stage through extensive analyses of four *King Lear* productions produced by the renowned avant-garde directors and a theatre collective. Rather than reconstructing a complete, totalizing picture of each production as a model representative postmodern *King Lear*, this study attempts to locate symptomatic postmodern

features prominently featured in each production and to explore the ways in which *King Lear* participated in and negotiated with postmodern cultural and aesthetic concerns about power, patriarchy, gender and identity politics, representation, and the crisis of the Author and the Director.

Chapter one provides an overview of the contemporary Shakespeare performance criticism that establishes new relationship between text and performance, performance and reception, and Shakespearean performance and reproduction of ideology. It also examines the complicated issues involved in directors' challenge to the authority of Shakespeare's text. Chapter two analyzes Giorgio Strehler's eclectic, intertextual *Re Lear* production at the Piccolo Teatro. Chapter three analyzes Suzuki Tadashi's intercultural *The Tale of Lear* production with an all-male American cast. Chapter four focuses on a New York avant-garde theatre collective, Mabou Mines's *Lear* production with Ruth Maleczech as Lear. Chapter five focuses on Robert Wilson's abstract formalization of *King Lear* with Marianne Hoppe as Lear. The final chapter assesses implications of the postmodern reinvention of *King Lear*.

Acknowledgement

They say that writing a dissertation is a lonely, arduous process which tests your intellectual commitment and mental, emotional strength. Writing this dissertation certainly has been an arduous process, but never lonely one, thanks to many individuals without whose encouragement, inspiration, and support it would not have been possible.

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Professor Daniel Gerould has been most influential in establishing my foundation as a scholar. Through the numerous classes I took with him, I learned that scholarship required discipline and an equal amount of

enthusiasm. It has been privilege learning from his inexhaustible scholarship on melodrama, tragicomedy, and the historical avant-garde theatre, and particularly from his expertise on Eastern European Theatre.

Professor Jane Bowers has been my role model, who taught me gracefully that being a scholar did not have to be deprived of the pleasure of being a mother. Instead, her work as a feminist scholar has proved that our experiences as women and mothers are invaluable assets, affecting our perspectives on scholarship and the world. I am very grateful for her compassionate understanding and a careful reading of this dissertation.

I would like to thank the staff members and librarians at the various archives and institutions for providing me with indispensable books and archive materials, including video tapes, promptbooks, files of review clippings, and production photos and designs: the staff members at the Byrd Hoffman Foundation, Mabou Mines Archive at the P.S. 122, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, StageWest, and Arena Stage, and the librarians at the New York Performing Arts Library.

I would like to thank my fellow graduate students and dissertators at the Graduate School at the CUNY for their friendship and compassion, particularly those who occasionally visited my habitat in the library to cheer me up and commiserate with me: Jennifer, Marla, Marion, Terry, Josua, Sharon, and Soo-Jin. I also like to thank Myung-Sook for her unwavering belief in me.

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Chapter I

Introduction: Postmodern *King Lear* and Shakespeare Performance Criticism

King Lear is to postmodernism what *Hamlet* was to Romanticism: an icon of
an age

-Arthur Holmberg¹-

I

King Lear as the greatest Shakespearean stage play is largely a twentieth century phenomenon. *King Lear*, having been habitually dismissed as unstageable by such prominent critics as Charles Lamb and A.C. Bradley, came a long way to become an icon of our time in theatre. Indeed, in the last twenty years or so, there has been an unprecedented proliferation of *King Lear* productions. Not only all the major British theatre institutions--the

¹ Arthur Holmberg, "The Liberation of Lear: Breuer and Suzuki Experiment with a Classic," *American Theatre* 5(1988): 12.

Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal National Theatre, and BBC- but also some of the most renowned avant-garde directors have staged *King Lear*, including Giorgio Strehler, Ingmar Bergman, Peter Zadek, and Daniel Mesguich on stage, and Akira Kurosawa, Grigori Kozintsev, and Jean Luc Godard on screen. In 1990 when two most unlikely Shakespearean, avant-garde directors, Robert Wilson and Lee Breuer, along with Nicholas Hytner at the Royal Shakespeare Company and Deborah Warner at the Royal National Theatre, presented their versions of *King Lear*, the coronation of *King Lear* as the greatest Shakespearean stage play seemed completed. More importantly, it also marked a culmination of a trend in the stage history of the play: the “postmodern” *King Lear*. This dissertation is an exploration of this phenomenon of the postmodern *King Lear* productions.

The reclaiming of *King Lear* as the greatest Shakespearean stage play was, in fact, a modernist project and two factors played significant roles in this modernist rehabilitation: the open-stage movement and its relevance to the world of post- World War Two. Open-stage movement aimed at recuperating the Elizabethan stage and conventions in order to allow the spectators to get closer to the original Shakespeare experience. Incorporating ideas from the experiments of William Poel and Harley Granville-Barker,

Tyron Guthrie led this powerful movement, by building new theatres modeled after the Elizabethan stage at Stratford, Minneapolis, and many other places. This open-stage freed Shakespearean production from realistic staging and allowed relatively unencumbered and speedy presentation of actions without undermining the poetic power of Shakespeare's text. By getting rid of illusionistic scenery from the stage, the emphasis was on the actor who was to incarnate Shakespeare's character, and eventually his poetry. On this almost empty stage, the linguistic text was made more consequential to Shakespearean enactment. Theatre became a worthy place to interpret Shakespeare and appreciate his poetic genius. This movement influenced Anglophone productions profoundly in the 1950s and 1960s partly because it fitted the dominant, modernist interpretation of Shakespeare that stresses the centrality of Shakespeare's subtle and imagistic poetry to his meaning.² The vast empty space allowed the spectators to experience the powerful imagery of the chaos of the world and nature and beastly human nature in *King Lear* which had been considered too huge for the stage.³

² Shakespeare's contribution to the aesthetic and ideological paradigm of Modernism and modernism's influence on how to read Shakespeare for the twentieth century are given considerable attention in recent Shakespeare studies. See Hugh Grady, *The Modernist Shakespeare: Critical Texts in a Material World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), and Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

³ Bradley famously wrote that *King Lear* was "Shakespeare's greatest achievement, but...not his best play," and that "the stage is the test of strictly

King Lear's excessive violence and unbearable cruelty had been frequently cited for its unstageability. However, the experience of the Holocaust and two world wars changed people's perception of the play and made critics and theatre artists realize the parallel cruelty between Lear's world and contemporary world. In *King Lear in Our Time*, Maynard Mack observed,

After two world wars and Auschwitz, our sensibility is significantly more in touch than our grandparents' was with the play's jagged violence, its sadism, madness, and procession of deaths, its wild blends of levity and horror, selfishness and selflessness, and the anguish of its closing scene.⁴

In his influential study on *King Lear*, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Jan Kott found in *King Lear* particular relevance and immediacy to the postwar world.⁵ Kott's pessimistic existentialist understanding of his world and *King Lear* projected the play as a timeless classic in which Shakespeare's genius

dramatic quality, and *King Lear* is too huge for the stage." Because the essence of *King Lear* is poetry and "such poetry cannot be transferred to the space behind the foot-lights, but has its being only in imagination." See A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (London: Macmillan, 1956), 247-48.

⁴ Maynard Mack, *King Lear in Our Time* (Berkeley: University of California, 1965), 25.

⁵ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Trans. Boleslaw Taborski (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1964).

anticipated the clownish human existence and absurdity of such existence. To him Shakespeare presented universal truth in *King Lear* that had strong resonance with Kott's grotesque contemporary world. Kott's study became extremely important, providing the critical and theoretical rationale for many postwar *King Lear* productions through its influence on Peter Brook's celebrated 1962 *King Lear* production. Inspired by Kott's absurdist view, Brook noticeably made his production darker by portraying Lear as an unsympathetic old man whose tragedy was caused not by his ingratiate daughters but by the absurdity and grotesqueness of the human existential condition. With Brook's landmark Royal Shakespeare Company production, not only was the issue of unstageability forever put to rest, but *King Lear* became the play most suitable for the world of post-World War Two. Theatre became the most effective medium to experience the enormity of the play's poetic power, making "its overwhelming emotions momentarily our own," as Harley Granville-Barker predicted half-a century ago.⁶

In fact these two factors, the open-stage and contemporizing the meaning of Shakespeare's play, became the most influential elements in

⁶ Opposing Bradley's view of the unstageability of *King Lear*, Granville-Barker insists, "if the variety of his ordeal is really to be brought home to us, we must, in as full a sense as may be, pass through it with him, must make the experience and its overwhelming emotions momentarily our own." See Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare: King Lear Cymbeline Julius Caesar*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 5.

staging Shakespearean plays adopted by the newly-founded Royal Shakespeare Company.⁷ Presenting a fluid succession of scenes on a near empty stage with a relevant contemporary message became the signature style of the Royal Shakespeare Company, along with its acting style that focuses on textual analysis of character and actor's ability to speak Shakespeare's poetic language.⁸ Through the influence of the production modes of the RSC, this modernist production style has held sway the British and the North American stage as a standard practice of Shakespearean production since the early 1960s until the late 1980s when "neo-pictorialism" emerged as a new trend reflecting the influence of the international avant-garde directors' new approach to staging Shakespeare.⁹

⁷ Alan Sinfield called this characteristic style of the Royal Shakespeare Company as "Shakespeare-plus-relevance." See Alan Sinfield, "Royal Shakespeare: Theatre and the Making of Ideology," *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, eds. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 176.

⁸ For an illustration of the characteristic production style of the Royal Shakespeare Company, see John Barton, *Playing Shakespeare* (London: Methuen, 1984), and Cicely Berry, *The Actor and His Text* (London: Virgin, 1987), and *Voice and the Actor* (London: Harrap, 1973).

⁹ In an overview of the Royal Shakespeare Company's work in the 1980s and the early 1990s, Robert Shaughnessy observes, "Placed in its broader theatrical context, the neo-pictorial RSC Shakespeare of the 1980s and 1990s may well reflect the influence, not only of Euro-Shakespeare, but of the postmodern theatrical *avant-garde*, typified by the work of Robert Wilson." See Robert Shaughnessy, "The Last Post: Henry V, War Culture and the Postmodern Shakespeare," *Theatre Survey* 39(1998): 45. Peter Holland sees

Starting in the mid-1970s, there emerged a Shakespearean production trend characterized as “postmodern”, whose approach to Shakespeare’s text greatly differed from that of modernist staging.¹⁰ These productions challenged modernist notion of the authority of Shakespeare’s text over theatrical performance by denarrativizing and fragmenting the text and by denying coherent characterization. Some openly refused to faithfully reproduce Shakespeare’s text in their staging practice and contested Shakespeare’s meaning, by privileging the visual elements of the production. Instead of making Shakespeare’s play relevant to contemporary world, some productions tried to stress the difference and the distance between the two. Instead of unifying each element of mise-en-scene, some productions intentionally introduced historically and culturally eclectic costuming and

the emergence of neo-pictorialism on the British stage not solely as a result of an aesthetic decision but of competition with the West End musicals in order to fill the house with 1508 seats. See Peter Holland, *English Shakespeares: Shakespeare on the English Stage in the 1990s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15.

¹⁰ Dennis Kennedy identifies as “postmodern” the key characteristics of the latest phase of Shakespeare production toward the end of his history of Shakespearean stage performance in twentieth-century Europe and America. This mode is characterized by self-consciousness, intertextuality, baroque ornamentation, eclecticism, quotation, hybridity, and pastiche. He also observes that postmodern Shakespeare is mesmerized by the rhetoric of the image and neo-pictorialism is dominant. See Dennis Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-Century Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

scenery, making the verbal collide with the visual and creating a new relationship between the text and its performance. As Patrice Pavis observes, mise-en-scene is

not a transformation of text into performance, but rather a theoretical fitting which consists in putting the text under dramatic and stage tension, in order to test how stage utterance challenges the text and initiates a hermeneutic circle between the text and its enunciation, thus opening up the text to several possible interpretations.¹¹

It is no longer Shakespeare's text but a director's self-conscious concept and intervention that dictates the meaning of performance and results in new experiences with Shakespeare's play. The director seems to take over the author function by claiming his staging as other than an authentic rereading of Shakespeare's text.

This postmodern phenomenon became more prominent in Europe and non-English speaking countries where directors were less subjected to the burden of fidelity to Shakespeare's language and thus were more open to the resourcefulness of scenographic and physical possibilities, often redefining

¹¹ Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 30.

the meaning of the play in the process.¹² However this new production style became quickly prominent even at the Royal Shakespeare Company by the end of the 1980s, as ever-expanding international theatre festivals and touring expedite the transmission of artistic innovations on a global scale, which, in turn, reflects the postmodern condition of global borderless economy.¹³ This theatrical internationalism inevitably put postmodern Shakespeare within the context of postcolonial and intercultural Shakespeare. Postmodern Shakespeare signifies more than stylistic and aesthetic innovation. It also reflects the new understanding of the role of mise-en-scene and the complicated, dialectic relationship between the text and performance. Most importantly, as Barbara Hodgdon writes, postmodern Shakespeare translates Shakespeare's text into an intercultural idiom, yoking "divergent cultural materials and identities into pastiche, collage, and bricolage" in opposition "to the grand literary and theatrical narratives that would draw national and cultural boundaries around "Shakespeare" and manage "his" meaning."¹⁴

¹² For an excellent collection of articles on international Shakespearean productions, see Dennis Kennedy, ed., *Foreign Shakespeare: Contemporary Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹³ For the study on the phenomenon of Shakespeare festivals and the marketability of Shakespeare, see Dennis Kennedy, "Shakespeare and Cultural Tourism," *Theatre Journal* 50(1998): 175-188.

¹⁴ Barbara Hodgdon, "Looking for Mr. Shakespeare after "The Revolution": Robert Lepage's Intercultural *Dream Machine*," *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*, ed. James Bulman (London: Routledge, 1996), 81.

Postmodern Shakespeare is thus a phenomenon reflecting the aesthetic, theoretical, cultural, and historical condition of the last quarter of the twentieth century. As Fredric Jameson describes it, the postmodern is the dominant cultural expression of late capitalism.¹⁵ As such, postmodern Shakespeare is under a constant threat of cultural commodification, which many cultural critics see as a characteristic modality of postmodern culture.

This postmodern phenomenon also presents a significant shift in the director's role. The director is traditionally required to manage the conceptual, artistic, and ideological relationship between the dramatic text and theatre, producing a representational unity of the performance. In fact, the emergence of the theatrical director as a sole controller of the production, unifying divergent elements of mise-en-scene, was closely related to theatrical modernism, which, among other things, strived to achieve a consistent conceptual, scenic whole in performance. Classic drama, particularly Shakespearean drama, needed a director who could impose conceptual coherence to make up for the distance and discontinuities between Shakespeare, his theatre and the circumstances of the modern stage, thus

¹⁵ See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

allowing the spectators an authentic encounter with Shakespeare.¹⁶ Above all, the contradictory modernist demand on Shakespearean performance, preserving the authority of the text and yet making it relevant to the contemporary world, inevitably called for a director's intervention. As Dennis Kennedy observes, the director was both a "godsend and a necessity of modernist Shakespearean performance"- a manager of the formidable possibilities of a text otherwise too distant in time, language, and thought.¹⁷ Director helps transcend the differences of history, culture, language, and theatre and thus creates a modern, timeless Shakespeare. In return, director gained legitimacy and authority relying on the authority of Shakespeare.¹⁸

The postmodern director's challenge to Shakespeare's authority therefore poses several interesting but intricate questions in relation to the current theoretical debate on Shakespearean performance criticism. A brief survey of some of the issues raised in recent studies on Shakespearean

¹⁶ For the recent discussions on the director's role in producing modernist Shakespeare performance, see Richard Paul Knowles, "From Dream to Machine: Peter Brook, Robert Lepage, and the Contemporary Shakespearean Director as (Post)Modernist," *Theatre Journal* 50(1998): 189-206, and W. B. Worthen, "Shakespeare's Auteurs: Directing Authority," *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 45-94.

¹⁷ Kennedy, "Introduction," *Foreign Shakespeare*, 13.

¹⁸ For the samples of the modernist discourses on the role of Shakespearean directors, see Ralph Berry, *On Directing Shakespeare*,

performance criticism will help understand what is at stake in a director's attempt to establish a new relationship with Shakespeare, whose unique status in literature, theatre, and western culture makes him more than just an author.

II

The idea, now almost a cliché, that Shakespeare wrote playcripts whose potential meanings could be best realized in theatrical performance was almost revolutionary when Harley Granville-Barker first claimed this in his prefaces to Shakespearean plays.¹⁹ His idea was further elaborated and extended by a number of eminent Shakespearean scholars in the Anglo-American tradition, most notably Muriel Bradbrook, Bernard Beckerman, John Russell Brown, and J.L. Styan.²⁰ Performance criticism, or stage-centered criticism, long marginalized and neglected by Shakespearean scholars, has become one of the most prolific fields of modern Shakespearean studies. However this revolution in Shakespearean performance criticism, as

¹⁹ See Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, 2 vols.(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965).

²⁰ See Muriel Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), John Russell Brown, *Shakespeare in Performance: An Introduction through Six Major Plays*(New York: Harcourt, 1976), J.L. Styan, *The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

the title of Styan's landmark study, *The Shakespeare Revolution*, called it, has recently been under critical scrutiny by a group of Shakespearean scholars influenced by poststructuralism, cultural studies, and theatre semiotics.

In a way it can be said that Shakespeare performance criticism is undergoing the second, "more fundamental" revolution, as James Bulman declares in his introduction to a collection of articles addressing the current discussions surrounding Shakespeare performance criticism.²¹ The strategy of these new revolutionaries takes two forms: to contextualize and historicize the first generation revolutionaries of stage-centered criticism; and to attempt to establish a radically changed view on the relationship between Shakespearean theatrical performance and his text, and on "The Shakespeare experience." If the first generation of the Shakespeare revolution established performance criticism as a significant and legitimate genre in interpreting Shakespeare within Shakespeare studies, this second generation tries to establish a new kind of Shakespeare performance criticism that can encompass a more dialectical, complex relationship between the text and performance, performance and its criticism, and performance and the reproduction of culture and history.

²¹ See James Bulman's introduction to *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*, 8.

Through a series of publications drawing on the poststructuralist theories of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault,²² the new revolutionaries first criticize the performance criticism of The Shakespeare Revolution as a modernist project whose underlying motivation is to recover the primacy of Shakespeare's language in performance. They particularly problematize the assumptions of the first generation that texts are stable and authoritative, and that meaning is immanent in them. They also challenge Styan and his generation's notion that the function of theatrical performance is realization of the text's authentic commands and recovery of meanings intrinsic to the text. For that generation, the stage is the site of interpretation and actors and directors are interpreters rather than creators, thus reinstating the authority of Shakespeare. W.B. Worthen, one of the ardent critics of modernist performance criticism, sees the emergence of the Shakespeare revolution as inspired by theatre and critics' desire to gain legitimacy by relying on the authority of Shakespeare:

²² Particularly, Derrida's deconstruction of speech and writing and of origin and presence, Barthes' notion of textuality, and Foucault's notion of author function are influential to the second generation of Shakespeare performance critics. See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), and Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 141-160.

Striving to legitimate performance as a mode of inquiry independent of literary criticism, performance criticism uses the sign of “Shakespeare” to repress the rhetorical character of performance; rather than understanding the *mise-en-scène* as a strategy for producing Shakespeare’s plays in the different medium of theatre, performance criticism takes the *mise-en-scène* as a recovery device, finding authentic Shakespeare in the designs of the stage...to cast the stage as an interpretive institution for the recuperation of Shakespearean authority.²³

By subscribing to the authority of Shakespeare, Worthen argues, performance criticism limits theatre’s unique potential as a site of specific, historical encounter with the text and of cultural and aesthetic contestation, to a site of mere representation and explanation of the literary text. Worthen also observes that as a result of relying on the authority of Shakespeare, performance criticism maps the author into the design of performance, and thus “hesitates to move “from work to text,” to consider the play in terms that conform more closely to the working of the scripts in the theatre: “as play, activity, production, practice.”²⁴ Heavily relying on Barthes’ notion of textuality, Worthen’s study calls for rethinking of the relationship between the text and its performance.

²³ Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*, 163.

²⁴ Ibid., 164. Worthen’s quote is from Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” *Image-Music-Text*, 162.

The recent studies of textual bibliographers such as Michael Warren, Gary Taylor, and Grace Ioppolo also lead performance critics to look at the relationship between text and performance from a markedly different perspective.²⁵ Their researches demonstrate that Shakespeare's plays exist as multiple texts whose variations may be accounted for in part by alteration made for, or during performance. Warren and Taylor's study on *King Lear* texts specifically illustrates that all texts are inherently multiple because of Shakespeare's own revising, and that there is no recoverable original, but only edited copies conflating Folio and quarto materials. The result of their study can be extended to imply that all Shakespearean editions are copies, and that there is no recoverable original. The more vigorously textual bibliographers search for some singular, original authorizing text, the more obvious it becomes that there is no original to be found. As Laurie E. Osborne observes, "the concept of original remains, but Shakespearean textual bibliography, old and new, derives from the fact that only copies

²⁵ See Gary Taylor and Michael Warren, eds. *The Division of the Kingdom: Shakespeare's Two Versions of Lear* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), Michael Warren, "Textual Problems, Editorial Assertions in Editions of Shakespeare," *Textual Criticism and Literary Interpretation*, ed. Jerome McGann (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 23-37, and Grace Ioppolo, *Revising Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991).

exist. It is comparison, not origin, which authorized any text.”²⁶ This new development in Shakespeare textual studies allows the much maligned eighteenth century and nineteenth century performance editions to be reevaluated as closer heirs to the Folio, because they recorded performance choices made in the theatre and in so doing inscribed the ideological pressures of the time.

This reading of theatrical performance as Barthesian textuality and studies of textual bibliographers help destabilize the authority and primacy of Shakespeare’s text and thus replace the logocentric idea of theatre, foregrounding the inherent gap between text and performance, and the contingencies in performance. In addition to the traditional analysis of mise-en-scene, performance criticism is now expected to account for material, historical conditions of performance, the physical presence of the actors themselves, and above all the dynamics of audience response, which makes performance criticism extremely tentative and precarious. Presenting a total picture of a performance becomes almost impossible, which leads Anthony Dawson to write, in his article “The Impasse over the Stage,” “the very

²⁶ Laurie E. Osborne, “Rethinking the Performance Editions: Theatrical and Textual Productions of Shakespeare,” *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*, 169.

contingency of performance generates its heterogeneity, a heterogeneity that cannot be adequately represented within any theoretical perspective.”²⁷

However, Dawson’s impasse, in fact, has to do with the inability of critical discourse, of any verbal description, to fully capture the embodied particularity of the stage and the spectator’s rich experience. Instead of giving up to the idea of incommensurability between text and performance, and performance and criticism as impasse, a few critics have directed their attention to the experience of the spectators and specific material, historical conditions of the production, and examine the rhetoric implicit in conceptions of performance and in performance practice, by studying production apparatuses. Arguing that merely to say that text and performance are incommensurable is to miss the point as much as to polarize text against performance, Worthen insists that text and performance are dialectically related through “the labor of enactment,” “operating in a given social and historical horizon.”²⁸ He then suggests that offstage performance such as editing, reading, advertising, and criticism should be treated as important as onstage performance in theatrical experience, and that by studying a performance continually taking place offstage, we may have access to a work,

²⁷ Anthony Dawson, “The Impasse over the Stage,” *English Literary Renaissance* 21(1991): 309-27

²⁸ Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*, 180.

for this offstage performance is closely related to the conditioning of the reception of the spectators as well as the aesthetic choices of onstage performance.

Worthen's attention to offstage performance and its influence on the reception of the spectators has strong echoes of Marvin Carlson's call for attention to the reception process in reconstructing performance. While lamenting that very little attention has been paid to the reception process and the audience's contribution to the process, Carlson suggests that performance critics may profit from adopting the reception theory of Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Umberto Eco, and particularly that of Tony Bennett., which focuses on investigating "the means and mechanisms whereby all texts...may be 'productively activated' during what is traditionally, and inadequately, thought of as the process of their consumption or reception."²⁹ Applying Bennett's theory, Carlson analyzes the effects of genre, lines of business, publicity and program, and institutional "readers," reviewer and dramaturg, as four historical means and mechanisms that have provided audiences with

²⁹ Tony Bennet, "Text, Readers, Reading Formations," *Literature and History* 9(1983), 214. Quoted in Marvin Carlson, "Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance," *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*, eds. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie(Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 86.

strategies for organizing and interpreting their involvement with the theatrical event.³⁰

The contribution of the audience to the reception process and the factors which contribute to the formation of its reading of performance are the main concerns of Barbara Hodgdon's study. Hodgdon focuses on how subject positions taken up by individual spectators affect their interpretive strategies for and affective response to a particular performance as much as theatrical means and mechanism Bennett and Carlson expounded. To her the performance text is an event constituted by the concrete conditions of its spectators such as gender, ethnicity, race, and class. Hodgdon thus suggests that in this distinctly multicultural and intercultural terrain, the work of performance criticism should take place not at the imaginary level of the text, nor "at the locus of examining director-auteurs and the ideotexts of their mise en scènes or the theatrical apparatus itself," but "at the point of historical reception, where "theatre" collides with spectators who may transform it into "a strange, eventful history"."³¹ Her study suggests the inevitable variability of reception and that recognition releases performance from the grip of totalizing, dominant ideological discourse. It also moves Shakespearean

³⁰ Ibid., 86-97.

³¹ Barbara Hodgdon, "Looking for Mr. Shakespeare after 'The Revolution': Robert Lepage's Intercultural *Dream Machine*," 86.

performance from the sphere of the aesthetic into a more politicized relationship to reproduction of culture and history.

III

As my brief survey of recent studies of Shakespearean performance criticism has illustrated, Shakespearean performance now participates in an ongoing dialogue between theory and practice. A fascinating interweaving and intersecting of poststructuralism and postmodernism provides new paradigms for understanding Shakespearean performance. Derrida's deconstruction of writing and speech, Barthes's notion of textuality and Foucault's notion of the author, all of which displace the Author, the semiotic study of reception, the materialist critique of cultural and identity politics, all contribute to the understanding of the complex relationship between text and performance, performance and reception, and Shakespearean performance and reproduction of ideology. In other words, current discussions in Shakespearean performance criticism point to the crisis of self-sufficiency of text and performance. They suggest that in theatrical performance neither the Author nor the Director can completely control the meaning of the performance. The emphasis on the crisis of representation, the problematic status of actor's body, and the reception conditioned by the spectator's specific material condition seems to undermine the director's intentions and

control as well as Shakespeare's authority. Meaning can only be created where spectators interact with performance in their own specific historicity. Thus the same theoretical grounds that provided the postmodern director with a theoretical rationale for challenging Shakespeare's authority can potentially evoke the director's own deconstruction.

It is thus a great irony and paradox that the majority of the postmodern Shakespeare productions have been produced by auteur-directors with unusually strong artistic control, which may reflect their unconscious anxieties over instability in postmodern performance. Richard Paul Knowles sees postmodern directors' anxiety over control of performance as "traces of the continuities between modernist and postmodernist manifestations of the directing of Shakespeare."³² (198) From Adrienne Mnouchkine's "oriental" *Richard II* tetralogy to Robert Lepage's multicultural, high-tech *Midsummer Nights Dream*, from Peter Zadek's anarchic, "trousers-down" *Othello* to Peter Sellar's multiracial *The Merchant of Venice*, it was directors' concepts and styles that seem to hold the productions together while Shakespeare's texts were estranged, fragmented and deconstructed. However their productions would not generate much meaning without the background of "Shakespeare" as a point of reference and origin, no matter how decentered he may be. As Gary Taylor's study in *Reinventing Shakespeare* manifests, Shakespeare has

³² Richard Paul Knowles, "From Dream to Machine," 198.

infiltrated culture and its imagination through endless reinventions.³³ Such ubiquity and saturation of Shakespeare allows directors to draw spectators' attention to their styles and concepts, thus controlling the meaning in a production. Directors need "Shakespeare" in order to overcome the postmodern crisis of the Director.

King Lear has certainly provided many auteur-directors with opportunities to exercise their artistic virtuosity, while engaging postmodern concerns in their staging. This study will focus on four postmodern *King Lear* productions directed by three internationally renowned avant-garde directors and one group as an attempt to assess the phenomenon of the postmodern Shakespeare and complicated issues related to the phenomenon that I attempted to expound so far: Giorgio Strehler's 1972 production of *Re Lear* in Milan, Suzuki Tadashi's 1988 Anglophone debut production of *The Tale of Lear* in collaboration with four American regional resident companies, Lee Breuer and Mabou Mines' 1990 *Lear* production at the Triplex theatre in Manhattan, and Robert Wilson's 1990 *Lear* production in Frankfurt.

This study intentionally excludes the mainstream British productions of *King Lear*, mainly because, despite postmodern scenographic features in

³³ See Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (London: Oxford University Press, 1989).

some of *King Lear* productions of the late 1980s and the 1990s, textual and institutional responsibility of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal National Theatre keep them from digressing substantially from the modernist ideal of Shakespearean performance.³⁴ Moreover, as “official” institutions sanctioning the standard practice of Shakespearean productions, critical attention has been already directed disproportionately to their productions, despite many critics’ observation that there have been more influential foreign *King Lear* productions than British ones.³⁵ Notwithstanding numerous

³⁴ Peter Holland in his study of Shakespearean productions on the British stage defines the RSC as the inheritor of a long tradition of English Shakespeare production that has rarely sought fundamentally to radicalize. It has become the embodiment of that tradition, “the cultural epitome of the centrality of Shakespeare in British theatre.” Trevor Nunn is also quoted as envisaging the RSC as the last shield against the eradication of Shakespeare. See, Peter Holland, *English Shakespeares*, 23-24.

³⁵ Esther Merles Jackson suggested that *King Lear* has worked better in the non-English-speaking world, given the European tradition of expressionism, “a plastic theatre-symbol, an ambiguous structural image composed of word, gesture, song, dance, light, color, shape, design, and suggestion.” See Esther Merle Jackson, “*King Lear*: The Grammar of Tragedy,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 17(1966): 31. Observing that recent European productions of the play have been “marked more by special, sometimes highly unorthodox, directorial treatments than by forceful individual performances” that have been a prominent feature of the English productions, editors for *Shakespeare around the Globe: A Guide to Notable Postwar Revivals* noticeably included more non-Anglophone productions in their anthology, ranging from a 1955 Israel production directed by Czech émigré Julius Gellner to Ingmar Bergman’s 1984 production. See Samuel Reiter, et al, eds. *Shakespeare around the Globe: A Guide to Notable Postwar Revivals*(Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 301.

articles and performance reviews in daily newspapers, and academic journals such as *Shakespeare Survey* and *Shakespeare Quarterly*, the only book-length study on the twentieth century *King Lear* productions, Alexander Leggatt's *Shakespeare in Performance: King Lear*, is exclusively on the British productions except for Grigori Kozintsev's film version.³⁶ Marvin Rosenberg's *The Masks of King Lear*, an exhaustive scene-by-scene analysis of the play, also uses acting and directing examples mostly from the British stage history of the play that he thinks has best illuminated Shakespeare's meaning and "the design of *King Lear*."³⁷

Besides their British bias, their studies also typify the modernist performance criticism heralded by Styan and his generation; seeking performance that serves to illuminate the poetry and "essential" meaning of Shakespeare's play. Leggatt's 1991 study of the most "influential" twentieth century *King Lear* productions reveals unmistakable modernist leanings. His study is filled with comments that foreground the primacy of Shakespeare's text. He begins his analysis of the performances by asking "What guidance does the text offer?"³⁸ And he concludes, "there will never be an ideal

³⁶ See Alexander Leggatt, *Shakespeare in Performance: King Lear* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991).

³⁷ See Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1972).

³⁸ Leggatt, *Shakespeare in Performance: King Lear*, 6.

production of *King Lear*,” for “no production will catch all the possibilities latent in a dramatic text.”³⁹ Such an insistence on stage performance as a site of reproducing authorial meaning rejects the possibility of mise-en-scene as a site of commenting on and contesting Shakespeare’s text. This modernist bias naturally affected Leggatt’s selection of the eight productions included in his study,⁴⁰ a study that predictably excludes the productions which seem to challenge Shakespeare’s authority.

In direct opposition to Leggatt’s study is Susan Bennett’s analysis of contemporary *King Lear* productions.⁴¹ Unlike Leggatt’s study, Bennett’s survey of seventeen *King Lear* productions of the 1980s ranges from those at the mainstream British theatre institutions to the Women’s Theatre Group’s *Lear’s Daughters* to the intercultural Kathakali dance-drama version of *King Lear*. Bennett’s study aims at searching for the reasons behind the

³⁹ Ibid., 132. Nevertheless Leggatt does not hesitate to proclaim Peter Brook’s 1962 *King Lear* production as the most exciting *King Lear* production of the twentieth century, for the production brought “contact between the play and the world we live in.” See Ibid., 134.

⁴⁰ The productions included in Leggatt’s study are John Gielgud’s 1940 production in collaboration with Harley Granville-Barker, Peter Brook’s 1962 production, Robin Phillips’ 1979 production with Peter Ustinov as Lear, Adrian Noble’s 1982 production, Griogori Kozintsev’s 1970 film version, Peter Brook’s 1971 film version, Jonathan Miller’s 1982 BBC production, and Laurence Olivier in 1983 Granada Television version.

⁴¹ Susan Bennett, “Production and Proliferation: Seventeen Lears,” *Performing Nostalgia*, 39-78.

proliferation of *King Lear* of the period and finds that it has more to do with the desire of reproducing Shakespearean authority and thus the dominant ideology than with compelling aesthetic motivations. In her survey of seventeen *King Lear* productions, Bennett observes a surprisingly narrow range of design, acting, and conceptual choice instead of originality in most of the mainstream productions. Bennett suggests that with this overexposed, over-produced text, the only possible “new” way of staging it is to creatively “vandalize” Shakespeare’s text as was done in such productions as *Lear’s Daughters* and Barrie Keeffe’s *King of England*, which successfully exposed the gaps and excesses of Shakespeare’s text, by taking up a deliberately antagonistic relationship to *King Lear* and to the operations under which the play is generally produced or received.⁴² Bennett concludes that this proliferation of *King Lear* productions can be explained as “a nostalgic identification with greatness--of the text, of Shakespeare,” and the play’s “monumental status which impels, with more or less success, the polyvalent practice of transgression.”⁴³

Thus there seems to be a gap in recent *King Lear* performance scholarship, which calls for a study that exclusively focuses on the

⁴² Bennett borrowed the notion of critical vandalism from Jonathan Dollimore’s program notes for the 1986 Royal Court production of Howard Barker’s *Women Beware Women*. See Bennett, 1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 77.

productions that have engaged postmodern concerns in *King Lear* productions. This dissertation will strive to explore the reinvention of *King Lear* for the postmodern era, by focusing on four productions that comprise a wide spectrum of directorial styles, nationalities and political stances. This dissertation does not attempt to reconstruct each *King Lear* production in order to provide a complete, totalizing picture of each staging as a model representative of postmodern *King Lear*. Rather it will attempt to locate symptomatic postmodern features prominently featured in each production and to explore the ways in which *King Lear* participated in and negotiated with postmodern cultural and aesthetic concerns about power, patriarchy, gender, identity politics, and representation, the crisis of the Author and the Director. Strehler's production set in a circus arena, Suzuki's intercultural production with all-male American cast, Mabou Mines's gender-reversed production with Ruth Maleczech as Lear, and Wilson's abstract stylization with female Lear, all seem to record the cultural, aesthetical pressures of their particular historical moment, that is postmodern.

Recent studies of Shakespearean performance criticism taught us that both texts and performances are materially unstable registers of signification, producing meaning intertextually in ways that deconstruct notions of

intentions, fidelity, authority, and presence. They also taught us that criticism cannot recapture stage performance and that critics in writing about performance construct narratives which foreground their own cultural perspectives. They also caution that traditional research tools to reconstruct a performance such as theatre reviews and programs, director's notes and promptbooks, must be interpreted in the contextual particularity of the production. Keeping in mind those limitations of and cautions for writing about performances, this study begins with Giorgio Strehler's 1972 *Lear* production, which has been considered by many critics as the most influential *King Lear* production of the second half of the twentieth century since Peter Brook's 1962 landmark production of the play. Despite Strehler's manifestly modernist attitude toward Shakespeare and his text, his 1972 production already reveals the signs of the crisis of autonomy of text and performance in his eclectic and intertextual staging of *King Lear*.

Chapter II

Giorgio Strehler's *King Lear: An Intertextual Text*

I

In his 1986 conversation with Ugo Ronfani, Italy's leading theatre critic, Giorgio Strehler revealed,

I'm certain of one thing: that I have to approach Shakespeare with great caution and care. Get under the surface of the text, but never go against it or abuse it. That-it seems to me-is the only viable way. He is a very demanding, tyrannical author; he requires total commitment. Shakespeare is that mountain range which separates those who play with theatre from those who believe in it¹

With forty years of theatrical experience and after directing seventeen Shakespearean productions including two Verdi operas based on Shakespearean texts, Giorgio Strehler still found Shakespeare an overwhelmingly demanding playwright. He approached Shakespeare's texts with caution even though he was surely among those who had imagination and craftsmanship to translate the complexity and

¹ Giorgio Strehler, conversation with Ugo Ronfani in Ugo Ronfani, *Io, Strehler: Una vita per il teatro: Conversazioni con Ugo Ronfani* (Milan: Rusconi, 1986), 137. This passage is quoted in David Hirst, *Giorgio Strehler, Directors in Perspective Series* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 63.

contradictions of Shakespearean drama into spectacular theatre. Strehler's humility and his respect for Shakespeare's work led him to exhaustive research on the scholarship and production history of Shakespeare's texts, and to an intense and lengthy rehearsal process, resulting in some of the twentieth century's most satisfying productions of Shakespearean plays. This chapter will be a study of one of those productions, Strehler's 1972 *King Lear*.

Giorgio Strehler was among the most prolific and respected theatre directors of the twentieth century. In a career spanning over fifty years since he cofounded the Piccolo Teatro in Milan with Paolo Grassi in 1947, Strehler garnered numerous accolades and titles including director of the Théâtre de l'Europe and member of the European Parliament. But it is mostly for his theatrical accomplishment at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan that Strehler will be remembered. During his fifty-year tenure at the Piccolo, Strehler brought Italy, for the first time, something close to a national theatre comparable to the Berliner Ensemble and the Théâtre National Populaire. With the founding principle of the theatre as public service for the city which barely recovered from the ruins of The World War Two, Strehler's most urgent and significant task was to develop a repertoire so as to draw a new and wider audience and educate them.²

² For the founding principles of the Piccolo Teatro and its achievement for the first sixteen years, see Paolo Grassi and Giorgio

Strehler has created an astonishing theatrical repertoire, producing more than 250 straight plays and 45 operas,³ several of which have been regarded as the highpoints of the twentieth century theatre history.⁴ Particularly some of Strehler's productions of Shakespeare, Goldoni, and Brecht drew wide admiration for their exquisite theatricality that translated the texts' complex, contradictory ideas and humanistic and political concerns into lucid but resonant stage images. Strehler was credited with having almost single-handedly recovered Goldoni's reputation for the contemporary theatre along with the art of *commedia dell'arte* he incorporated in staging Goldoni's plays, particularly *Arlecchino, the Servant of Two Masters*. Strehler was arguably the most influential Brechtian director outside Germany, whose productions of

Strehler, "Sixteen Years of the Piccolo Teatro," trans. Ruby Cohn and Michael Campo, *Tulane Drama Review* 8(1964): 27-43.

³ For the list of Strehler's productions, see "Chronology," in Hirst, 125-130.

⁴ For Strehler's career, the only comprehensive study in English is David Hirst's book. Most of the studies on Strehler's theatre have been written in Italian, German, and French; they are listed in the bibliography section in Hirst's book. Not included in his bibliography were Cordelia Dvor, *Passione teatrale: Giorgio Strehler und das theater* (Berlin: Henschel, 1994), Giancarlo Stampalia, ed., *Strehler Dirige: le fasi di un allestimento e l'impulso musicale nel teatro* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1997), *Giorgio Strehler e il suo teatro*, Papers presented to the seminar on Giorgio Strehler (Roma: Bulzoni, 1998). *Io, Strehler: Conversazioni con Ugo Ronfani* and Giorgio Strehler's own writing, *Per un teatro umano* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974) are importance sources for understanding Strehler's theatrical aesthetics and politics.

*Threepenny Opera*⁵, *Galileo*, and *Good Person of Setzuan* have been considered among the finest productions of Brecht's plays. Based on his vast experience in staging Shakespearean drama, Strehler's understanding of Shakespeare culminated in his last two Shakespearean productions, *King Lear* (1972) and *The Tempest* (1978), both of which have been regarded as among the most significant revivals of Shakespearean plays in the second half of the twentieth century.

As the title of a collection of Strehler's essays on theatre, *Per un teatro umano*, indicates, " 'umano' was," according to David Hirst, "the key word in Strehler's approach to theatre", adding that "the Italian word *umano* has all the implications of human, humane, and humanitarian with their concomitant social and political overtone."⁶ Man in relation to his world, to history had been Strehler's constant interest and accordingly his theatre always participated in commenting on the immediate social and political issues. But his theatre was also a humanist theatre that was richly textured and wholly theatricalized one. Consequently his choice of plays

⁵ Brecht came to Milan to observe Strehler's rehearsal of the play. He liked Strehler's production so much that he entrusted Strehler with the artistic direction of all his works. Even though Brecht's sudden death after their brief encounter did not permit further interaction between the two directors, the fact that the Berliner Ensemble offered its directorship to Strehler after Brecht's death proves that Brecht was impressed with Strehler as much as Strehler respected him.

⁶ Hirst, 1-2.

was based upon the human concerns and their theatrical possibilities the particular text evoked. Strehler would insist, "There are certain great theatrical texts in which humanity is called upon to recognize itself."⁷ This was one of the main reasons Strehler went back to particular playwrights, notably Shakespeare, Goldoni, Brecht, Pirandello, and Chekhov, and the same texts over and over again, the most famous one being Goldoni's *Arlecchino, the Servant of Two Masters* which he restaged six times. This humanist concern was also the reason Strehler and the Piccolo stayed away from avantgarde theatre. In a report on their achievement for the first sixteen years of the Piccolo Teatro, Strehler and Grassi wrote,

The pleasure one feels in the theatre springs from the presentation of the relationship between man and society; it springs from seeing this difficult relationship posed in a clearer way than can be done in life.... This is why we have not done the work of the French avantgarde. We have habituated our public to a wider, more social theatre. To give them Ionesco or Godot would be to deceive them.⁸

However, humanist content was not the only standard of Strehler's choice of playwrights and plays, as Strehler himself explained,

⁷ Strehler, in Ronfani, 151-52. Quoted in Maria Nadotti, "Stages of Strehler," trans. Marguerite Shore, *Artforum* 28(1989): 120.

⁸ See Paolo Grassi and Giorgio Strehler: 39-40. This firm position against French avantgardist, particularly Beckett, was changed in staging *King Lear*.

For me, art is a reflection of the life of the world. At the same time, I have never loved a dramatic text for its 'content', independently of its aesthetic truth. In art, form and content are one and the same thing. There is no content which is truly in need of theatrical representation which does not already, at the same time, have a poetic, aesthetic reality-or is seeking after that reality.⁹

For Strehler, the artistic form was as important as the politically engaged, humanist concern of the text. Like Brecht, who had insisted that in order to be revolutionary theatre must be beautiful, Strehler understood that in order to communicate humanist concerns of the text, the production must move the spectator by its poetic and artistic quality. Once Strehler recognized the humanistic interest in the theme and the artistic value of a particular play, he paid meticulous attention to the text in order to realize its artistic potential on stage.

In fact, for Strehler, a careful, thorough interpretation of the text was the director's foremost job. In his answer to an interviewer's question on the role of a director, Strehler states,

I love the theatre which is "made", not the theatre which is "talked about". I think of the stage as a place of truth, where we discover our own truth, those of others and those of the text itself, which is the prime mover of every show we put on. The undeviating search for the truth of the text, the painstaking search for the

⁹ Strehler, interview in Maria M. Delgado and Paul Heritage, eds., "Giorgio Strehler," trans. Peter Snowdon, *In Contact with the Gods?: Directors Talk Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 266.

dramatic work of art, these are the essential tasks of the director.¹⁰

Such a total commitment to the text and belief in its truth and humanity seem to indicate that Strehler is a modernist par excellence. However paradoxically, as this chapter will illustrate, it was exactly this strong sense of responsibility toward the text, toward the craft of making theatre, and toward the public that made Strehler fundamentally eclectic and open-minded toward quite disparate theatrical languages and traditions-- elite and popular, remote and contemporary. His production became, I would argue, a kind of intertextual 'text' in which such eclectic inspirations were incorporated through a web of subtle and exquisite allusions and quotations. It was his sense of responsibility toward the truth and humanity in the text that had driven Strehler to restage certain theatrical texts so as to reflect the changing times in his understanding of the texts, resulting in setting up self-referential, intertextual connections among his own productions. This chapter will attempt to explore the postmodern eclectic, self-referential intertextuality of Strehler's style in his staging of *King Lear*, locating diverse influences and the specific ways Strehler utilized them in the service of interpreting the text.

II

¹⁰ Strehler, interview in *In Contact with the Gods?*, 265.

With the advent of Poststructuralism, the notion of a text as a closed, self-sufficient, autonomous work was deconstructed. Through their influential writings,¹¹ Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Michel Foucault, challenged the idea of the literary work as equipped with definite meanings which one should decipher. Instead, they foregrounded the notion of a text as irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which could never be pinned down to a single meaning, for, as Kristeva wrote, “each word is an intersection of word where at least one other word can be read.... Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations, any text is the absorption and transformation of another.”¹² This argument suggests that each text does not just bear the traces of influences but, in the more

¹¹ Particularly for their discussions on intertextuality, See Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Walker (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), and Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josue V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979).

¹² Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 66. Because Kristeva situates the text within history and society and within cultural texts, I find her notion of intertextuality more germane to Strehler than Barthes’ pure linguistic notion of intertextuality. For a comparative discussion of intertextuality, see Susan Stanford Friedman, “Weavings: Intertextuality and the (Re)Birth of the Author,” *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, eds. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 146-180.

radical sense, every word, phrase or segment is a reworking of other writings which precede or surround the individual work. There is no such thing as literary originality, no such thing as the first literary work: all literature is intertextual.

Poststructuralism's understanding of the text as an intricate web of intertextual citations seemed to provide a proper model to understand Strehler's theatrical work. If there was such a thing as the Strehler style, which he denied, it would have been the eclectic interweaving of some of the best European theatrical traditions into his vigorous interpretation of some of the best European theatrical classics.¹³ Within a single production, Strehler would incorporate such diverse theatrical languages as the Pirandellian concern with theatre within theatre, the Brechtian analysis of politics, the *lazzi* of the *commedia dell'arte*, and the stagings of lyrical opera, as he did spectacularly in his production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

Such eclectic interweaving of diverse inspirations was present from the formative stage of Strehler's career. His natural instinct for Italian theatre that included lyrical opera and popular *commedia* was well

¹³ Throughout his conversation with Ugo Ronfani, Strehler made several remarks echoing his practice of interweaving the greatest twentieth century European theatrical traditions. For instance, Strehler told Ugo Ronfani, "I am convinced that a mysterious bond unites Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Copeau, Brecht, and Chaplin." See Ronfani, 181. Quoted in Maria Nadotti: 122.

balanced with strong attachment to the epic theatre of Brecht and his love of French theatre, particularly the kind of theatre with 'extratheatrical' commitment practiced by Jacques Copeau and Louis Jouvet. Calling Copeau, Jouvet, and Brecht his three masters, Strehler explained their particular kinds of influence on his mise-en-scene:

I owe to Jouvet the sense of a 'critical presence' in the staging of a performance: the discovery that a production is not only a philological, cultural, or technical effort, but also a sensitive reading of a text, an intuitive surrender to its poetic values....

I owe to Copeau an austere, moral, almost Jansenist vision of the theatre. Theatre as moral responsibility in terms of community. It is a painfully religious idea of theatricality. Theatre that is absolute commitment, a giving of oneself to others, severe even when comic, exclusive in the quest for order, honesty, truth.¹⁴

Brecht was my last true master in art and in life.... Jouvet had no sense of history. He was not really a part of life. Brecht taught me, taught all of us, that only by living as men, with our own particularities, our own thoughts, can we face up to the task of the theatre.... You must see the theatre as a place of mutability, of dialectical fact....Brecht taught me doubt, the fundamental essence of dialectics. To live dialectically with oneself and with the world is difficult, but for me it is essential... It(dialectics) means that you are always able to change your ideas, that you are not bound for life to an 'ideology', and that you can also seek for truth in opposites.¹⁵

It was evident that Copeau's moral commitment, Jouvet's dedication to the thorough exploration of the artistic and philosophical meaning of the text, and Brecht's sense of history and dialectics had been assimilated into

¹⁴ Ibid., 62-64, quoted in Maria Nadotti:120-21.

¹⁵ Strehler, interview in *In Contact with the Gods?*, 269-270.

Strehler's concept of theatre. To Strehler, theatre was a vocation worthy of one's life, which required an unconditional commitment to the mastery of the performer's arts and rigorous search for the meaning of the text, and which had a unique potential for the exploration of human being and its relation to and in society and history.

Such eclectic influences were most prominently palpable in the acting style of his productions. The highly refined acting style that characterized Strehler's productions was indeed a result of his experimentation with diverse acting traditions. In addition to understanding Brechtian epic style acting, Strehler's actors were trained in the Italian acting traditions such as comic improvisation and the powerful grand gestures peculiar to lyrical opera. After restaging Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* in 1974, Strehler was more drawn to the Stanislavskian naturalistic acting style, claiming that the combination of Brechtian techniques of epic theatre and Stanislavskian naturalism would be basic to a theatre of true dialectics.¹⁶ Hirst calls Strehler's achievement in successfully synthesizing these eclectic, diverse acting traditions as "a revolution in acting."¹⁷ Instead of subscribing to a particular acting tradition, Strehler took inspiration from diverse acting styles and applied

¹⁶ Strehler also told Ronfani that the salvation of modern theatre, looking at it from a stylistic point of view, was dependent on a synthesis of Stanislavski and Brecht. See Ronfani, 192. Quoted in Hirst, 25.

¹⁷ See Hirst, 123.

them at the appropriate moments within a production for maximum effects, creating a unique, rare quality that had clear physicality, emotional resonance, critical engagement, and outrageous fun at once.

Strehler also created spectacular effects by subtly alluding to and quoting from the materials taken out of literary, theatrical, and artistic history. Through his extensive research, Strehler frequently excavated the most exquisite images relevant to his current project. In fact two of the most memorable moments of Strehler's *The Tempest* were results of such quotations from the theatrical past, as Jan Kott hinted in his critique of Strehler's *The Tempest*: the shipwreck scene and the descent of Ariel. While praising Strehler's staging of the opening shipwreck scene as "one of the most beautiful theatrical moments," Kott wrote,

Invention in the theatre is the selection of a tradition and its deliberate repetition. Strehler's spectacular *Tempest* was performed almost precisely in accordance with a recipe which Sebastiano Serlio described in his mid-XVIth century treatise on theatre architecture. The orchestra pit was divided into three corridors with their floor shaped into mounds and hollows. "Operators" hidden inside the corridors walked up and down the mounds and hollows, pulling behind them wide blue ribbons which rose and fell like waves of a stormy sea. The Baroque *machina* was moved by human hands. Strehler's first plan was to make the "machine" visible. Later he decided not to show it. Only at rehearsal... did I see for a fleeting instant the boys and girls carrying the blue sea on their raised arms.¹⁸

¹⁸ Jan Kott, "Prospero or the Director: Giorgio Strehler's *The Tempest* (Piccolo Teatro di Milano)," trans. Barbara Krzywicka,

As Kott acutely observed, Strehler's staging indeed seemed to bring back Serlio's treatise to contemporary theatre with an extraordinary effect. Kott also noticed that Strehler's unforgettable Ariel, who descended from "heaven" on a wire, rolling on the ground and floating up, gliding and walking through the air like a circus acrobat and a ballerina until she finally settled down on Lear's hands, echoed the frontpiece to Rowe's 1709 edition of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, which had portrayed Ariel floating above the sinking ship as a ballerina hanging from a wire. Kott also suggested that Ariel's balletic movements reflected the widely practiced Restoration period convention of staging *The Tempest* as opera-ballet. As Kott's observation attests, behind the creation of Ariel lay Strehler's vigorous research in theatre history, his acute eye for theatrically powerful and relevant images from it, and his ability to recycle those materials into his own creation. For Strehler, the theatrical past was a precious depository for inspiration and actual borrowings. Strehler's productions were loaded with such recycled images, providing extra pleasure for the spectators who could read Strehler's intertextual references.

In addition to his eclectic adoption of diverse inspirations, another hallmark of Strehler's long career was that he not only returned to the same playwrights, but frequently restaged the same plays. Those

Theatre 10(1979): 118.

restagings, deepened in meaning and theatrical effectiveness, have been considered among his greatest work. Goldoni's *Arlecchino, the Servant of Two Masters*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, Brecht's *Good Person of Setzuan* and *Threepenny Opera*, and Pirandello's *The Mountain Giants* were all restaged with great acclaim. This trend became dominant when Strehler returned to the Piccolo in 1972 after four years absence from the theatre. With the awareness of the fact that every idea or form changed with time and that theatre's particular strength, to express truths with visual and verbal clarity, was fleeting and transitory, Strehler returned to those plays that had been most meaningful for him and reinterpreted them for another generation of actors and spectators, taking his productions on lengthy and grueling tours throughout Italy and Europe and to America. Highly conscious of some of the criticism of this continuous remakes and tours, Strehler defended his practice of restaging certain plays as a natural outcome of his growing maturity;

The second *Tempest*, more than twenty years after the first, is one of the shows that is dearest to me, and which was for me, in a certain sense, intended to cancel out the other, which had been an open-air show, and critically quite insufficient. After many long years, I think I have understood what *The Tempest* is about, at least in part, what an absolute masterpiece it is, how inexhaustibly profound, and how much maturity is required to produce it.¹⁹

¹⁹ Strehler, in *In Contact with the Gods?*, 273.

Even though his restaging was a completely different, and significantly improved, version of the previous production, reflecting his maturity as a human being and director, the second production could not help being put into intertextual dialogue with his previous staging. Strehler's first version of *The Tempest* (his second Shakespearean production) was an open-air production presented in the Boboli Gardens in Florence. Judging from Strehler and Grassi's denouncement of outdoor performance in their writing on sixteen years of the Piccolo Teatro's achievement and aesthetic, preferring "a closed space with well-defined volumes with which one can play or clash,"²⁰ it seems obvious that Strehler was not happy with his first staging. The second *Tempest* unavoidably foregrounded the differences and changes between the two productions, pointing to Strehler's evolution as a theatre artist. In the case of Goldoni's *Arlecchino, the Servant of Two Masters*, having been produced in six different versions,²¹ its production became not only a trademark of the Piccolo Teatro but also served as a point of reference for the whole of Strehler's work. Each staging was a testing ground for a new performance style, new acting techniques and comic inventions, serving as a sort of auto-anthology of Strehler's and the Piccolo's evolving aesthetics and politics.

With his career stretching more than several decades and after

²⁰ Grassi and Strehler, "Sixteen Years of the Piccolo Teatro," 40.

²¹ The last 'farewell' version was produced in 1986.

creating some of the most memorable and spectacular theatrical images, Strehler's tendency of self-reference had become more and more obvious. In addition to his continual restagings, Strehler increasingly quoted his own stagings. Even though critics found such tendency as early as in his 1965 production of *Power Games*, calling it "Strehler's 8 1/2,"²² a summing-up of the director's previous work, such conscious and effective self-reference had become a more prominent feature of Strehler's later work. One of the most spectacular, ingenious self-quotations took place in his production of Goethe's *Faust, Part II*, perhaps the most postmodern of Strehler's work, in which the performance began with the descent of Ariel suspended over the prostrate body of Faust.²³ The spectators at the Piccolo must have immediately recognized Giulia Lazzarini's Ariel, whose performance in *The Tempest* had been one of the everlasting images of the production and itself had been a quotation from the theatrical past, as I described earlier. By casting Lazzarini for the part of Ariel in his *Faust* production, Strehler highlighted Goethe's borrowing from Shakespeare. At the same time, by introducing one of his most enduring theatrical moments, Strehler also commented on the fact that *Faust* was a sum of Goethe's career as well as his own.²⁴

²² Fabio Batisistini, *Giorgio Strehler* (Rome: Gremese, 1980), 198. Quoted in Hirst, 72.

²³ The part was performed by Strehler.

²⁴ For an information on the tortuous process of producing such a

This chapter will attempt to locate such self-referential moments in the *King Lear* production and read the effects of such practices. This chapter will also explore diverse and eclectic inspirations in Strehler's staging of *King Lear* and the ways in which they were executed.

III

Strehler's Shakespearean repertoire began with the production of the history play, *Richard II*(1948). Strehler's career as a Shakespearean director seems to have gone through three distinctive stages. For the first ten years, Strehler directed diverse genres of Shakespearean plays such as *The Tempest*(1948), *Romeo and Juliet*(1948), *The Taming of the Shrew*(1949), *Richard III*(1950), *Henry IV*(1951), *Twelfth Night*(1951), *Macbeth*(1952), and *Julius Caesar*(1953). Early on, Strehler seemed to struggle with the complex and dialectic dramaturgy of Shakespearean plays and to have been overwhelmed by the different styles, tones and paces that individual plays appeared to be built on. In his conversation

mega- project and its political and artistic strategies, see Christopher Balme, "Giorgio Strehler's Faust Project: Signification and Reception Strategies," *New Theatre Quarterly* 9(1993): 211-24. For a detailed description of two parts of *Faust* productions now known as *Faust- Fragments*, see Rosette C. Lamont, "Giorgio Strehler's *Faust*," *Western European Stages* 1(1989): 5-8, and "Giorgio Strehler's *Faust II*," 3(1991): 5-9. Rosette Lamont's interview with Strehler was also included in 1991 issue of *Western European Stages*, in which Lamont pointed out that Goethe's text itself and Strehler's staging contained postmodern aspects.

with Ronfani, Strehler admitted, "For me, the beginning was dismaying and painful. In fact, the Shakespeare text sets the problems of its utter polyvalence (it is historical and political, lyrical and existential) and of all the possibilities of the Elizabethan stage."²⁵ Only with the production of *Coriolanus* in 1957 did Strehler seem to strike the right chord with Shakespearean drama. David Hirst attributes Strehler's success with *Coriolanus* and his maturity in understanding Shakespearean dramaturgy to his encounter with Brecht and his epic theatre.²⁶ Only after mastering the techniques and developing a critical awareness of the politics and ethics of Brechtian epic theatre did Strehler gain a reputation as a great Shakespearean director.

His *Coriolanus* (1957) had set the seal on his reputation as a Shakespeare interpreter, and - coming as it did between *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Good Person of Setzuan* - it served to point up the link between Shakespeare and Brecht, whose style Strehler had mastered in those first two shows.²⁷

²⁵ Strehler, in Ronfani, 137, quoted in Maria Nadotti, "Stages of Strehler": 120.

²⁶ In fact, it was Brecht himself that drew Strehler's attention to *Coriolanus* who thought the play was "horrible, fascist, impossible." Brecht advised Strehler to look at the play from another point of view and particularly look closely at the characters of the tribunes Sicinius and Junius. See Strehler, *Per un teatro umano*, 122.

²⁷ See Hirst, 12. It is also necessary to point that Brecht's epic theatre was in fact influenced by Shakespearean dramaturgy. I will discuss Brecht's relationship with Shakespeare shortly.

Strehler's understanding of the staging devices and ethics of Brecht's epic theatre, particularly Alienation effect and Gestus, was unmistakably felt in his staging of *Coriolanus* and helped him to create a remarkably clear dialectic theatre out of one of Shakespeare's most complex and ambiguous dramas, while keeping all the contradictions in its human and political insight. In this production, Strehler seemed to have become a truly Brechtian director. Equally important in his success was his decision to drastically cut the number of productions he directed from ten or more, aside from his frequent staging of operas, to three or four in a year. This allowed Strehler time and energy for in-depth research and attention to each project, which became a standard practice for his later work.²⁸

Eight years later Strehler went back to direct another Shakespearean drama, the three parts of *Henry VI*, with a style and tone quite different from the austere and simple *Coriolanus*. Titled *Power Games* (1965), his adaptation of the three parts of *Henry VI* was a popular success. Known as "Strehler's blockbuster," *Power Games* employed exuberant and bravura theatricality including spectacular stage battles, court ceremonies, and fairs and festivities that helped explore the dramatic variety of the play.²⁹

²⁸ The fact that Strehler was able to work consistently with scene designer Ezio Frigerio and costume designer Luciano Damiani, both of whom could translate the director's conceptual and artistic interpretation into an exquisite theatre, also contributed to the highly polished sophistication of his productions.

²⁹ Strehler told Ronfani, "It was certainly my greatest effort as a

While political concern was at the center of the production, Brecht was by no means the only source of inspiration. The influence of Italian theatrical traditions was obvious in the exciting theatricality of *Henry VI* plays. Strehler, a consummate man of the theatre, constantly searched for diverse sources and techniques that could best serve the theatrical realization of the aesthetic truth of the text. His experience with *commedia dell'arte* à la Goldoni and other Italian theatrical traditions such as grand opera taught Strehler to recognize the innate theatricality of the play and provided more excitement and flexibility in his staging.

Strehler waited for another seven years to direct his next Shakespeare play, *King Lear*, which initiated a great crowning period of Shakespearean productions in Strehler's career. During this period, Strehler for the first time staged Verdi's operatic versions of Shakespeare's plays *Macbeth*(1975) and *Falstaff*(1980), restaged *The Tempest* with great acclaim, and twice restaged the *Power Games*, in 1973 and 1975. Part of the reason for Strehler's maturity and success with Shakespearean productions during the period may be his serious reassessment of his aesthetic and political philosophy. The late 1960s proved for Strehler, as well as for most left intellectuals and artists, a period of crisis and reorientation. His early optimistic belief in social

director. A sort of delirium.... I put as much theatre as possible into it with all the theatre's prescriptions for pacifying the public." See Ronfani, 144. Quoted in Maria Nadotti, 120.

revolution and art's contribution to that goal seemed to be replaced by his growing disillusionment with his public and with the municipal government of Milan that had subsidized the Piccolo Teatro. He was immensely frustrated with the bourgeois politics of Milan officials and particularly their unwillingness to build a new theatre that could accommodate more spectators and the growing technical sophistication in his work. Strehler was also extremely frustrated by the reactions of his young spectators to whom Strehler was part of the establishment they wanted to contest.³⁰ His abrupt departure from the Piccolo was ignited by a student protest against him in front of the Piccolo Teatro. Strehler left the Piccolo Teatro in 1968 and formed *Gruppo Teatro e Azione*. After four years of independent activities with his new group with mixed results, Strehler decided to return to the Piccolo to succeed Paolo Grassi, who accepted a superintendent's position at La Scala. The events leading up to his departure and the experiences during the intervening four years inevitably affected Strehler's future artistic direction. *King Lear*, being his first production after returning to the Piccolo, would feature such changes and reassessment. *King Lear* premiered on November 4, 1972 in the

³⁰ In his book *Per un teatro umano*, Strehler talked about his disillusioned experience of the *contestazione* : " The contestazione taught me a terrible lesson to discover one morning that you're right-wing, in the eyes of many a reactionary, when only the night before you thought you were well to the left, fighting for the cause." See Strehler, *Per un teatro umano*, 52. Quoted in Hirst, 14.

Piccolo Teatro in Milan.³¹ From the opening on, Strehler's production enjoyed tremendous critical and popular success and remained active for five years, touring most theatrical centers of Western Europe.

The first and the most urgent problem Strehler faced in staging *King Lear* was the ahistoricity of Shakespeare's text. From the beginning, Strehler was concerned with establishing the historical context of the play.³² Observing the remoteness of the fable of Lear and the absence of a specific historical background in Shakespeare's text, Strehler wrote in his first note on the work, dated April 16,³³

³¹ The cast included Tino Carraro(King Lear), Ottavia Piccolo(Fool/Cordelia), Carlo Cataneo(Kent), Renato De Carmine(Gloucester), Giuseppe Pambieri(Edmund), Gabriele Lavia(Edgar), Cesare Ferrario(Albany), Orlando Mezzabotta(Cornwall), Enrico Carabelli(Burgundy), Franco Patano(France), Fulvio Ricciardi(Oswald), Ida Meda(Goneril), Ivana Monti(Regan). Ezio Frigerio was set designer and Angelo Dallagiacomma and Luigi Lunari were translators. The performance lasted three hours and forty minutes with an intermission after Lear's unbuttoning scene in Act III, scene iv. Strehler arranged Shakespeare's text into a sequence of scenes from A to Z.

³² Luigi Lunari wrote that for the first time Strehler was faced with "the thing itself" in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, see Program of *Re Lear*.

³³ Strehler's rehearsal and research notes were included in the Program of *Re Lear* production and in the published text of *Re Lear*. See William Shakespeare, *Le Lear*, ed. Luigi Lunari with notes by Giorgio Strehler, and introduction by Agostino Lombardo(Verona: Bertani, 1974).

Ne pas négliger dans *Lear* une donnée de fait: la «fable» de Leir-Lear porte, d'après Holinshed, la date de 3105 après la naissance du monde (55 ans avant la fondation de Rome en Israël régnaient Jadas et Jéraboam)

La tragédie a été située par Shakespeare au seuil du temps, non pas hors du temps mais dans une aire historique.

On obtient ainsi une abstraction des situations, sans pour autant perdre une présence historique possible: l'histoire des hommes en un temps donné. Mais ce temps est très reculé.

La tragédie la plus éloignée dans le temps de Shakespeare: remarquer que l'on parle ici de Dieux et non de Dieu.

Eviter de la situer dans le vide.

Eviter d'en faire un prétexte historique.

(Don't neglect one given fact(clue) in *Lear*: the fable of Leir-Lear story, according to Holinshed, bears the date 3105 after the formation of the world (55 years before the foundation of Rome when Israel was governed by Judas and Jeroboam.

Shakespeare had situated the tragedy on the threshold of time, not completely outside time, but within a historical period.

One obtains therefore an abstraction of situations, without losing any possibility of historical presence: the history of human beings in a given time. But the time is very remote.

The oldest tale among Shakespeare's plays: notice that people talk about the gods, not God.

Avoid situating the play in the void.

Avoid making any historical pretense.)³⁴

King Lear posed a very difficult task for Strehler's dialectical mode of direction, which required the specific historical circumstances that determined the development of the events, as was manifested in his productions of *Coriolanus* and the *Power Games*. After vigorous research

³⁴ Strehler, *Un Théâtre pour la vie: Réflexions, entretiens, notes de travail*, ed. Sinah Kessler with preface by Bernard Dort, and trans. Emmanuelle Genevois (Paris: Fayard, 1980), 279. This book is a French translation of Strehler's *Per un teatro umano*. I used this French version in referring to Strehler's rehearsal notes due to my lack of knowledge in the Italian language. The English translation of the quotations from this book is my own.

and contemplation on the meaning of the play, Strehler concluded that *King Lear* was a tragedy of human existence and a play about a voyage in the realization of man's own nature through that of Lear. In other words, it was a metaphysical, universal tragedy of human existence:

En somme, ce *Lear* est une tragédie de l'existence, de l'homme, de la crédibilité des générations, etc. On ne peut pas l'enfermer à l'intérieur de l'histoire. L'histoire est une des composantes, parmi d'autres.

(In summary, *Lear* is a tragedy of existence, of man, of the credulous generations and many other things. One can not lock it away within history. History is one component among other things.)³⁵

Strehler reasoned that such a play of metaphysical, existential contemplation could exist outside a specific historical setting, provided that he find the right device to keep it from being too abstract or too realistic. Strehler and his set designer, Ezio Frigerio, hit on a powerful idea for the setting of the production that would provide just such a device: a circus ring. Strehler himself explains the conception of the setting in the program note,

La scene: un teatro-mondo. Un luogo-teatro che diventa mondo: un circo-mondo. Una pista, una cosmica pista per una rappresentazione di vita e storia. Una scena vuota e faticosa: desolata. Una superficie tragica, fangosa, primordiale, in cui si

³⁵ Ibid., 285.

cammina a fatica. In cui si affonda con i piedi, in cui ci si insudicia quando si cade.

Su questa «terra» poggiano le precarie regge che i «servi» allestiscono per i potenti: fragili come le passerelle gettate sull'abisso, o le povere tavole in precario equilibrio per i giochi del pagliacci o di abilissimi acrobati per i salti mortali.

(The setting: a theatre/a world. A theatre space which becomes a world; a circus/a world. A circus ring, a cosmic ring for the dramatisation of life and of history. An empty setting: abandoned. Its surface is bleak, muddy, primordial; it is hard work walking on it; your feet sink in it; you get covered in mud when you fall. The precarious dominion of the powerful is laid out by the servants on this land: as fragile as planks over an abyss, or those which are used by clowns or acrobats for balancing acts or death-defying stunts.)³⁶

By conceiving the world as a circus/theatre and human beings as clowns who “fret and strut” on “this great stage of fools,” Strehler found a perfect metaphor for the human condition and a setting that was congenial to the world of Shakespeare. This setting also became an alienation device to his actors causing them physical discomfort in moving through muddy earth and fragile planks and keeping them and the spectators aware of the metaphysical dimension of the play in a concrete manner. In this constructed metatheatrical circus-world, Lear and Gloucester were cast as clowns making a journey of self-realization, accompanied by the Fool and Poor Tom. Lear’s two daughters, their husbands, and Edmund were animal tamers, while their servants were both spectators and stagehands, witnessing their masters’ journey.

This highly original conception of the play along with exquisitely

³⁶ Strehler, Programme of *Re Lear*, 1972. Quoted in Hirst, 78.

clear and resonate performances helped earn its reputation as one of the most significant stagings of Shakespeare's play in the twentieth century along with Peter Brook's 1962 production and Gielgud/Granville-Barker's 1931 collaboration on the play. Daniel J. Watermeier, a contributor for *Shakespeare around the Globe* wrote,

Undoubtedly Giorgio Strehler's 1972 production has been the most successful and satisfying of the postwar years.... Blending a strikingly simple but evocative and theatricalized mise-en-scene with sensitive, polished performances and a highly personal but cogent idea of Lear's meaning, Strehler's production has been widely influential.³⁷

This strange but striking setting was a manifestation of Strehler's theatrical genius that integrated certain techniques and concerns of Brechtian epic theatre with metaphysical (existential) underpinning of the play that had been explored by Jan Kott's study on *King Lear*.

Jan Kott was the first scholar who interpreted Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a Beckettian absurdist drama par excellence and its characters as clowns, in his influential book, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. By recognizing the parallel between his own contemporary world and that of

³⁷ Samuel Leiter, et al., eds. *Shakespeare around the Globe: A guide to Notable Postwar Revivals* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), 301. Watermeier further pointed out that Strehler's production was very influential on the subsequent *King Lear* productions such as Maguel Narros' 1982 *Lear*, Manfred Karge and Mattias Langhoff's 1979 *Lear* in his use of circus setting and conceptualization of the characters as clowns.

the Shakespearean plays, Kott argued that when absolute values such as God, History, and Nature had been stripped of any ultimate truth, the world became absurd and grotesque, and that in that world human beings were mere fools and buffoonery became a philosophy. To Kott, Shakespearean plays embodied such a grotesque world, which made Shakespeare his contemporary and that of the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd, particularly Samuel Beckett. In the chapter titled as “*King Lear* or *Endgame*,” Kott argued that Beckett’s *Endgame* and, in some sense, *Waiting for Godot* were the skeleton form of *King Lear*, emptied of all action and everything external,³⁸ and that in *King Lear* the clowns became the central figures and the clowning was the central action of the play: “In Shakespeare clowns often ape the gestures of kings and heroes, but only in *King Lear* are great tragic scenes shown through clowning.”³⁹ Lear and Gloucester were fools who did not realize that their existence was clownish. Strehler, though a self-avowed Brechtian, found Kott’s understanding of *King Lear* as Beckettian *Endgame* very effective. Particularly Kott’s interpretation of Lear and Gloucester as clowns was most instrumental to his conception of the play. Strehler brilliantly incorporated and further developed Kott’s idea in his mise-en-scene. It

³⁸ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 157.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

seems only natural that Jan Kott enthusiastically praised Strehler's production as the best that European theatres currently could offer and as even superior to Peter Brook's celebrated 1962 *King Lear* production. Kott wrote that Peter Brook's production was "a story of flesh and blood...But Strehler's *King Lear* is more effective and cruel, and a true metaphysical drama." ("Una storia di carne e di sangue.... Questo di Strehler è più forte, più crudele. È un vero dramma metafisico.")⁴⁰

However Strehler's *King Lear* was not exclusively a Kottian absurdist interpretation of Shakespeare's play. As seen in his conception of the setting, Brechtian influence was equally powerful and effective in creating concrete and immediate condition of this metaphysical inquiries of the play by introducing muddy earth and movable flanks. In fact his production was a complicated interweaving of diverse theatrical sources and scholarship among which Brechtian and Kottian implications were most prominent, but not exclusive. The Program of the production actually contains a host of passages from the scholars whose ideas were directly and indirectly incorporated in Strehler's production, providing a significant window into Strehler's understanding of the play and fascinating clues to trace intertextual workings of the production. It is extremely interesting to see how Strehler negotiated and interweaved such conflicting impulses in his effort to best serve his understanding of

⁴⁰ Kott, "Lear, il Miglior Spettacolo Europeo," Program of *Re Lear*.

Shakespeare's text. It was here in his practice of reconciling contrasting ideas we encounter Strehler, a postmodern director.

Naturally Kottian influence prevailed in the action of the fools, which included Lear, Gloucester, Poor Tom, and the Fool. Instead of the commedia characters Strehler and his company famously had revitalized, Strehler modelled the Fool, Lear, and Gloucester after circus clowns: the august clown and the white-faced clown. The Fool had a painted face, red nose, and close-cropped hair and wore baggy trousers, a green sequined tail-coat, and an old misshapen top hat. Lear and Gloucester wore white makeup on their faces and clown-like frills around the neck. Not only was casting them as the circus clowns in tune with the conception of the stage as a circus ring and characters as clowns, but also the relationship between the august clown and the white-face clown in the convention of the circus clowning fitted the relationship between Lear and the Fool, as Pia Kleber observes.⁴¹ The white-faced clown is usually introduced to the circus ring when the ringmaster is involved with an animal act, invested with the master's authority including his whip. Despite his subordinate status, the august clown constantly taunts and makes a fool out of the white-faced clown who unsuccessfully tries to be in charge. This august-white-faced

⁴¹ See Pia Kleber, "Theatrical Continuities in Giorgio Strehler's *The Tempest*," *Foreign Shakespeare*, ed. Dennis Kennedy (New York; Cambridge University Press, 1993): 152-53.

clown relationship in the convention of the circus clowning conveniently reflected that of the Fool and the King, which was the relationship between a fool and a greater fool who did not recognize he was a fool and tried to hold onto his authority in vain.

Incidentally, Geneviève Serreau also described two characters in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon, as "the white clown and august(played by François and Albert Fratellini)."⁴² In addition to reflecting on the nature of the relationship between Lear and the Fool, Strehler's choice of the white-faced and august clowns suggests certain resonance with Beckettian mise-en-scene, particularly that of *Waiting for Godot*. In fact the adoption of the august and the white-faced clowns was one of the allusions Strehler made to *Waiting for Godot* in his *King Lear* production. Another striking allusion to *Waiting for Godot* took place in the scene between Lear and Gloucester in Act IV, scene vi. The scene captured a superb imagery and a sense of the cruelty and absurdity of the human condition through the clowning of the deranged Lear and the blind Gloucester. The old men, who finally realized that they were fools and the

⁴² See Geneviève Serreau, "Beckett's Clowns," *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*, ed. and trans. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 173. It is also worth mentioning Strehler's compatriot Federico Fellini's film, *The Clowns*, documenting the traditions of the European circus and its influence on the silent films of Chaplin and Keaton, came out in 1970. Fellini's earlier film, *La Strada*, had also dealt with the life of a travelling circus company. There was a striking similarity between Piccolo Ottavia's Fool and Gelsomina, the heroine of *La Strada*.

world was the great stage of fools at the cost of their sanity and sight, sat together at the edge of the stage, playing and becoming clowns. Amidst existential confrontation with their own follies and nothingness, Lear demanded his pinching shoe to be taken off, and then Lear and Gloucester played with Lear's shoe like two children playing with their favorite toy. Strehler's staging of the scene resonated with the scene between Vladimir and Estragon at the beginning of *Waiting for Godot*. Lear's pinching shoe seemed to point to the boot that Estragon was trying to take off at the beginning of *Waiting for Godot*.

If Kottian influence was subtly alluded to in staging the scene between Lear and Gloucester, Strehler's staging of the Dover cliff scene (Act IV, scene vi) was a direct quotation from the passages in Kott's book. To Kott, this scene in which a mad man leads a blind man and talks him into believing in a non-existing mountain best captured the absurd condition of human existence. This was the scene that, Kott declared, had inspired Beckett's creation of *Endgame* and the scene in *Waiting for Godot* of the blind Pozzo leading the dumb Lucky. Kott interpreted Gloucester as Everyman and Gloucester's suicide attempt as a parable of both the Elizabethan and contemporary human condition and fall. Arguing that this type of scene was not to be thought of outside the theatre, or rather a certain kind of theatre, Kott suggested that "this entire scene is written for a very definite type of theatre, namely pantomime. This pantomime only

makes sense if enacted on a flat and level stage.”⁴³ Pantomime is exactly how Strehler staged this scene. While assuring Gloucester that they were heading to Dover, Edgar held Gloucester’s hands and kept circling around the same spot, stamping his one foot on the stage with regular beat. This continuous circling created enough sense of disorientation for Gloucester not to suspect the real location. Strehler’s setting for the cliff scene consisted of two planks bridging from the floor to a rostrum about one foot high which gave just enough height for the blind Gloucester not to touch the floor when he bended over to check the abyss of the cliff. Toward the stage floor one foot below, the blind Gloucester made a suicidal jump. Gloucester’s suicide attempt, an act of utter despair, and Edgar’s suffering from watching his father’s excruciating journey of self-realization were all communicated in earnest. But as Kott writes, “The blind Gloucester who has climbed a non-existent height and fallen over flat boards is a clown.”⁴⁴ Gloucester’s suicide attempt mimed on the stage was an act of a circus clown. When Gloucester finally fell over the empty stage in Strehler’s production, the spectators laughed and gave an ovation⁴⁵ in appreciation of the performance style that captured the tragic,

⁴³ Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 142. Kott’s passages from the chapter on *King Lear* were quoted under the title of “Pantomima Grottesca” in The Program of *Re Lear*, along with an interview with Kott.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 147.

⁴⁵ Giving an ovation during the performance as a sign of the

absurd, and at the same time inherently theatrical nature of the scene with such lucidity.

Another passages included in the program for *Lear* was from A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* which famously praised the universality of Shakespeare's characters and plays.⁴⁶ In Bradley's writing Strehler found an inspiration for one of the most exciting ideas of his *King Lear* production: the doubling of the Fool and Cordelia. Strehler's observation that Cordelia's disappearance and appearance again at the end of the play coincided with the Fool's appearance and disappearance led to a conclusion that the role of the Fool was an extension of that of Cordelia in terms of her relationship with Lear. Bradley explained that Cordelia and the Fool do not occupy the stage at the same time because the same actor played both parts on the Elizabethan stage. This suggested to Strehler the casting of a single actress, Ottavia Piccolo, for both parts.⁴⁷ By having the

audience's appreciation of the excellent performance was a conventional practice in the Piccolo Teatro. There were several such moments during the performance including Lear's "I shall go mad" speech in Act II scene ii.

⁴⁶ See A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955). In the book, Bradley also argued that *King Lear* was the greatest among Shakespearean plays, but unstageable.

⁴⁷ See Strehler, *Un Théâtre pour la vie*, 297-98. Strehler wrote, "Quand Cordélia disparaît, le Fou apparaît, quant le Fou disparaît, Cordélia réapparaît. C'est tout à fait évident, mais cela ne justifie pas en soi une identification de Cordélia avec le Fou.... Plus tard vient à mon secours une citation de Bradley qui suppose que cette double apparition-disparition était due au fait qu' «au temps de

same actress play both Cordelia and the Fool, Strehler made sense of the mysterious disappearance of the Fool, who returned as a comforting daughter. The enigmatic meaning of Lear's line "and my poor fool is hanged," addressed to the corpse of Cordelia, was thereby clarified. The Fool became a substitute for Cordelia, and vice versa. The curious absence of the Fool at the love contest could be partly explained that Cordelia's blunt rejection of Lear's ridiculous love test also fulfilled the Fool's usual role as antifatlerer and foil to Lear. Naturally, Strehler found the Fool ageless and sexless, for she was a substitute for Lear's favorite daughter. Despite the Fool's naughtiness and cruelty, requisite qualities of a court jester, Piccolo's performance was also noted for its strong sense of bitter sweetness toward Lear. Piccolo's performance achieved the remarkable feat of delivering an unusually delicate balance between being foil and loving daughter to Lear, accompanying his journey to the final tragic self-realization. Agostino Lombardo wrote of Piccolo's performance,

She is the unforgettable clown with cropped hair and painted face, alternately comic and tragic, tender and cruel, fragile but [sic] the same time strong, happy and sad, full of laughter and desperate: a formidably accomplished performer who conveys all the aspects of the character. Through the clarity of her expression and movement she makes sense of the virtually untranslatable language Shakespeare gives the character, and, above all, elucidates - with that clear direct voice of hers - the truth behind all appearances which is the Fool's

Shakespeare l'acteur qui incarnait Cordélia tenait aussi le rôle du Fou»."

raison d'être, and - at the same time - the crux of the tragedy.⁴⁸

Ottavia Piccolo's performance of the Fool made it clear that Lear's tragedy stemmed from his very failure to recognize his clownish existence in a world which was but a circus arena.

Another passage that influenced Strehler's production was from Caroline F. Spurgeon's 1932 article, "Leading Motives in the Imagery of Shakespeare's Tragedies."⁴⁹ Spurgeon's discussion of the pervasiveness of animal imagery in *King Lear* seemed to help Strehler to visualize the characters of the young, evil generation that included Goneril, Regan, their husbands, and Edmund. The imagery of savage beasts was not only reflected in Strehler's costuming of the young characters with tight-fitting black leather suits, but most prominently featured in his staging of Act III, scene iv. After confronting Lear for the last time, Goneril and Regan went indoors with their husbands, leaving Lear outside as the storm was brewing. Goneril, Regan, and their husbands stood on a rostrum at the center stage, while the servants were raising the wooden planks vertically so as to create an effect of enclosing them in a wooden case. They were

⁴⁸ Agostino Lombardo, "Irrappresentabile o Illeggibile?" *Re Lear*, 263-264. Quoted in Hirst, 79.

⁴⁹ Caroline F. Spurgeon, "Leading Motives in the Imagery of Shakespeare's Imagery," *His Infinite Variety: Major Shakespearean Criticism since Johnson*, ed. Paul N. Siegel (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1964), 222-248.

like caged animals, precariously clinging to their territory.⁵⁰

Given the significant influence of Brecht on Strehler's aesthetics and the unmistakably dialectical ending of the production, there was a curious absence of quotations from Brecht's writing in the program. Closest to Brecht was a passage from Arnold Kettle which interpreted *King Lear* as a journey of self-knowledge.⁵¹ However throughout the performance, Brechtian influence was apparent. One such instance was the staging of Lear's love contest scene at the beginning of the production. Strehler's staging uncannily pointed to Brecht's own writing regarding this very scene. Like Strehler, Brecht had been grappling with Shakespeare throughout his career. If his early writings mostly in *A Short Organum for the Theatre*⁵² left an impression that Brecht was critical of Shakespeare and tried to dissociate his theatre from Shakespearean tradition, in *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, a posthumously compiled book, Brecht embraced the power of Shakespearean dramaturgy, urging theatre artists to learn

⁵⁰ Agostino Lombardo observed that in Strehler's staging they were like the Vices of the medieval morality play who had expelled the Virtues from the castle. See Agostino Lombardo, Program of *Re Lear*.

⁵¹ See Arnold Kettle, "Un Cammino di Conoscenza," Program of *Re Lear*. The quotation is from Kettle's *Shakespeare in a Changing World* (New York: International Publishers, 1964).

⁵² See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1974).

from “a theatre full of A-effects.”⁵³ Critics generally have agreed that Brecht consciously drew from Shakespeare and the Elizabethan theatre much of what was new and innovative in his own dramatic methods and attitudes to the theatre-what he called first epic theatre and later developed into dialectical theatre.⁵⁴ After working on his own adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, Brecht became more and more impressed with Shakespeare’s command of contradiction and causation, and the dialectical structure of the play as a whole. So much so that he cautioned against any kind of alteration in adapting Shakespeare’s play: “I think we can alter Shakespeare if we can alter him. But it has to be done very carefully, not arbitrarily, if we’re not to spoil the play. And there’s always a risk that unsuitable alterations may mobilize all Shakespeare’s excellencies against you.”⁵⁵ Strehler’s cautious attitude towards Shakespeare’s text seems to echo that of Brecht. It is no surprise that both directors found the love test scene in *King Lear* extremely difficult to stage.

In fact, the love contest scene has been a source of puzzlement to many directors and scholars for its incongruity with the mood of the rest

⁵³ Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, trans. John Willet (London: Methuen & Co. LTD, 1965), 58.

⁵⁴ For an excellent study of the relationship between Brecht and Shakespeare, see, Margot Heinemann, “How Brecht read Shakespeare,” *Political Shakespeare*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

⁵⁵ Bertold Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), 869.

of the play and its lack of psychological motivation for Lear's decision. In *The Messingkauf Dialogues* by way of the discussions among The Actor, The Dramaturg, and The Philosopher, Brecht suggested that the scene should be staged by having an actual map torn up to stress the arbitrariness of Lear's division of the kingdom:

You might as well take his division of his kingdom seriously and have an actual map torn up in the first scene. Lear could hand the pieces to his daughters in the hope of ensuring their love that way. He could take the third piece, the one meant for Cordelia, and tear that across once again to distribute to the others. That would be a particularly good way of making the audience stop and think.⁵⁶

Strehler developed this idea of tearing up an actual map and handing over the pieces to his daughters into a more elaborate and theatrically stunning staging. In his rehearsal note dated July 1, Strehler recorded the difficulties of staging the first scene, musing on its complexity. The arbitrariness of Lear's unrealistic and absurd abdication, and the almost equally ridiculous love test had to be foregrounded along with its full consequential importance to the development of the play. Strehler cut the scene between Gloucester, Kent, and Edmund and began the performance with the love test scene. On the almost empty stage surrounded by a tightly stretched circus tent, Lear, played Tino Carraro, made a powerful solo entrance with a gesture of outstretched arms. He summoned the court

⁵⁶ Bertold Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, 63.

to announce his decision to abdicate his throne in favor of his daughters. This solo entrance of Carraro who had played leading roles in some of the most significant Strehler's productions, was understood to the spectators and reviewers as an autobiographical gesture alluding Strehler's return to the Piccolo after a turbulent four years as "a sadder and wiser man," as Hirst puts it. With Lear's words, "la mappa," a mysterious ceremonial ritual began. A transparent veil, a kind of Brechtian traverse curtain, which also represented the map of Lear's kingdom, was drawn across the stage at the proscenium level. The stage was bathed in half-light, and the figures were static and majestically dressed. The love contest was performed behind this veil as a kind of formal ceremony conducted between a high priest and his faithful followers, with music of boys' choir accompanied by the pipe organ. In the testimony of their love for Lear, both Goneril and Regan almost chanted their speeches with their hands folded in prayer. As soon as Cordelia refused to participate in Lear's test, moving downstage out of the veil and light, the music stopped. The mysterious, dreamy world of ritual was suddenly shattered. Denouncing Cordelia, the enraged Lear cut the veil into two pieces and took off his twin crowns throwing them at the feet of Goneril and Regan, who in turn courteously picked them up. Left alone at the end of the scene, the two daughters also picked up the two halves of the veil and meticulously folded their separate portions. The staging of the scene with minimum

props and simple actions was swift and clear. But the effect was complex and theatrically powerful.

The presentation of the first scene showed Strehler's clear understanding of Brecht's *Gestus* and his mastery in creating an alienation effect. Above all, by cutting the veil/map in half, and showing the two daughters picking up and folding their shares in a simple, but deliberate gesture, resembling bourgeois housewives' folding of sheets, Strehler brilliantly showed the consequence of Lear's absurd abdication and his two daughters' unabashed materialism. In fact the entire performance was full of such gestic moments and alienation effects, creating memorable, arresting images in the production.

Another distinctive Brechtian aspect of the production would be its importance given to the role of servants. Strehler not only kept all servant characters and their dialogue but also used them as a theatrically very effective device. In his rehearsal note Strehler described three functions of the servant: "une fonction de contrepoint, de commentaire, de démystification." (a function of counterpoint, of commentary, and of demystification.)⁵⁷ Strehler used the servants not only as dramatic characters interacting with their masters but also as witnesses to their masters actions, demystifying the events of the drama. Instead of using stagehands, Strehler had the servants change props and handle the

⁵⁷ Strehler, *Un Théâtre pour la vie*, 285.

configuration of planks, lurking behind their masters. They were ever present at all the crucial scenes of the performance such as Lear's mad trial scene setting the table for mad Lear and Gloucester's blinding scene participating in torturing Gloucester and later challenging their masters' inhumanity. Even their pure presence in such scenes seems to have provided their silent comment on the larger implications of the consequences of their masters' actions.

Strehler's Brechtian aesthetics and politics were never more clearly displayed than in his creation of Edgar. In Strehler's production the role of Edgar was significantly stressed and extended, due to Strehler's dialectic understanding of *King Lear*. Despite the powerful Kottian implication of a circus setting and Strehler's debt to Kott's understanding of *King Lear*, the most troubling of Kott's views to Strehler was his non-dialectic understanding of the meaning of the play's ending. Arguing that the play did not restore the order and heal the world with a character like Fortinbras or Malcolm as in Shakespeare's other tragedies, Kott wrote,

The theme of *King Lear* is the decay and fall of the world. The play opens like the Histories, with the division of the realm and the king's abdication. It also ends like the Histories, with the proclamation of a new king. Between the prologue and the epilogue there is a civil war. But unlike the Histories and Tragedies, in *King Lear* the world is not healed again. In *King Lear* there is no young and resolute Fortinbras to ascend the throne of Denmark; no cool-headed Octavius to become Augustus Caesar; no noble Malcolm to "give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights."⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 152.

Strehler could not subscribe to such a totally pessimistic outlook. To Strehler *King Lear* was a play about a journey of self-realization and the education of the future generation represented by Edgar. He would agree with Kott's metaphysical approach only to the point that it helped illuminate human nature, motivating us to understand and become better human beings.

From the beginning, Strehler understood Edgar as representing the just human being: "Edgar représente le pôle humain 'juste'." Ironically citing the same example of Malcolm in *Macbeth* to support his own argument, Strehler insisted that Shakespeare had always installed the positive sign in younger generation: "Shakespeare laisse le pôle positif à celui qui est en devenir, à un jeune."⁵⁹ Since Edgar represented a just, humane young generation, his education and journey to a more mature human being was as important as that of the old generation, Lear and Gloucester, in Strehler's dialectic conception of the production. For this purpose, Strehler made small but crucial textual changes in the last lines of the performance. Instead of Edgar's final couplet "The eldest hath borne most; we that are young/Shall never see so much nor live so long."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Strehler, 283.

⁶⁰ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1975), Act V scene iii, 324-25.

Strehler had Edgar say,

Noi che siamo giovani
non permetteremo
che si vedano piu simili sventure,
ne pretenderemo di essere eterni.

(We that are young/ will not permit /such tragic event to occur
again/ nor assume that we will live for ever.)⁶¹

This change was the natural end of a series of arrangements the director made to draw an inevitable conclusion to his research on the meaning of the play.

In order to emphasize Edgar's experiences through the events of the play and his transformation, Strehler moved Edgar's first return to the stage as Poor Tom in Act II, scene 3 to Act III, scene 3. The director put Edgar's soliloquy right between the storm scene and Lear's unbutton scene, stressing that Edgar's painful journey was as important as Lear's. While delivering his soliloquy, Edgar undressed to become naked, thus transforming himself into Poor Tom. The spectators witnessed this amazing transformation of an actor who would undertake a series of transforming roles in his journey to be a qualified heir to the new world. Strehler's intention is made clear by David Hirst's report on the rehearsal process. Strehler actually delineated seven separate roles that Edgar had to

⁶¹ William Shakespeare, *Re Lear*, ed. Luigi Lunari, Sequenza Z, 211.

play in the course of the drama:

The first six he defines as: faithful elder son, Poor Tom, the 'voice' guiding Gloucester, the peasant who finds Gloucester at the foot of the cliff, the ruffian who kills Oswald, and the unknown knight who kills Edmund. It is his experience in handling these- a sort of Pirandellian 'game of roles'- which makes him able to assume responsibility at the end of the play, a more confident, mature, and human figure: his seventh and final transformation.⁶²

Assuming seven different roles was no easy task for an actor and Gabriele Lavia rose to the challenge of the part, giving a striking performance that one has rarely seen of the role of Edgar. Lavia's performance in the hovel scene in particular was a tour de force of acting combining epileptic mime with the gibberish of a feigned fool, which finally led Lear to realize his clownish human nature. The confrontation of three madmen in this scene never had more depth of signification.⁶³ With his realization "is man no more than this?" after facing Poor Tom, Lear accepted the clownish existence of human beings and joined Poor Tom by undressing and imitating Poor Tom's buffoonery. The real Fool, while witnessing Lear and Poor Tom's buffoonery, came down to the auditorium, directly addressing the prophecy speech in Act III scene ii to the audience. The last

⁶² Hirst, 81.

⁶³ Strehler differentiated three types of fools in *King Lear*: Lear, who becomes a fool, Edgar, who pretend to be a fool, and the Fool, who is a fool by profession. See Strehler, *Un Theatre pour la vie*, 284.

tableau of the scene in which three men embracing madness traversed the stage hand in hand in queue, left a powerful image. With each role he performed, Edgar proceeded toward his final maturity. Gabriele Lavia's Edgar in Strehler's *King Lear* was arguably one of the most unforgettable Edgars ever created on stage in its conception and performance.

Strehler's conception of Edgar as the representation of a new just, humanistic generation strongly echoed the ending of Verdi's opera *Simon Boccanegra*, which Strehler directed at La Scala in 1971, a year before his *King Lear* production. Strehler's triumphant staging of the opera is widely regarded as having rescued the rather obscure opera among Verdi's oeuvre and ignited new interest in producing the work.⁶⁴ Verdi adapted a complex political melodrama of the Spanish playwright, Garcia Gutierrez, set in the fourteenth-century sea-going republic of Genoa in the midst of a conflict between the patrician and plebian parties. Critics have observed that Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* was more Shakespearean in politically complex theme and somber, dark mood than Verdi's Shakespearean operas, *Othello*, and *Falstaff*.⁶⁵ David Hirst even included this production in Strehler's

⁶⁴ See *L'Avant Scène Opéra* 19(1979), *Simon Boccanegra* special issue. Strehler was also a very influential opera director, vocalizing passionately the reform of the conventions of the opera staging. His success with *Simon Boccanegra* was partly due to Strehler's collaboration with conductor Claudio Abbado, with whom Strehler frequently worked afterwards.

⁶⁵ See Jean Louis Martinoty, "*Simon Boccanegra* ou les vies

Shakespearean repertoire. Its particular affinities with *King Lear* are striking⁶⁶: the two principal characters are old politicians, Simon, who is a leader of the plebians and the Doge of Genoa, and Fiesco, who is a patrician politician, both of whom have lost a child, Maria/Amelia; both are fathers who experience a painful pilgrimage towards understanding. The hero dies after rediscovering his lost daughter, Maria, and there is a scene of reconciliation with his enemy in the final act. The emergence of the worthy heir to the dogeship of the city in the character of Gabriele particularly fitted Strehler's concern with the dialectical theatre, and showed an intertextual link with Strehler's *King Lear* production. This intertextual echoing must have been unmistakable to Strehler's audience, the cultural elite of Milan, who regularly visited La Scala and the Piccolo. Through their recognition of the common link between two works, they were brought to a closer understanding of Strehler's theatre of dialectics.

Such a tendency to choose the plays that share common interest became more prominent when Strehler came back to the Piccolo, making his work highly self-referential. Not only did he constantly restage certain plays, as I described earlier, but also his productions revealed common links among themselves with growing frequency. Strehler's work in the

paralleles," *L'Avant Scène Opéra*: 105.

⁶⁶ See Giuseppe Verdi, *Simon Boccanegra: Melodrama in Three Acts and a Prologue*, Text by Francesco Maria Piave, trans. Mary Ellis Peltz (New York: G. Schirmer, 1964).

80s, for instance, seems to have been particularly concerned with the theme of the power of illusion and theatrical magic and its relationship with life, resulting in the trilogy of illusion: *The Tempest* (1978), Corneille's *Illusion*, (1984) and Edwardo de Filippo's *Great Magic* (1985). In addition to the unique qualities of the individual productions, the trilogy also set up intertextual connections among the three productions in their metatheatrical concerns, just as *Simon Boccanegra* and *King Lear* revealed their intertextual links to Strehler's concern for the dialectic theatre.

Self-quotation was another distinctive self-referential practice. For example, Strehler was very fond of using an immense veil that provided him with apt symbol and effective theatrical tool in a number of productions. Strehler used the veil in *Lear* as a symbol of his kingdom and to theatricalize his division of the kingdom. Similar use of the veil with an equal theatrical ingenuity took place in his staging of Verdi's *Macbeth*. In the witch scene, Strehler used a huge veil floating over the whole stage onto which giant faces were projected for the apparitions. This giant veil also gave visual form to Macbeth's subconscious, constantly reflecting changing shapes and colors. At the end of *The Cherry Orchard*, the huge white cloth came down to cover the furniture and the stage, creating an unmistakable sense of closure. In the second scene of *The Tempest*, Strehler used the folding of a veil to a great effect. As soon as Prospero's magic incantation was over, Prospero and Miranda folded an embroidered

kerchief that had been thrown over Prospero's shoulder, implying that Prospero would put aside conjuring up his magic for a while. Strehler's theatrical genius could make a simple act of folding a cloth or kerchief on stage spectacular and resonant with meaning, turning it into a moment of alienation effect. This distinctive use of veil and its elaborate folding also draw our attention to the interlinks among Strehler's work.

IV

Observing Strehler's growing self-referential tendency, Jan Kott, who had been so enthusiastic about Strehler's *King Lear* production, wrote critically in his review of *The Tempest*, "Strehler is a prisoner of his imagination, of his theatre, and of all the plays he ever directed."⁶⁷ Kott's criticism seems to misrepresent Strehler's fundamental eclecticism that grew out of Strehler's endless search for the meaning of the text. Strehler was first and foremost an interpreter.⁶⁸ No matter how striking his theatrical productions have been, they always proved a source of illumination and often revaluation of the dramatic text. Rather than being a prisoner of his own theatre, as my analysis of *King Lear* illustrated, Strehler actively studied scholarship and the production history of the play

⁶⁷ Jan Kott, "Prospero or the Director," 119.

⁶⁸ Strehler told Ronfani, "I have always known that I was a born interpreter. Not a creator." See Ronfani, 261. Quoted in Hirst, 17.

including Kott's own study of *King Lear*, and adopted diverse and sometimes conflicting theatrical languages and styles including his own theatrical inventions to theatricalize his understanding of the meaning of the text. As a result, the mise-en-scene of Strehler's *King Lear* production became a kind of intertextual text that interweaved diverse theatrical languages and traditions through the mixing of subtle allusions and direct and indirect quotations from the sources. Strehler's genius lay in that he so effectively reconciled such diverse theatrical languages into the most exquisite metaphysical experience of the play while exposing the latent dialectics of Shakespeare's text. The formal beauty of Strehler's creation, as well as the complex conceptions which underlay them, made Shakespeare's text simultaneously immensely complex and crystal clear, giving immense satisfaction to the spectator.

It seems curious that Strehler never directed another Shakespearean production after such phenomenal success with *The Tempest*. Was it that Strehler so thoroughly identified with Shakespeare by way of Prospero that he gave up directing Shakespeare's plays, if not theatre entirely? Or after directing *The Tempest*, nothing was left to challenge Strehler in staging Shakespearean work? Given the fact the last decade of Strehler's career was taken over by his *Faust* project, Strehler's interest in Shakespeare appears to have been dissipated. A revealing written

interview with the editors of *In Contact with the Gods ?* provided an answer to such questions. In response to the interviewer's question on his future plans, Strehler wrote, "At the moment, I am musing on future projects... For what seems like an eternity, I have been unable to find the courage to take on *Anthony and Cleopatra*, and *Hamlet*. Perhaps it will be the moment?"⁶⁹ The statement is an ultimate expression of Strehler's humility and respect toward Shakespeare.

Strehler was probably one of the last theatre giants who still believed in the sanctity of the text. When we move into the 1980s, we meet a new breed of directors whose attitudes toward Shakespeare's text are very different from that of Strehler. But Strehler lurks behind them watching over their work, having set such a high standard with his production of *King Lear*.

⁶⁹ Strehler, interview in *In Contact with the Gods?*, 274.

Chapter III

Suzuki Tadashi's *The Tale of Lear*: The Suzuki Style

I

Suzuki Tadashi's reputation as one of the most innovative avant-garde directors of the second half of the twentieth century has been built around his truly original productions of the Western canon from Greek tragedies to the plays of Chekhov and Beckett. In addition to being a creator of a widely influential actor training method, "the Suzuki Method," Suzuki Tadashi has been particularly respected as one of the few innovative Shakespearean directors of our time, along the line of such influential directors as Peter Brook, Giorgio Strehler, and Arianne Mnouchkine. If Greek tragedies, particularly Euripides's plays,¹ were major sources of experimentation and inspiration at the formative stage of "The Suzuki Style," that is a unique intercultural encounter between West and East, Shakespearean plays have been an invaluable vehicle in which Suzuki's mature style executes its unusual theatrical brilliance, resulting in a

¹ For a span of ten years, Suzuki exclusively directed three Greek tragedies, *The Trojan Women* (1974), *The Bacchae* (1978), and *The Clytemnestra* (1983), all based on Euripides's versions. His productions of the Greek trilogy were seen all over the world. Suzuki became known to American theatre mainly through these productions. The invitation of *The Trojan Women*, to perform at the Los Angeles Olympics Arts Festival in 1984 truly established Suzuki's reputation as one of the most influential directors of our time.

challenging but rare theatrical experiences for his spectators. With a distinctive style, which this chapter will extensively explore, Suzuki's Shakespearean productions open up interesting new possibilities of creating meaningful intercultural encounter between the Western text and the Eastern performance style.

A casual acquaintance with Suzuki's Shakespearean productions would suggest that they are intercultural performances that incorporate the conventions of the Japanese classical theatre, particularly those of *noh*, in staging Shakespeare's texts. However, Suzuki's dramaturgy is not as simple as it seems. Suzuki articulates his approach in directing Shakespearean plays:

One isn't so much seeing Shakespeare presented as seeing my deformation of Shakespeare, the Suzuki style. Ultimately it's an adaptation not on the level of words but on the level of the acting, the physical situation. On the visual level, what is presented is very different from what one might imagine by just reading the text. But the words are the same.²

Suzuki's Shakespearean productions are deliberate clashes between Shakespeare's texts and Suzuki's performer-oriented staging style, drawing on the conventions of the Japanese classical theatre. And these

² Suzuki Tadashi, interview by Ian Carruthers, "*The Chronicle of Macbeth: Suzuki Tadashi's Transformation of Shakespeare's Macbeth*," *Shakespeare: World View*, eds. Heather Kerr, Robin Eaden, and Madge Mitton (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), 227.

clashes are meant to result in a “deformation” of Shakespeare’s texts. In the same interview, Suzuki also mentions the implication of such an approach for the audience: “With Shakespeare, the audience is able to see what’s done to that story (in my adaptation). They can enjoy that; it’s a deeper experience to compare their own perceptions of that story with the presented version onstage.”³ The audience’s familiarity with the characters and the situations in Shakespeare’s text is prerequisite in appreciating Suzuki’s “deformation” of Shakespeare and partly explains the director’s attraction to Shakespeare’s plays. In other words, his Shakespearean production is not meant to be a faithful representation nor even the distillation of Shakespeare’s text, as many reviewers have pointed out,⁴ but to be an intertextual and intercultural encounter between Shakespeare’s text and the Suzuki Style that heavily relies on spectators’ active artistic and intellectual involvement for the proper appreciation of the production. This chapter will specifically study Suzuki’s 1988 English-language production of *The Tale of Lear* with an all-male American cast as

³ Ibid., 228. In another article, Ian Carruthers describes this process as bringing “Zeami into creative collision with Shakespeare.” See Ian Carruthers, “Traditions in Transformation: Suzuki Tadashi’s *The Chronicle of Macbeth*,” *Meanjin* 3(1992): 616. Ian Carruthers is currently working on a book on Suzuki as part of Cambridge University Press’ Directors in Perspective Series.

⁴ For instance, a reviewer for the *Chicago Tribune* observes, “This is more than condensed Shakespeare; it is the essence of Shakespeare, transcending the theatrical conventions with which and within which the playwright worked and reaching to the very idea that is the core of the play.” Michael Kilian, “Lear,” *Chicago Tribune*, 28 July 1988.

a site to experience such an encounter between Shakespeare's text and the Suzuki style and to assess the artistic process and cultural values of such a production. Since a proper appreciation of the intertextual and intercultural encounter in Suzuki's *The Tale of Lear* also requires significant familiarity with the Suzuki style, this chapter will extensively examine the Suzuki style and will show that it is a confluence of intercultural theatre and postmodernism.

Faced with the world-wide phenomenon of intercultural productions that have exploded into the international theatrical scene for the last two decades, of which Suzuki Tadashi's work has been an important part, theorists have been overwhelmed by a wealth of questions and problems arising from it, unable to establish a viable theory of theatrical interculturalism. A leading theorist of intercultural theatre, Patrice Pavis, expresses such a concern in his introduction of *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*:

Never before has the western stage contemplated and manipulated the various cultures of the world to such a degree, but never before has it been at such a loss as to what to make of their inexhaustible babble, their explosive mix, the inextricable collage of their languages.⁵

⁵ Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, trans. Loren Kruger (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1.

While it aims to heal divisions and increase communication between different cultures and nations, interculturalism runs a risk of obliterating fractures resulting from the other's socio-political, cultural specificities. The charges of neo-colonialism and theatrical Orientalism best articulated in Rustom Bharucha's *Theatre and World* have forced theatre practitioners to be more aware of their unconscious ideologies in their intercultural practices.⁶ Nevertheless Pavis suggests that, instead of holding forth endlessly on deep-seated intentions and on incompatible cultural perspectives, "one should locate it [intercultural theatre] as a crucible in which performance techniques are tested against and amalgamated with the techniques that receive and fusion[sic] them."⁷ In other words, in order to get hold of and assess this intercultural phenomenon as it is happening even at this moment, it is more productive to focus on exchange and reciprocal influence in the intercultural mode of theatrical expression

⁶ Despite criticism and charges of cultural appropriation, Peter Brook's 1985 production of *Mahabharata* is a historical production in the sense that his production triggered an explosion of the discussions on interculturalism in theatre. The entire controversy over Brook's *Mahabharata* generated a lively conversation, which is still under way, between the practitioners and theorists of West and East on the potential and problems of current practices in intercultural theatre. For discussions on the controversy around Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*, see Rustom Bharucha, *Theatre and World* (New York: Routledge, 1993), and David Williams, ed. *Peter Brook and the Mahabharata: Critical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁷ Patrice Pavis, ed. & intro., "Introduction: Towards a Theory of Interculturalism in Theatre?" *The Intercultural Performance Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 2.

and representation than to exclusively criticize the negative intercultural practices. Following Pavis's advice, this chapter will examine Suzuki's intercultural style as represented in his staging of *The Tale of Lear*, in order to explore specific artistic and cultural exchanges between the Shakespearean text and his performance style.

Among the issues about which theorists of interculturalism disagree is the relationship between interculturalism and postmodernism. Certainly the two phenomena coincide in time and in the practices of certain directors. The postmodern aesthetic of fragmentation and collage seems to accelerate intercultural practice, evading the charges of the cultural appropriation that haunt practically every intercultural production. In a study on Suzuki's production of *Three Sisters*, Erika Fischer-Lichte argues,

Post-modern theatre seems to be characterized and dominated by intercultural tendencies in a way that is unknown in the history of Western as well as of Japanese theatre. It may well be that this type of interculturality reflects a general development in the culture of post-industrial societies (and even in some societies in the Third World): one can observe a certain tendency of different cultures to merge into one world-culture.⁸

While Fischer-Lichte seems to see interculturalism as a genuine postmodern phenomenon, Patrice Pavis cautions against such an opinion,

⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Intercultural Aspects in Post-modern Theatre: A Japanese Version of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*," *The Play out of Context: Transferring Plays from Culture to Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 183-84.

insisting that despite the fact that in the practices of directors like Robert Wilson, Suzuki, and Béjart interculturalism converges with postmodernism, their works represent only “one type among many of cultural exchange, and moreover one which levels cultures and decrees the outmoding of those radical avant-gardes of which Artaud, Brook, and Mnouchkine are the last dinosaurs.”⁹ Pavis sees the postmodern aesthetic mainly responsible for cultural appropriation charged against some of intercultural work. Despite their different sentiments toward the relationship between interculturalism and postmodernism, Pavis and Fischer-Lichte both seem to agree that interculturalism and postmodernism converge in Suzuki’s work. This chapter will explore the ways in which Suzuki’s interculturalism becomes a postmodern practice in his staging of *The Tale of Lear*. This chapter will show that Suzuki’s intercultural practice has provided a non-Western perspective, resisting West-centered, homogenizing international intercultural theatre that appropriates and synthesizes the other cultures without consideration for the cultural specificity of the source materials.

Suzuki Tadashi’s theatre takes place at the crossroad between the intracultural and intercultural search for a theatrical style that aims to talk to the contemporary global spectators. As such, the rhetoric of Suzuki’s

⁹ Pavis, “Introduction: Towards a Theory of Interculturalism in Theatre?” 19.

aesthetic is imbued with his own homogenizing universalism, which, I would argue, proves the opposite in practice, particularly in the intercultural project like *The Tale of Lear* with an all-American cast. Suzuki starts from the assumption that language and the body were original universals of human expression, the powers of which have been erased over the course of history. Suzuki wants to recover these universals in his theatrical productions through his unique production style. Since Suzuki believes that language is developed to the highest degree of expressivity in Western drama, he exclusively uses Western texts. In an interview, Suzuki defends such a practice, citing the universal quality of those texts:

I am often asked why I use foreign texts. Well, if I use Shakespeare or Euripides, for example, I don't feel I'm using a foreign text, rather the heritage of the human race. If Europeans consider this to be a peculiarly European drama, I think that shows excessive self-consciousness on their part. If the English think that Shakespeare is part of their exclusive heritage, then Shakespeare is of no interest. It's precisely the ability to impress other nations that makes Shakespeare so excellent.¹⁰

In the same way, Suzuki believes that the human body as a means of expression is most highly developed in the traditional Japanese theatre from which he elaborates his acting method, the Suzuki Method. Despite

¹⁰ Suzuki, interview on *Japan: Live Performance*, Channel 4 (Melbourne, 1989). Quoted in Carruthers, "The Chronicle of *Macbeth*: Suzuki Tadashi's Transformation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*," 217.

its obvious Japanese origin, Suzuki claims that since the Suzuki method is founded on a condition basic to all human beings, aiming at “the discovery of an inner physical sensibility” or at “the recognition of an inner and profound memory innate to the human body,” it can be “mastered and assimilated into the body as a second instinct.”¹¹ Thus the combination of his acting method and the Western classical text would result in an intercultural form of theatre which would directly communicate with spectators all over the world. However, the claim of universal appeal is the least plausible, convincing goal of such an intercultural exchange, as my analysis of *The Tale of Lear* production will reveal. Hopefully this chapter will show that the Suzuki style is most brilliant when it helps reveal the gap between West and East, while keeping the tension between them on display mainly through performer’s body. In the process I will show what is at stake in an intercultural production, particularly in relation to its target audience.

II

¹¹ Suzuki, “Culture is the Body,” *Interculturalism and Theatre*, eds. Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta (New York: PAJ Publications, 1991), 246. This succinct transcription of the Suzuki Method was first published in *The Scot (Suzuki Company of Toga)*, a special edition for the 20th anniversary of Waseda Little Theatre and the 10th anniversary of Toga theatre. It has been circulated in many publications. Here I use the article included in *Performing Arts Journal*’s special issue on intercultural theatre.

Suzuki Tadashi began his theatrical career as one of the significant proponents of the 1960s Japanese radical little theatre movement, calling for an urgent reform in the general practices of the mainstream Japanese theatre of the time.¹² Suzuki founded *Waseda Shogekijo* in 1966 with Minoru Betsuyaku and Juro Kara, experimenting with various theatrical traditions in search of a theatrical style that could embody urgent social and political concerns, and replace the *Shingeki*, which was modeled on European Realism by the pioneers of the Japanese new drama movement at the beginning of the twentieth century and has dominated the Japanese stage since.¹³ The experimentation resulted in the three-part series production of *On the Dramatic Passion* (1966-1980) that drew on the various scenes portraying women's plight from Namboku's *kabuki* plays. Kayoko Shiraishi's performance of a mad woman who, in her imagination,

¹² For information on Suzuki's career and aesthetics, see James Brandon, "Training at the Waseda Little Theatre: The Suzuki Method," *TDR* 22(1978): 19-42, Goto Yukihiro, *Suzuki Tadashi: Innovator of Contemporary Japanese Theatre* (Ph.D diss., University of Hawaii, 1988), Marie Myerscough, "East Meets West in the Art of Tadashi Suzuki," *American Theatre* 2(1986): 4-10, Suzuki Tadashi, *The Way of Acting: The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki*, trans. J. Thomas Rimer (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986), William O. Beeman, "Styles in Production: Tadashi Suzuki's Universal Vision," *Performing Arts Journal* 17(1982): 77-92.

¹³ For the history of modern Japanese theatre, see J. Thomas Rimer, *Towards a Modern Japanese Theatre: Kishida Kunio* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), Benito Ortolani, ed. *The Japanese Theatre: From Shamanistic Ritual to Contemporary Pluralism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

reenacted the harrowing predicament of fictional heroines in the Japanese classic plays and Suzuki's radical transformation of the dramaturgy of the Japanese classical theatre drew enthusiastic responses both from spectators and critics. Particularly the second part of *On the Dramatic Passion* was heralded as "one of the milestones in the history of post-war Japanese theatre" when premiered in 1970.¹⁴ Jean-Louis Barrault invited *On the Dramatic Passion Part Two* to the Théâtre des Nations in Paris in 1972, where both the director and the actress achieved instant international theatrical acclaim.

It turned out that the intercultural experience at the Théâtre des Nations was a turning point in Suzuki's theatrical career, not because it established Suzuki's international reputation, but because there Suzuki encountered two of the most important inspirations for his artistic future: Jean-Louis Barrault's purpose-built theatre and the performance of a famous *noh* performer, Kanze Hisao, who was part of the Japanese delegation to the festival. By observing Barrault's *Théâtre Recamier*, for the first time Suzuki realized the importance of the permanent performance space that is tailored to a director's aesthetic ideals. Fixed performance space could allow continuous and communal commitment to actor training and experimentation with theatrical forms. Most of all, by watching Kanze Hisao's performance in a *noh* production, which was

¹⁴ Yasunari Takahashi, unpublished article. Quoted in Amlin Gray, "East and West, Past and Future: Tadashi Suzuki at the Cloverleaf," *Berkeley Program*: 14.

played on the stage different from the original *noh* stage, Suzuki was made to realize the significance of the performer in theatre, and the power and theatricality of *noh* theatre, which drew its effect from intensely minimal and stylized staging and powerfully controlled acting. In *The Way of Acting*, Suzuki describes the way in which Kanze Hisao's performance influenced the direction his own work was to take:

I was made to recognize its superb theatricality. The rigorous training that had tempered and shaped the body of the actor produced a brilliant liveliness...For the first time I began to realize what Zeami meant when he spoke of *yugen*, of stillness in a performance.... What I saw gave me enormous motivation.¹⁵

Suzuki also realized the importance of long, vigorous, and systematic actor training. Even though there was the embryo of style that has become known as the Suzuki Style in his *On the Dramatic Passion* productions, his encounter with Kanze Hisao's performance and *noh* theatre in Paris led Suzuki to the Japanese classical theatre for specific acting techniques and concepts. Performing at the Théâtre des Nations was a journey that Suzuki had to take to rediscover the value of his theatrical past, launching his intracultural search.

Upon returning from Paris, Suzuki and his company began planning to build their own theatrical space. In 1976 The Suzuki Company closed the theatre in Tokyo and finally moved to Toga, a remote village four hundred

¹⁵ Suzuki, *The Way of Acting*, 71-2.

miles northwest of Tokyo. Suzuki and his troupe converted a group of abandoned farmhouses into a complex of rehearsal rooms, theatre, accommodations and offices with the help of a renowned Japanese architect, Isozaki Arata. They also constructed a lakeside amphitheatre. The company changed its name to the SCOT (the Suzuki Company of Toga) and launched the Toga-mura international theatre festival which since 1982 has hosted the world's best avant-garde directors and companies.¹⁶ With newly constructed actor training facilities custom-tailored by Suzuki and through communicating with international artists, Suzuki elaborated a style that uniquely confronts West with East, past with present, resulting in a series of memorable productions of Western classics. His productions have widely traveled, and been performed at the important world theatrical centers. One of them was the 1988 production of *The Tale of Lear*.

III

Even though Suzuki had previously toured the United States, first with *The Trojan Women* in 1979 and later with a bilingual production of *The Bacchae*, played by Japanese and American actors in 1981-82, *The Tale of*

¹⁶ Tadeusz Kantor and Meredith Monk were among the participants of the festival as well as Robert Wilson and Lee Breuer whose *King Lear* versions are also the subject of this dissertation.

Lear marked Suzuki's English-language debut with all American actors drawn from four regional repertory companies, The Arena Stage of Washington D.C., Milwaukee Repertory, Berkeley Repertory, and StageWest of Springfield, Massachusetts. According to an Arena Stage program note, it was Suzuki who initiated the possibility of staging the work in English with an entirely American cast. A 1986 trip to Toga by the representatives of four companies set the project in motion. Twelve actors from the four theatre companies spent the summer of 1987 training and rehearsing with the director in Toga before bringing the production to their home stages in 1988. It was a history-making artistic collaboration, for it combined the resources of four major regional theatre companies under the direction of an internationally renowned theatre artist. It was heralded as the "most ambitious cross-cultural event yet undertaken by America's regional theatre companies."¹⁷ *The Tale of Lear* premiered on February 28, 1988, at Milwaukee Repertory theatre.¹⁸

In fact, Shakespeare's *King Lear* is one of the most frequently revived

¹⁷ Edwin Wilson, "A Crosscultural Lear," *Wall Street Journal*, 18 March 1988.

¹⁸ The all-male American cast included Tom Hewitt(Lear), Laurence Ballard(Gloucester), Tom Blair(Goneril), Corey Hansen(Regan), Charles Tuthill(Cordelia), Eric Hill(Edmund), Mathew A. Loney(Edgar), Larry G. Malvern(Attendant, Captain, Gentleman), James DeVita(Oswald), David Asher(Albany), Mark Corkins(Cornwall), and Jeffrey Bihr(The Fool). *The Tale of Lear* was performed at each regional theatre as follows: Feb. 28 – April 3 at Milwaukee Repertory Theatre; April 14 – May 15 at StageWest; May 20 – July 2 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre; July 7 – 17 at Arena Stage.

productions among Suzuki's repertory. It was first produced at the Suzuki theatre in Toga with the SCOT members in 1984 and toured to many locations in Japan. A London visit with a Japanese cast took place at the Barbican in 1994.¹⁹ It was also performed at the BeSeTo festival in Seoul, Korea, in 1995.²⁰ Each revival is, however, a new production, due to the nature of intercultural performance and particularly its specific relationship with the target audience. The English-language production of *The Tale of Lear* with an American cast for American spectators required a new set of artistic considerations and its reception inevitably relied on the target audience's ideological tolerance as well as its cultural and artistic background.

In his production style, Suzuki is concerned with the contemporary resonance the particular text has for him and his spectators, in this case, his American spectators. For Suzuki all theatrical work should touch on

¹⁹ For the reception of 1984 Japanese production, see Yasunari Takahashi, "Tadashi Suzuki's *The Tale of Lear*," unpublished article, World Shakespeare Congress, Los Angeles, 1996. Quoted in J.R. Mulryne, "The Theatre Art of Tadashi Suzuki," *Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage*, eds. Takahashi Sasayama, J. R. Mulryne, and Margaret Shewring (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁰ The BeSeTo festival was created to promote an on-going theatrical interaction among three Far-Eastern countries, China, Korea, and Japan. The festival is to convene biannually with both symposiums and theatrical productions by the representatives of three countries. Suzuki's *Lear* production was part of the inaugural season. For information on the BeSeTo festival and the reception of the Suzuki production, see Yun-Cheol Kim's performance review, *Theatre Journal* 47(1995): 416-19.

social problems and all his theatrical work is a kind of social criticism.²¹

In response to a reviewer's question as to why *King Lear* has become the preferred script of postmodern performance, Suzuki says,

Lear is about a world in dissolution, so it strikes a chord we recognize. I chose *Lear* not because I wanted to do a play by Shakespeare but because this play deals with themes that shed light on our time.... Today, the figure of the patriarch, which used to be the keystone of the social edifice, has lost its authority. *Lear* speaks to us because it dramatizes the disruption of male power. *Lear* is an absolute monarch and absolute patriarch who lost his role. Like many American males, he lashed out in destructive rage when deprived of power.²²

To Suzuki, the world in Shakespeare's *King Lear* resonates with contemporary postmodern, American society in which traditional values such as familial loyalty and patriarchal authority are challenged. To foreground this similarity, Suzuki frames Shakespeare's text with a contemporary story of an Old Man in the hospital in the last hours of his life. For Suzuki, the image of an old man in a mental institution attended

²¹ Suzuki's social and political consciousness has its root in his involvement with the 1960s radical movement and continues to be an important part of Suzuki's work, as is reflected in the foundation of the SITI(Saratoga International Theatre Institute) in collaboration with American avant-garde director, Anne Bogart. For information on the intercultural experimentation at SITI, see Eelka Lampe, "Collaboration and Cultural Clashing: Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki's Saratoga International Theatre Institute," *TDR* 37(1993): 147-156.

²² Suzuki, interview by Arthur Holmberg, "The Liberation of *Lear*: Breuer and Suzuki Experiment with a Classic," *American Theatre* 5(1988): 14.

by an indifferent nurse perfectly captures the image of society in dissolution as a result of the disruption of male power and an ensuing chaos and madness.²³ In this framing story, the Old Man reflects on his life and his children's betrayal, while listening to the Nurse reading Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Suddenly the Old Man is deluded, seeing himself as Lear, producing a vivid hallucination. Shakespeare's text is presented as an enactment of the Old Man's hallucination. When Lear dies, the Old Man also dies, fallen from his throne.

Within the framing story, Suzuki significantly condensed Shakespeare's text and edited it into a series of 16 scenes in two acts, running approximately 110 minutes without intermission.²⁴ While the plot still maintained an orderly flow with a few minor changes,²⁵ Suzuki

²³ The image of an old man or woman in a mental institution is Suzuki's favorite theatrical motif, which helps articulate his exploration of modern man's tendency towards psychological decay. Suzuki used this image in almost all of his major productions, notably in his Greek trilogy and Shakespearean productions. Suzuki's interview, given during the Australian performance of *The Chronicle of Macbeth* (1991) reflects his special fondness for this image. Suzuki states, "For me the theme of a man hallucinating in an insane asylum comes first. The words chosen from the Shakespeare text are only those related to the situation, which feed the image. The words used are taken from Shakespeare but they're put into a new context." See Carruthers, "*The Chronicle of Macbeth*: Suzuki Tadashi's Transformation of Shakespeare," 228.

²⁴ The Program note includes a synopsis of each scene of the production.

²⁵ Noticeably Kent is absent; the Fool's lines are significantly reduced; Cordelia's lines are reduced to almost non-existent eight lines at the end of the performance; Gloucester, not an anonymous

refocuses the play on moments of emotional outpouring, mostly those of Lear and Gloucester. The drama moves from one emotional confrontation to another, and subsidiary and transitional scenes have been eliminated, which prompted one critic to declare that “the production...might just as easily be retitled(with apologies to New York’s Wooster Group)

“Lear....Just the High Points.””²⁶ It becomes obvious that Suzuki is not so much interested in storytelling as he is in creating images and arranging them to show heightened emotional situations. This English-language version does away with any narrative logic and coherent characterization. Instead of an external narrative chronicling the decline and fall of an aged monarch, Suzuki gives us the internal landscape of a man’s hallucinating mind.

A hallucinatory landscape was created by Arden Fingerhut who served

servant, stabs Cornwall to death; the final reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia does not take place. All the changes seem to point to the director’s vision, darker than Shakespeare’s. In a published article, Eric Hill, who played the role of Edmund, speculates that Suzuki omitted Kent, the only character whose goodness is unwavering throughout the play, for the purpose of making the play darker than it already is. See Eric Hill, “Where is Kent?” *American Theatre* 5(1988): 18-9. This explanation seems to echo Peter Brook’s rationale in his 1962 seminal production of *King Lear*. This also seems to explain J. R. Mulryne’s evaluation of Suzuki’s production. Mulryne situates Suzuki’s *The Tale of Lear* along a “mainstream interpretive line that takes in and goes beyond Peter Brook’s absurdist, Kott-inspired *King Lear* production.” See J. R. Mulryne, “The Theatre Art of Tadashi Suzuki,” 92.

²⁶ Hilary DeVries, “A Japanese-flavored ‘Lear’: Suzuki’s adaptation uses Noh and Kabuki styles,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 11 May 1988.

as set and lighting designer.²⁷ The setting of *The Tale of Lear* is quite simple and bare. The stage is carved into an amorphous space--dark, empty, and gleaming with surface polish. It's a blank terrain that the imagination can as easily convert into the palaces of Lear and his daughters as the stormy heath wandered by the blinded Gloucester. A black armchair, used as a throne, rested in the middle, and adjacent to it a cushion supports a book. The stage is framed in low-hanging metal grids that function as panels for lighting fixtures. Two poles flanking the stage support lighting fixtures, which provide stark, low angle illumination. In addition, a brown grill panel is located on the left side of the stage, complementing metal grids that hover above the stage, conveying the image of a suspended steel net. The setting is austere, sterile, and barren and the low-hanging lighting creates the atmosphere of a dreamscape.

The performance of *The Tale of Lear* begins when a wide-eyed Old Man looking like a lunatic slowly walks across a stage punctuated only by a throne-like chair and slashing flickers of light and shadow. He glares at the audience malevolently before wobbling over to a golden chair stage center. As he slumps over in pain, a Nurse performed by an actor in hospital uniform approaches her patient and, rather than taking care of him, amuses herself by reading a story of violence and madness-*The Tale*

²⁷ Incidentally Arden Fingerhut was also a lighting designer for Mabou Mines' *Lear* production. For insight on her collaboration with Suzuki, see Sheryl Flatow, "Arden Fingerhut: Lighting on Her Own Terms," *Theatre Crafts*, (November, 1988): 47-52.

of Lear. Thus the frame of the performance is established. When, unexpectedly, Handel's *Largo* booms out in a blast, a frieze of nobles floats in and circles round the sick man with slow and stately measure. Except for the Nurse in hospital uniform, the entire twelve-member, all-male cast, clothed in kimono-like costumes which have been cut and rearranged by Suzuki, silently glides on en masse with choreographed precision. There is little upper body movement; only the legs and feet either bare or in the traditional tabi, white bifurcated socks, do the work, sliding and stomping on the stage floor. On cue with the Nurse's sudden demented laughter, the Old Man, played by thirty-year-old actor Tom Hewitt without any pretense of being a senile old man, leaps up and launches into Lear's well-known opening tirade with a guttural, powerful, Japanese-style vocal performance. He never diverts his intense stare from the auditorium, without making direct eye contact with the audience. Not once does he acknowledge the presence of the courtiers, who remain on stage like the Greek chorus for good part of performance. He speaks the explosive speeches into empty space and ignores the surrounding group.

The performance quickly establishes a disorienting world that is both serious and grotesque, medieval and contemporary, restrained in stylized movement and explosive in emotional expression. It was the kind of *King Lear* production the audience had not been exposed to. From the first moment when the Old Man appears onstage, the spectators are bombarded

with the strange mise-en-scene that is the Suzuki style. Reception of such a performance can be frustrating to spectators who are not familiar with the director's style and draws hostile reactions from spectators and reviewers. The following two responses from a spectator and a reviewer will show the degree of their frustrations:

Then, you sit and watch actors gliding smoothly on and off stage for no clear reason; you hear strange, guttural speech that has no continuity; you stare back at actors facing front staring at you, while fixed poses seem to last longer and longer... The letdown from expectation to reality is such a shock it's a wonder we had any energy left to climb out of the theatre.²⁸

All these intents seem so noble-a cross-cultural performance, shared resources by regional companies, a new adaptation of a Shakespearian work, and the availability of an internationally recognized director.

Almost all these intents were dashed Sunday in a lethargic, melodramatic, almost incomprehensible evening which failed to illuminate either *Lear* or a cross-cultural exchange of Western and Eastern theatre methodology....

What went wrong? Such an assessment is not easy. A quick straw poll might fault the Japanese conventions which here present ponderously slow crosses, symbolic gesture, clear body attitudes, that fail to connote the attendant emotion, the menace, the threat that underlines their use. In the same manner, the Japanese actor oratorical voice approach which uses not only language but vocal nuance to carry emotion results in melodramatic, histrionic falseness. The use of an all male cast simply confuses the drama. But I believe the major fault lies with the attempt by Suzuki to adapt the text to a setting where an old Man, not Lear, is found in a hospital near death.... the lapse of the man into Lear, is never clear; his drama is only nightmare histrionics.... the product serves neither the classic script nor illuminates our perception.

There are some moments. Performances by Tom Hewitt,

²⁸ E. Paul Kozelka, "Audience's Response," *Milwaukee Journal*, 26 March 1988.

Laurence Ballard, Charles Tuthill, Matthew A. Loney prove exceptional testaments to the technique and craft of Western acting that has been heightened by the discipline of Eastern vocalization.²⁹

I extensively quoted the second review, because it not only reveals the reviewer's lack of knowledge of the Suzuki style to facilitate his reception of the production, but, more importantly, it shows an unconscious Western nervousness toward Suzuki's intercultural practice applied to the work of its greatest literary icon. It also shows their bias in favor of western realistic acting and directing style. The fact that there was considerable publicity in advance to help the media and the spectators get acquainted with this unusual project, and the fact that Milwaukee was a kind of American base for Suzuki would support this impression.³⁰ Bicultural competence may be an impossible ideal for most spectators. However, such resistance from the target audience including reviewers would block any prospect of meaningful intercultural communication. Such resistance proves a justification for Suzuki's intercultural production, for it opens up the audience's unconscious bias. Such an intercultural project can be educational to the target audience, exposing them to new, foreign theatrical practice and eventually forcing them to face their own deep-seated prejudices. James Brandon states the goal of intercultural

²⁹ Dave Molten, "Tale of Lear Falls Short of Expectations," *Waukesha Freeman*, 3 March, 1988.

³⁰ Suzuki had brought his previous two productions to Milwaukee and frequently taught his acting method to the students of University of Wisconsin and the actors of Milwaukee Repertory.

performance as the education of the target audience:

Making the foreign familiar is, after all, the basic process of education....The goal of intercultural and intracultural performance is to produce, for the spectator, opportunities for perceiving new relationships between other and self, between foreign and familiar.³¹

Through intercultural performance the target audience is exposed to interaction between foreign and familiar, becoming more tolerant with the other cultures. This would be the right moment to examine the Suzuki style in order to explore the ways in which Suzuki manipulates foreign and familiar, Eastern and Western theatrical conventions.

Suzuki is a quintessential postmodernist in the way he positions himself in relation to his own Eastern theatrical heritage and the Western classical texts. Suzuki turned to the Japanese traditional theatre for conventions and concepts of dramaturgy, staging, and acting that could provide an alternative model to the theatrical realism Suzuki vehemently renounces. But it never was a blind adoption. Suzuki explains his intracultural approach as “remodeling”:

³¹ James R. Brandon, “Contemporary Japanese Theatre: Interculturalism & Intraculturalism,” *The Dramatic Touch of Difference: Theatre, Own and Foreign*, eds. Erika Fischer-Lichte, Josephine Riley, and Michael Gissenweher (Tubingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1990), 95-6.

I hope thereby not only to somehow modernize the traditions of *noh* and *kabuki*, but to study the essential beauties of these forms so as to reintroduce some of their concepts into the contemporary theatre. My ultimate goal is to restore vitality to the theatre in a process similar to that of remodeling an old piece of architecture in order to bring it back to a new and useful life.³²

The analogy of remodeling seems to be very useful to understand Suzuki's postmodern aesthetic. Remodeling is a modernization of the old site by getting rid of the obsolete and by updating the elements that still have value. Unlike reconstruction, which creates itself from the ashes of the old, remodeling contains the traces of the old, providing constant comment and dialogue between the old and the new. Suzuki's remodeling of the conventions of the Japanese traditional theatre is such that it not only provides him with tools to create non-realistic, performer-oriented theatre, but also enables him to keep cultural tension between past and present, East and West on stage, particularly on the performer's body.

Providing a new framing story and condensing *King Lear* to a series of scenes of intense emotion, showing the derangement of Lear's psyche, is also a kind of intercultural remodeling of Shakespeare's text that helps connect Shakespeare's text with contemporary concerns. In his production, present concerns are always brought face to face with the past represented in the text. Thus there always exists tension in Suzuki's theatre. Sustaining the tension between past and present, text and performance style

³² Suzuki, *The Way of Acting*, 75-76.

throughout the performance can be considered the objective of the Suzuki style. The tension is built into his structural and performative conception of *The Tale of Lear* in such matters as, for example, framing of the text, acting style, all-male casting, and incongruous mix of Japanese popular music with western classical music. The tension is the point where his art is created, so that truly meaningful appreciation of the production can take place in an individual spectator's intertextual, intercultural reception process. An examination of the way in which tension is built into Suzuki's structural and performative strategies in his staging of *The Tale of Lear* would lead us to that aspect of the Suzuki style that is distinctively postmodern.

One of the most prominent structural strategies of *The Tale of Lear* would be the framing of Shakespeare's *King Lear* with a contemporary story. The use of framing device, what Ian Carruthers calls a "formula-frame",³³ is not meant to contain Shakespeare's text within the frame, demarcating the boundary between the two stories. It rather alerts its spectators on multiple levels, immediately creating a sense of disorientation. Where are we? In a nursing home? An insane asylum? On a

³³ See Carruthers, "*The Chronicle of Macbeth: Suzuki's Tadashi's Transformation of Shakespeare*," 234(footnote 19). Opposing Richard Moore's use of the term, 'the Suzuki formula' as somewhat pejorative, Carruthers explains that he uses the term, 'formula-frame' in the sense that it is used by Parry and Lord in Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

blasted heath in Elizabethan England or in contemporary Japan? Who is this man? Lear? A stroke victim? A Madman? Who are the other characters on stage? Images of the dying king, parading his memories in a life-review? The distortions of a mental patient who tries to understand his suffering through Shakespeare's tragedy? By juxtaposing the world of Shakespeare's text with a contemporary hospital setting, Suzuki deliberately forces the spectators to face confusing, contradictory perspectives between past and present. Suzuki articulates his intention in creating a framing device that echoes a typical postmodernist position:

We live in a fragmentary world. There are so many opposite perspectives from which one can view the same event. We no longer share a consensus of assumptions to evaluate a situation. When people believed in monarchy and patriarchy, an old king in Lear's predicament would have called forth sympathy unqualified by irony. But today we can also see Lear as a clown doing comic turns in a hospital. And we laugh. Old-fashioned theatre gives the audience a hero they sympathize with completely. Now it's more interesting to explore the multiplicity of meanings in human situations and the complex net of relationships among individuals. I am less interested in Lear's personal saga than in the crash of worlds represented by the nurse in modern dress and Lear in antique kimono. Conflict and contrast keep drama moving.³⁴

Framing efficiently sets up the contrast by juxtaposing and intertwining different attitudes to the same events. The framing device is used to facilitate Suzuki's postmodern idea of creating multiple conversations expressing the differences between past and present, and text and

³⁴ Suzuki, interview by Holmberg, "The Liberation of Lear," 17-8.

performance style.

Framing is, in fact, Suzuki's remodeling of the practice of *honkadori* and *sekai* of the Japanese literary tradition, which Goto Yukihiro explains as two underpinnings of Suzuki's dramaturgy.³⁵ *Honkadori* is a technique of taking a foundation poem to create a new poem. New poems are composed drawing on elements or images in existing well-known poems. Sometimes the new poem echoes the words of the original and sometimes only the story or conception is recognizably incorporated into a new situation. It is a technique that has been developed within Japanese literary and dramatic tradition over the last thousand years. The *noh* theatre exemplifies this technique. *Noh* playwrights would make use of ideas and imagery of a well-known poem to compose and deepen the meaning of a new play. By doing so, *honkadori* sets up a series of emotional and aesthetic echoes between the play and the foundation poem. *Honkadori* provides a context or springboard for the new work.

Suzuki is a master of *honkadori*. Suzuki's work is always comprised of materials from existing, famous dramatic texts put into Suzuki's own writings that deal with contemporary issues. However, Suzuki's positioning of *honkadori* in relation to *sekai*, that can be translated as milieu or world, is contradictory to the general practice of *noh* plays. Unlike *noh* plays in which *honkadori* and *sekai* complement each other, in

³⁵ See Goto Yukihiro, "The Theatrical Fusion of Suzuki Tadashi," *Asian Theatre Journal* 6(1989): 109.

Suzuki's work they are brought into direct conflict. The older play assumes far greater importance than in *noh* plays; the work suggested by *honkadori* is brought into conflict with *sekai*; and a violent confrontation with the sensibilities of the older play transpires. In *The Tale of Lear* we see the story of *King Lear* not only performed, but also commented on and contradicted by the story of a modern man who lost patriarchal power and with it his sanity. Bringing the new into existence creates tensions between the old and the new, adding to the depth and experience of the play. In Suzuki's words, "It is a new meeting of elements that have up to now been unrelated, coming together inside the theatre to form a previously unseen spectacle of time and space... We take what we know and construct the unknown. This is, I believe, the calling and duty of today's theatre."³⁶ Suzuki's formula-frame is a device to connect the unrelated, resulting in the unknown and unexpected experience.

Suzuki's peculiar use of music has always been a source of both delight and frustration of his spectators. He would mix Japanese contemporary popular songs with Western classical music within a production and, for example, play Japanese popular music in a Trojan setting, irrespective of time and place. The intercultural encounter in

³⁶ Suzuki, Program Note for the Australian performance of *The Chronicle of Macbeth*. Quoted in Mulryne, "The Perils and Profits of Interculturalism and the Theatre Art of Tadashi Suzuki," 90.

Suzuki's use of music creates an unexpected and quasi-surrealist effect. Goto Yukihiro explains this incongruity as part of the Suzuki production style that is rooted in surrealist influence.³⁷ Another critic has described this practice of Suzuki as a collage technique, "participating in the postmodern process of a commentary with cultural fragments."³⁸ In *The Tale of Lear* the spectators and reviewers surely responded to the use of music. One critic denounces Suzuki's use of Handel's music, declaring that Suzuki's use of Handel's music is the most disturbing device that clearly didn't work: "Handel's syrupy 'Largo' poured over the production at such high-decibel level as to become aural bombast."³⁹ It would be hard not to respond to Suzuki's mixing of the Japanese traditional lute sound with Western classical music, such as Handel's *Largo* and Tchaikovsky's *Danse Espagnol*, particularly Suzuki's use of Handel's music to initiate the enactment of the Old Man/Lear's hallucination at the beginning of the performance. The loud volume and leisurely pace in which Handel's music

³⁷ See Goto, "Theatre of Fusion," 130. Goto explains that this mixing of incongruous materials as well as such techniques as "dream-like hallucinatory image, dialogue out of context, and acts of provocation" are all used to "break down ingrained, habitual audience response."

³⁸ James R. Brandon, "Contemporary Japanese Theatre: Interculturalism and Intraculturalism," 92. Brandon also sees that Suzuki borrows Surrealist's concept of disorientation in his collage system of juxtaposing disparate materials and performing styles in order to gain an objective view.

³⁹ See Hilary DeVries, "A Japanese-flavoured 'Lear': Suzuki's adaptation uses Noh and Kabuki styles."

is used surely draws attention to itself for its incongruity and excess, and disrupts the audience's reception of the Old Man's transition to Lear.

This particular way of using music is, in fact, another structural and performative strategy Suzuki recycles from a convention of *noh* theatre, the *Michiyuki* (travel song). In *noh* theatre, the effect of travel is conventionally presented by the actor taking a few steps while chanting a poetic description of famous beauty spots seen along the way. The travel song smoothly transports the spectators to the imaginary world of the *shite*, the principal performer, establishing a proper relationship between two worlds. However, here in Suzuki's *The Tale of Lear* the jarring, grotesque effect of Handel's music disorients the spectators, foregrounding the incongruity between music and the production's setting. The loud volume and leisurely pace of this music alerts them to keep a distance from the performance.

As explained earlier, one of the most enduring theatrical images recurring in Suzuki's productions is that of an old man attended by an unnamed person in a mental institution. This image fits Suzuki's reading of the world as gone mad on power politics. It is again prominently featured in *The Tale of Lear*, as the Nurse/Fool and the Old Man/Lear. The couple in this image seems to be remodeled after *noh* characters, the *waki* and the *shite*. In a *noh* play, a traveling Buddhist priest played by the *waki* stops at a spot made famous in history to pray for the soul of the famous

person who once lived there. While praying, he meets a local villager played by the *shite* or principle actor. This person seems to know so much that the priest's suspicions are aroused. The local person then vanishes, only to reappear in his or her true form as the spirit of that famous person. The *waki* is an observer and traveler who mediates between the onstage image and the audience. The *shite* is, in a sense, the only real character. The *shite* has a double role as a figure from everyday life (a fisherman, a vagabond) and later as the other-worldly figure (a dead warrior, a goddess, demon) who inhabits him. The *shite* would then perform a ritualistic enactment of disembodied spirit to release his obsession.

In a way, a *noh* play can be understood as a psychodrama in which the *waki* priest functions as a kind of analyst and the *shite* as a patient acting out an obsession in order to be released from it. Suzuki seems to be hinting at that idea when he reinvents the *shite* and the *waki* as a mental patient and a person in the medical profession. In *noh*, the *waki* functions as a kind of privileged spectator and mediator who would connect the onstage performance with the spectators and recruit their "willing suspension of disbelief," for the effect of a *noh* performance depends on the spectators' complete identification with the onstage performance. In Suzuki's theatre, the *waki* character has a different agenda. As manifested here in the first scene of the performance, the Nurse in drag uniform puzzles and unsettles the audience more than she facilitates its focus on the performance of the Old Man. Suzuki tries to maintain the audience's

ironic distance from the text throughout the performance by having the Nurse/Fool burst into discomfoting laughter at inappropriate moments, particularly at the play's crueller moments. The indifference and irreverence of the Nurse throughout the Old Man's intense moments of emotional outpouring and violence constantly put the spectators off balance: during Lear's emotional speech, "Blow winds and crack your cheeks,"(Act III, scene ii) in scene 10, the Nurse chomps merrily on Triscuits; when Lear and mad Tom meet--a poignant moment of rare human contact in scene 11, the Nurse shoves scissors up her nose to trim nasal hair; when Gloucester's eyes are put out in scene 12, she looks into her compact and smears on lipstick; and the most disturbing of all, the Nurse reads to herself, quietly laughing, while Lear/Old Man expires onstage. Throughout, Suzuki consciously elicits contradictory emotional responses. It is impossible to see the suffering of Lear and Gloucester, he seems to say, without laughing.

To show the tension between individuals and groups, Suzuki isolates Lear physically and emotionally from the rest of the cast. Throughout the performance, Lear is allowed only four times to establish contact with other characters: once each with Gloucester, Nurse/Fool, Tom, and Cordelia in the last scene. The only moment when the Nurse extensively interacts with Lear/Old Man(scene 15) creates the most jarring spectacle of the performance. It happens in Lear's second mad scene, which is presented almost like a Beckettian farce. Instead of minding her own

business, while occasionally providing ironic comments on the stage performance as in most scenes, the Nurse here fights with Lear over the book and wheels him across the stage in a dirty laundry cart during Lear's entire ranting speech. When Lear finally stands up in the laundry cart to proclaim himself "every inch a king," (Act IV, scene vi, 108), he crowns himself with a bedpan. The preceding stern, fervent demeanor of Lear does not adequately prepare one for such comic absurdities. The scene does not seem to belong to the same play, making the whole confused and grotesque. The collision of the grotesque and the sublime, of comedy and pathos in the scene, creates a characteristic postmodern vision, resulting in a shifting, unstable emotional environment. Suzuki reinvents the *waki* character in such a way that the Nurse/Fool becomes a structural device that constantly disrupts the spectator's reception of the performance and identification with Lear's suffering, rather than transporting the spectators to the inner world of Lear's suffering,

Scholars have agreed on the fact that one of the prominent features of postmodernism is its celebratory recognition and presentation of the self as "fragmented" and "decentered." Hans Berten's succinct survey catalogues the diverse discourse on the postmodern self, proving its centrality in the discussions of postmodernism:

For Gerald Graff the celebratory mode of Postmodernism is characterized by a "dissolution of ego boundaries"; for Daniel Bell

“the various kinds of postmodernism...are simply the decomposition of the self in an effort to erase the individual ego,” and Ihab Hassan notes that “the Self...is really an empty ‘place’ where many selves come to mingle and depart.” For Hoffman this movement in the direction of a less defined, less stable identity is even a shift of epistemic proportions: “The perceivable signs of a tendency toward the disappearance of a subjectivity in modern literature become a fact in postmodern works. Thus a radical gap between modern and postmodern literature is reflected in the opposition of two epistemes: subjectivity versus loss of subjectivity.” The postmodern self is no longer a coherent entity that has the power to impose (admittedly subjective) order upon its environment. It has become decentered, to repeat Holland’s phrase. The radical indeterminacy of postmodernism has entered the individual ego and has drastically affected its former (supposed) stability. Identity has become as uncertain as everything else.⁴⁰

Postmodern theatre has also dealt with the disintegration of the self through its fragmented dramatic characters and of this Suzuki is a master. In Suzuki’s productions, the hero or heroine does not represent a coherent dramatic character with a distinctive identity, but a composite of characters from diverse sources. Multiple characters reside in one body, resisting any attempt to define the character’s subjectivity. Famously, in *The Trojan Women*, Suzuki created a heroine embodying the ghosts of Hecuba and her daughter, Cassandra, in the body of an old homeless Japanese woman to express the plight of women who suffer in wars initiated by men. Here, in *The Tale of Lear*, Suzuki creates a hero, the Old Man in the hospital, who enacts Lear’s suffering in his hallucination. By

⁴⁰ Hans Berten, “The Postmodern *Weltanschauung* and Its Relations with Modernism: An Introductory Survey,” *Approaching Postmodernism*, eds. Fokkema Douwe and Hans Berten, General and Comparative Literature vol. 21 (Amsterdam: Utrecht Publications, 1986), 46-47.

deliberately obliterating the ego boundary between the Old Man and Lear, Suzuki's production foregrounds the indeterminacy of the postmodern self. Through the strategy of the decentered hero, Suzuki's production participates in the postmodern discourse of identity crisis.

Suzuki's decentered hero is in fact a postmodern reinvention of the *shite* character. In *noh*, no confusion is created by the dual roles of the *shite*, for the *shite*'s enactment of spirited emotion not his identity is the focus of attention. Here in *The Tale of Lear*, the identity of the Old Man is a constant puzzle and central concern. The fact that the Old man is performed by a robust thirty year-old actor, Tom Hewitt, who does not pretend to act like a doddering old man through make-up or wig, further confounds the problem. Suzuki instructed Hewitt about the role during a rehearsal,

At the very beginning of the play, on your first entrance, your personality is already fractured, broken. You are not well. It is the end of your life. You sit at the front of the stage to show that everything taking place behind you is in your head." ...He must go through a psychic collapse and revert to being a senile old man as he mutters "Blow wind, come wrack."⁴¹

Hewitt is required to visualize the unconscious of the Old Man/Lear whose psychology has been already fractured and whose identity has never been clearly defined. While retaining the ambiguity in the identity of the Old

⁴¹ Suzuki, quoted in Carruthers, "*The Chronicle of Macbeth: Suzuki Tadashi's Transformation of Shakespeare*," 221-22.

Man/Lear, Hewitt delivers a remarkable performance that physicalizes the differing stages of disintegrating psyche in the Old Man/Lear from the opening moments of powerfully restrained actions to the final heart wrenching release. Reviewers unanimously praised his performance for its emotional depth and vocal power.⁴² Without any sign of being a senile old man, Hewitt nevertheless enacts the process of dismantling Lear/Old Man's sanity into madness.

J. R. Mulryne finds a different function in Suzuki's strategy of the "decentered hero." He sees Suzuki's adoption of the "decentered hero" as a useful narrative strategy specifically created to solve the potential problems of intercultural performance that tend to obliterate the cultural identity of the other. J. R. Mulryne keenly observes,

The strategem of what might be named the decentered hero is one that occurs repeatedly in subsequent performances. In the *Chekhov: a Paradise Lost*, in *The Clytemnestra*, in *The Chronicles of Macbeth*, and *The Tale of Lear*, the central figure becomes the victim of the narrative rather than its protagonist or initiator. In this perspective, the interculturalism of the work maps its anxieties on to the narratology of the performance... Working by way of the strategem of the decentered hero, Suzuki as playwright/adaptor/director garners the wealth of the culturally distant text without invasive appropriation and without sacrifice of his own cultural identity.⁴³

⁴² Tom Hewitt, Arena Stage acting company member, is one of the most experienced American actors in the Suzuki Method, having begun studying with Suzuki in 1980. Before performing in *The Tale of Lear*, Hewitt performed in *The Bacchae* as Penthus and in *The Clytemnestra* as Orestes.

⁴³ J. R. Mulryn, "The Theatre Art of Suzuki Tadashi," 83.

Mulryne's argument that by decentering the hero's identity, Suzuki avoids "invasive appropriation" of the Western text without sacrificing his unique Eastern dramaturgy seems to attest to the particular way in which postmodern strategies converge in Suzuki's intercultural work. Intercultural encounter between Shakespeare and the Suzuki style takes place in *The Tale of Lear* without compromising their cultural differences, by deliberately foregrounding Lear's fragmented, incoherent self.

Suzuki's all-male casting confounds an already complicated dramaturgy. Though the cast is reduced to a modest twelve actors, casting male actors for the parts of Lear's daughters brings out the complex gender and sexual politics of Suzuki's *Lear* production. Suzuki has explained his all-male casting as a strategy to eliminate sexual distractions. He wants the audience to concentrate on what he sees as the heart of the play regardless of the characters' sexual identities. Suzuki asserts,

Sexual differences are often imposed by specific cultures and are only on the surface. I wanted to dig down to a level where sexual differences no longer operate, where common elements of existence are shared by men and women. Great art deals with universal human attributes, not with the parts of a human being that are sexually distinguished. The will to power and the desire to exist in a group drive both men and women.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Suzuki, interview by Holmberg, "The Liberation of Lear," 16.

For Suzuki, however, getting rid of sexual distinction does not mean going back to a pre-cultural, original state, which would be an impossible dream. Suzuki's strategy to achieve such a goal is not through erasing the difference in sexual distinctions but through accentuating it. Suzuki asked the actors playing women's roles to grow beards, "Don't give me a male representation of a woman," he cautioned Corey Hansen and Tom Blair, who play Regan and Goneril respectively. "Give me super-masculine men. Goneril should be Kirk Douglas and Regan, Burt Lancaster. If I wanted real women I would have cast real women."⁴⁵ By casting bearded and masculine actors in parts for Lear's daughters, Suzuki not only makes his point that the thirst for power and cruelty are not gender-specific, but also calls into question the antithesis between male and female. By disrupting the system of sexual difference, he challenges the depth of culturally coded gender definitions.

This strategy eventually helps both performers and spectators to keep the distance between the characters and the actors, which also fits into Suzuki's anti-realism stance. For Suzuki, theatre, particularly Shakespeare's, has nothing to do with realism. Suzuki asserts,

Stanislavsky realism has nothing to do with Shakespeare. Shakespeare doesn't present actual people. He creates stage images, myths, and archetypes. You don't analyze someone on stage the way you analyze the man sitting across you on the subway. A

⁴⁵ Ibid., 16.

person on stage is a theatrical sign.⁴⁶

Since the dramatic character is a sign, Suzuki believes that there should be a gap between the character and the performer. “An actress,” he argues, “who looks like a stereotypic image of Ophelia acts with a barrier of thinking she can just be Ophelia.” A male actor, Suzuki contends, has an advantage, “because he is so different from the role,” and “because he has to approach the role as a pure fiction.” Suzuki maintains that, while “from the standpoint of realism it might be grotesque,”⁴⁷ the all-male casting enables the audience to gain new insight through the distance between the character and the actor. Lear’s bearded, macho daughters as well as Tom Hewitt’s robust, thirty-ish Lear are truly fictional.

In fact, sustaining a distance between the role and the actor is a key to Suzuki’s acting theory and training. Suzuki asserts that acting is not imitation of character, but rather an objectification of an actor’s self through performance. For Suzuki, a performer is in dialogue with him or herself rather than with a character, and the drama is enacted within the body rather than between the body and a fictionalized character. Acting has nothing to do with imitation, for the theatrical matter is the

⁴⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁷ Suzuki, “Tale of Lear,” *America’s Arena* 6(June 1988), 12. This is newsletter published for the Arena Stage.

performer's struggle with his or her own physical and mental being.⁴⁸

Through this theoretical foundation, the training of the actor's body that enables the performer to be fictional and objectified onstage becomes the central concern in the Suzuki Method.

Suzuki's actor training method has been taught all over the world, notably in North America, since the late 1970s. Each year actors from the different parts of the world visit Toga to train with Suzuki and the SCOT members. Sheer demand on the performer's body with concentration and energy and forceful, stylized movement and gestures represented by powerful foot stamping are regarded as an antidote to the Western realistic acting method that has been the primary training of western actors. For Suzuki the truest theatre language is the actor's performing body. He laments the growing tendency of using technology in theatrical performance at the expense of acting. To Suzuki, the actor's art is the core of the theatrical encounter and is what separates theatre from film and TV. Studying the concepts and the specific physical, vocal postures and movements of the Japanese classical theatre, especially *noh*, Suzuki developed a set of training exercises that enables the actor to create a strong sense of presence onstage by maintaining energy and concentration. Suzuki succinctly articulates the purpose of the Suzuki Method:

⁴⁸ Such a view of objectivity in acting also leads to Zeami's idea of a "distanced view" (*riken no ken*). See Zeami, *On the Art of No Drama*, trans. J. Thomas Rimer and Yamazaki Masakazu (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

The main purpose of my method is to uncover and bring to the surface the physically perceptive sensibility which actors originally had, before the theatre acquired its various codified performing styles. This works to heighten the actor's innate expressive abilities.... Technically speaking, my method consists of training to learn to speak powerfully and with clear articulation, and also to learn to make the whole body speak, even when one keeps silent. Thus the actors can learn the best way to exist on the stage. By applying this method, I want to make it possible for actors to develop their ability of physical expression and also to nourish a tenacity of concentration.⁴⁹

The Suzuki method is designed to discipline the actor toward a total awareness of his body in movement and stillness and toward the awakening of an inner sensibility. In order to achieve this goal, great emphasis is given to the feet, because Suzuki believes that consciousness of the body's communication with the ground leads to a greater awareness of all the physical junctions of the body. An equal emphasis is given to achieving a sense of unification between the physical body and the spoken word, for a proper sense of corpus can be increased through harmonious relationship between the word and the body. To Suzuki there should exist no sense of friction between the word and the body, for "the word is an act of the body"⁵⁰ and a kind of gesture. Vocal muscles, like other muscles in

⁴⁹ Suzuki, "Culture is the Body," 241-42. This is also included in the program note of *The Tale of Lear* Production.

⁵⁰ Suzuki, interview by William O. Beeman, "Interview with Tadashi Suzuki: "The Word is an Act of the Body," *Performing Arts Journal* 17(1982): 89. In response to the question on the most central element in Japanese theatre that the West avant-garde theatre can learn, Suzuki answered that Japanese theatre can give

the body, need to be exercised through the vigorous movements of the diaphragm. Suzuki insists these skills be mastered by actors both Eastern and Western through hard training, for they are universal:

There are some people who watch this and consider my training particularly Japanese; who say that the training is unsuitable for American actors.... It has nothing to do with the length of the legs.... but with the discovery of an inner physical sensibility or with the recognition of an inner and profound memory innate to the human body.... Whether in Europe or in Japan, stomping or beating the ground with the feet is a universal physical movement necessary for us to become highly conscious of our own body or to create a "fictional" space, which might also be called a ritualistic space, where we can achieve a personal metamorphosis.⁵¹

Suzuki's insistence on recovering the performer's power and physical sensibility through his actor training method regardless of the actor's race and culture, is not, however, convincing, as studies in Kinesics and culture in the last thirty years have shown. Since Marcel Mauss's pioneering lecture "Les Techniques corporelles" in 1935,⁵² it has been already shown that the ways and means by which a man eats, sleeps, walks or stands are culturally determined. Kinesic researches have also convincingly proved the cultural specification of gestures, movements, and bodily techniques.

the West a sense of corpus-the unification between the word and the body, while criticizing the West avant-garde theatre's exclusive emphasis on the body without the word.

⁵¹ Suzuki, "Culture is the Body," 246.

⁵² Marcel Mauss, *Sociologies et Anthropologie* (Paris: Presses University de France, 1935).

Suzuki's claim to have rediscovered a universal theatrical language through his acting method does not seem to be persuasive. On the contrary, it has been agreed that culture affects even our biological organism, as Camille Camilleri defines in her formulation of culture: "Culture is a kind of shaping, of specific inflections which mark our representations, feelings, activity, in short, and in a general grammar, every aspect of our mental life and even of our biological organism under the influence of the group."⁵³ Theatre is, in fact, a privileged site to visualize this inscription of culture on and through the body. American actors' bodies in *The Tale of Lear* become a site of real intercultural encounter between Suzuki's acting style based on the specifically Japanese traditional theatrical idioms and an American actor's realistic acting training inscribed by the specifications of Western culture. Despite the fastidiousness of Suzuki's choreography, the slow pace, the careful composition of the stage picture, the glittering, piercing glares, and vocalization with harsh, guttural sounds, each actor's individuality and identification with character tend to sneak in at every turn. Extreme moments of physical pain in the blinding of Gloucester or the mental anguish of Lear's torment on the heath are expressed through the distractingly detailed facial and bodily gestures of the actors. One notices also the attention paid to narrative by American actors, unaccustomed to

⁵³ Camille Camilleri, "Culture et Sociétés: Caractère et fonctions," *Les amis de Sèvres* (1982), 4. Quoted in Pavis, "Introduction: Towards a theory of Intercultural Theatre?" 3.

the inconsequence of the narrative in the conventions of the traditional Japanese theatre and Suzuki's own. There exists tension not just between the Suzuki style and Shakespeare's text, between the actor and the character, but also within a performer's body. The statement by Jeffrey Bihr, who played the Nurse/Fool, attests to the American actors' struggle with the acting style imposed on them:

All one's instinct as a Western actor are [sic.] virtually no good. You have to throw them out the window because they don't work. Anything you do on stage that you think is going to work, and you think is going to be clever, and you think is going to succeed, doesn't. It fails.... These problems are so enormous that in working on them you're constantly bumping your head on the wall of your own limitations. In that sense, the work is clearly heroic.⁵⁴

The biggest challenge for American actors seems to be acquiring the vocal techniques of the Suzuki method.⁵⁵ Laurence Ballard, who played the role of Gloucester, provides an insight on the effect of intercultural encounter for the performers:

My training as a Western actor had always included a dissociation between body and voice—that two are coequal partners. With Mr.

⁵⁴ Jeffrey Bihr, Program Note of Berkeley Production, 18. His statement was included as part of actors' testimony to their experience with the Suzuki Method.

⁵⁵ For discussions on the present state of the Suzuki Method as it is being taught in the Western countries and problematic implications for the Western actors, see Paul Allain, "Suzuki Training," *TDR* 42(1998): 66-89.

Suzuki, the body and voice are to be one. And by focusing actor's energies in the pelvic area, the voice comes right out of the body. The level of concentration that view requires was a great discovery for me.⁵⁶

The performers' struggle with the Suzuki-style vocalization shows itself in the performance. A survey of the reviews of the productions shows that the Suzuki-style vocalization was the most alienating aspect of the performance. Some reviewers complained that actors' full-speed, roaring, and ranting deliveries were inaudible, sounding "as if it(Shakespeare's text) had been fed through an electric blender,"⁵⁷ and "undermining every nuance of melody and sonority in Shakespeare's language," their vocal performance was "anathema to the complex and fully orchestrated verses of Lear."⁵⁸

However, as Patrice Pavis observes, it is exactly in this kind of actor's inter-corporeal struggle that the most meaningful intercultural exchange takes place:

Intercultural theatre is at its most transportable and experimental when it focuses on the actor and performance, on training of whatever duration conducted on the "others" homeground, or on an experiment with new body technique. Microscopic work of this kind concerns the body, then by extension the personality and

⁵⁶ Laurence Ballard, Program Note of Berkeley Production, 18.

⁵⁷ Bruce Russell, "Crossing Barriers with the Bard," *The Washington Post*, 8 January 1989.

⁵⁸ Mohamad Kowsar, "*The Tale of Lear*," *Theatre Journal* 41(1989): 110.

culture of the participants. It is only very effective when it is accepted as inter-corporeal work, in which an actor confronts his/her technique and professional identity with those of the others. Here is the paradox and strength of such inter-corporeal, inter-cultural theatre: the greater its concern with exchange of corporeal technique, the more political and historical it becomes. Here paradox is also aporia: it is inconceivable outside of political and economic structures, but it is realized in an individual exchange of bodies and organic reference points.... As a result an intercultural practice such as this can become, and even more so in the future, a form of resistance against standardization, against the Europeanization of super-productions.⁵⁹

The Suzuki Method surely provides his American performers with the techniques that resist and confront their western acting training with emphasis on the lower body and pelvic area, which helps increase power and concentration onstage. The “unnatural” Suzuki style vocalization helps the performer to recognize a different kind of relationship between the body and the voice. Such a production requires a high degree of artistic and intellectual commitment not only from the performers but also from the audience members to recognize and bridge the gaps between the performers’ Western bodies and an Eastern performance method imposed on them.

IV

What, then, has been transferred to and communicated to the

⁵⁹ Pavis, “Introduction: Towards a Theory of Interculturalism in Theatre?” 15.

spectators through the performers' onstage inter-cultural, inter-corporeal struggle in *The Tale of Lear*? Judging from the polarized reviews, from total condemnation as I quoted earlier to utter admiration such as "improvement over Shakespeare,"⁶⁰ and "artifice at its finest,"⁶¹ the degree of reception depends on Western ideology as much as on bicultural (in)competence.⁶² Intercultural experience allows the target audience to question their deeply unconscious central formations and also helps them to orient themselves towards better understanding of the foreign culture. Thus intercultural theatre such as this can be political and historical. Complete intercultural communication seems to be not just impossible but unhealthy, for the ever-present incomprehensibility reminds the target audience of the distance and difference between the cultures.

Suzuki's 1988 production of *The Tale of Lear* with an all-male

⁶⁰ Michele May, "Be Leery of This 'Lear'," *Potomac News*, 8 July 1988.

⁶¹ Denis Regan, "Suzuki's *King Lear*," *The Shepherd Express*, 18 March 1988.

⁶² Patricia Mitchell conducted some very interesting research on the spectators' reception of the Australian English-language production of *The Chronicle of Macbeth*, which was a very similar project to Suzuki's American production of *The Tale of Lear* in that Suzuki collaborated with Australian actors for the Australian spectators. Based on the spectators' response to her questionnaire, Mitchell drew a conclusion that more educated, male spectators, and academics responded negatively to Suzuki's intercultural production. See Ian Carruthers and Patricia Mitchell, "Theatre East and West: Problems of Difference or Problems of Perception?" *La Trobe Asian Studies Papers*, Research Series 5 (La Trobe University, Australia, 1995).

American cast was an educational process not just for the target audience and American performers but also for the director himself. Collaboration with American actors and artists in his first English-language production precipitated changes in the Suzuki style. He no longer seems to promote the possibility of creating a universal theatre. Suzuki concedes that “there is probably no such thing as a universal theatre but there is a possibility for theatre to address universal problems.”⁶³ Through interaction with Western actors and texts, Suzuki seems to recognize the implausibility of the idea of creating a universal theatre, as this chapter has shown. Instead, Suzuki begins to promote the idea that an intercultural production should become a site to address universal problems theatres all over the world are facing: homogeneous one-world culture and theatre. Suzuki is concerned that the current move towards an economic borderless globe would push arts to fit into a commercial niche, heading towards an increased homogeneity in which theatre will become more and more similar. In order not to submit to one-world culture that indiscriminately appropriates and syncretizes other cultures, obliterating unique voices of the others, intercultural performance has to continuously strive to find strategies to keep the diverse voices.⁶⁴

⁶³ Suzuki, quoted in Lampe, “Collaboration and Cultural Clashing: Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki’s Saratoga International Theatre Institute,” 61.

⁶⁴ Such was urgent rationale behind the foundation of SIT. See also the manifesto of SIT included in Lampe, 148.

Suzuki looks upon his production of *The Tale of Lear* as a gift to the West, a sort of “artistic balance of payments.” He states that “Japan has taken many things from other cultures, but there is very little that Japan has contributed to the world community in terms of culture and enriching lives.”⁶⁵ Suzuki’s statement can be, on the one hand, an understatement about the contribution of the Japanese classical theatres, particularly *noh*, to the works of major avant-garde directors of the twentieth century in their effort to revitalize Western theatre. On the other hand, his statement is correct in that his production is a sort of balance of payment in the current international intercultural exchanges, for Suzuki’s work provides a unique voice from an Eastern point of view, constantly engaging in conversation with Western performers, directors, and scholars in the discourse of theatrical interculturalism. Thus Suzuki’s productions seem to be free of the intercultural angst most Western intercultural productions are ridden with, in the face of the charges of theatrical Orientalism. By speaking from an Eastern voice, Suzuki’s production enables the “other” voice to be heard in intercultural exchanges and challenges Western unconscious motives in its intercultural practices.

V

Suzuki’s critique of Kurosawa’s film, *Ran*, is very informative in

⁶⁵ Suzuki, “The Tale of Lear,” *America’s Arena* 6(June 1988), 12.

understanding Suzuki's own artistic strategy in staging *The Tale of Lear*.

Suzuki feels that Kurosawa failed, because

He bent, twisted, warped Shakespeare's story too much to make it correspond, become part of fake a piece in Japanese history. He need not have done that; it would have worked without fake parallelism; would have been stronger. There were magnificent things in the film, its sweep, its dramatic color. And some very bad things as well.... Kurosawa used very bad actors, very bad. The film would have been something had he used actors who knew what they were doing.⁶⁶

Suzuki would not want fake parallelism, as my analysis of the production has shown, but rather he wants to reveal and accentuate the schism between the parallel stories. Suzuki recognizes in Shakespeare's text the theme that resonates with a contemporary social problem, the problem of society in dissolution due to the disruption of male authority. He, then, brings Shakespeare's story face to face with the contemporary setting of the Old Man in the hospital at the last hours of his life, while constantly keeping tension and revealing contradictory perspectives between the two stories through a series of structural and performative strategies of the Suzuki style, that is a unique convergence of intercultural theatre and postmodernism. In the process Suzuki presents a production in which the intercultural encounter between Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the Suzuki style that is his intracultural remodeling of the conventions of *noh* theatre,

⁶⁶ Suzuki, interview in Kevin Kelly, "Suzuki Looks to Earth for Strength, Energy," *Boston Globe*, April 1988.

takes place on American actors' bodies in their inter-cultural and inter-corporeal struggles. Suzuki's *Lear* also provides the spectators with a chance to embrace the strange and unfamiliar territory of intercultural Shakespeare and to learn about their own unconscious Western bias. Suzuki's theatre seems to represent the kind of "strong and confident theatre" that Richard Schechner calls for to address the difference between cultures, a theatre that engages "intercultural fractures, philosophical difficulties, ideological contradictions, and crumbling national myths."⁶⁷ Above all, through the Suzuki style, Shakespeare's *King Lear* is made relevant at the particular juncture of postmodernism and interculturalism, and brought back to the center of the current international phenomenon of intercultural theatre.

⁶⁷ Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1.

Chapter IV

Mabou Mines' *Lear*: The Postmodern Political

I

The theatrical collective, Mabou Mines, has been known since its formation in 1969-70 in the downtown New York avant-garde scene for its large scale, multicultural, multi-media projects which explore such politically engaging issues as gender, race, sexuality, and class.¹ For its twentieth anniversary production, Mabou presented a cross-gender, cross-cultural *Lear* starring Ruth Maleczech as Lear. It was the collective's first attempt to stage Shakespeare, except for director Lee Breuer's Hollywood-celebrity version of *The Tempest* for Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival in 1981. While specializing in the works of Samuel Beckett and a trilogy of

¹ Its founding members include Lee Breuer, Joan Akalaitis, Phillip Glass, William Raymond, Frederick Neuman, Terry O'Reilly, and David Warrilow. For a General guide to the history of Mabou Mines, see C.W.E. Bigsby's chapter on Lee Breuer in *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 204-18.

“animations,” among its original pieces,² Mabou Mines had also tried to build a uniquely American theatrical style in its productions of English and European classics. Breuer’s most recent works prior to *Lear* were the 1981 *The Tempest*, the Motown-style adaptation of Wedekind’s *Lulu* plays at the American Repertory Theatre also in 1981, and the gospel version of Sophocles’ Oedipus legend, *Gospel at Colonus*, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1983 and later on Broadway. All were part of Mabou Mines’s ongoing attempts to discover a style through which genuine American concerns stemming from its particular multicultural existence can be addressed.³ In an interview, Breuer announced, “This *Lear* is part of an ongoing statement I am trying to make about American classicism.”⁴ The *Lear* production promised to be a culmination of two decades of experimentation and collaboration among the Mabou members and their downtown associates.

²The trilogy includes *The Shaggy Dog Animation*(1978), *The Red Horse Animation*(1970), and the *B. Beaver Animation*(1974). See Bonnie Marranca, *Animation: A Trilogy for Mabou Mines*(New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1979).

³ On Mabou Mines’s American classicism, see Marti-Ray Runnels, *Lee Breuer and His Cross-Cultural American Classicism*(Ph.D Dissertation: Texas Technology, 1989).

⁴ Lee Breuer, interview by Michael Cadden, “Crossover Shakespeare,” *Time Off*, 6 January 1988, 11.

Mabou's search for uniquely American responses to classic texts in which the contradictions and differences of American multicultural-gender, racial, regional, and sexual-experiences can be explored, results in a distinctive theatrical style. Among the most noticeable elements of Mabou's style are its blatant appropriation of American pop-culture iconography and extensive use of electronic media. Mabou's distinctive practice of incorporating icons of American popular culture into its staging of classical works in particular reflects one of the characteristics of postmodern art, that is, the breakdown of the divide between "high" and "popular" art, as Andreas Huyssen observes.⁵ Breuer's statement, "I try to give pop imagery the same validity as classical and mix the two,"⁶ clearly manifests Breuer and Mabou's postmodern aesthetics. In addition, Mabou's interest in exploring multicultural American experiences reflects the postmodern obsession with representation and identity. This chapter will focus on Mabou Mines's distinctive postmodern production style in its attempt to adapt Shakespeare's *King Lear* to accommodate its interest in gender, race, and class relations in the United States.

⁵ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

⁶ Lee Breuer, interview by Alex Patterson, "Mabou Mines Rethinks Lear," *Metropolis*, 15 March 1990, n.p.

II

Mabou Mines's work can be described as what Philip Auslander calls "resistant" theatre. In his search for a new concept of political art in postmodern theatre, Auslander observes that instead of the transgressive political theatre of the historical avant-gardes and of the 1960s, postmodern culture requires a different kind of political theatre, namely resistant theatre which urges an investigation of the processes and apparatuses which control hegemonic representations and reveals the counterhegemonic tendencies within the dominant discourse. Drawing on Hal Foster and Fredric Jameson,⁷ Auslander suggests that the postmodern political artist should focus on "incorporating the functions of positioning the subject within dominant discourses and of offering strategies of counterhegemonic resistance by exposing processes of cultural control and emphasizing the traces of nonhegemonic discourses within the dominant without claiming to transcend its terms."⁸ Breuer's refusal to simply interpret and reproduce Shakespeare's

⁷ See Hal Foster, "For a Concept of the Political in Contemporary Art," *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1985); Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodern Debate," *New German Critique* 32(1984):

⁸ Philip Auslander, "Toward a Concept of the Political in Postmodern Theatre," *Theatre Journal* 39(1987): 23.

Elizabethan social and political order and his strategy of exposing the ideological undertones of Shakespeare's text and the typical "respectable" mainstream productions of it hinted at a kind of resistant counterhegemonic reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear*:

Our usual notions of how Shakespeare is to be performed are still tied to the Victorian era, the era of the great actor-managers. But their Shakespeare cannot be ours; theirs was an agent of the British class system, male oppression and imperialism-more Victorian than Elizabethan, and decidedly not American.... A production always advocates an ideological point of view, and the visual point of view you get from an evening in the theatre with Shakespeare is not one that we, as Americans, can be comfortable with. I mean, what do all those kings have to do with us?⁹

Rather than submitting to the "universal" meanings of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Mabou Mines sought to find its specific, local, and contemporary meanings and, in the process, expose the ideological assumptions and contradictions of a classic text. Breuer was also interested in the ways *King Lear* manifested power and betrayal in families, and how they were affected by, age, race, and particularly by gender. In fact, Breuer primarily envisioned Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a story about the interrelations between power and gender. In order to keep this relationship in the foreground, Breuer decided to reverse the genders of the characters. Breuer then provided a

⁹ Lee Breuer, interview by Michael Cadden, 12.

concrete American context, by situating the production in the American South of the late 1950s, which would help make the play completely accessible to an American audience and the production's choice of a matriarch plausible. Besides, this southern setting allowed the production to address Mabou's continuing interest in race relations in the United States. Not only reversing the genders of Gloucester and his sons but also casting them as a black matriarch and her daughters, the production was able to foreground the racism and class hierarchy, in addition to the patriarchal order that the gender switch revealed. In the process, the familiar story of Shakespeare's tragedy became distinctively American and at the same time strange.

Brechtian theory resonates in Mabou's exploitation of popular culture and multi-media and its concern for the cultural and political conditions of American society. At first glance, claiming the influences of both postmodernism and Brechtian theory on Mabou's *Lear* production may seem contradictory in principle. However, both postmodernism and Brechtian theory share a great deal, particularly in their critique of dominant representations. Marc Silberman observes Brecht's relevance to postmodern society in his article, "A Postmodernized Brecht?": "Brecht's *Weltanschauung* is of less interest now than his relation to reality, than the

specific quality of his ability to see and to resist.”¹⁰ In this era of global expansion of capitalism, electronic communications, and market consumerism, paradigms in our cultural, political, and economic activities have been shifted significantly from those in Brecht’s time. Particularly in the area of subject identity, class is no longer the only element defining a subject’s identity but one part of wider range of cultural determinants, such as race, gender, and sexuality. And the radical social change and concept of agency Brechtian theory aspired to achieve are no longer valid, in light of the collapse of the Eastern European communist block. Instead, Brecht’s theory of representation and his staging techniques provide convenient tools for the postmodern inquiry into identity politics and its representations. This interrogation questions all forms of cultural hegemony in the specific sexual, racial, and class experience. After all, Brecht was a director and theoretician who devised elaborate staging techniques to resist dominant bourgeois representation. Brecht’s strategy of contextualizing and at the same time destroying institutional discourse in such dominant modes of cultural practice as painting, literature, the cinema, and electronic media seems strikingly similar to that of postmodern deconstruction.¹¹

¹⁰ Marc Silberman, “A Postmodernized Brecht?” *Theatre Journal* 45(1993): 3.

¹¹ See Marc Silberman, “The Politics of Representation: Brecht and Media,” *Theatre Journal* 39(1987): 448-60. In this article, Silberman

Brecht has been, in fact, among the most influential inspirations for Mabou's unique theatrical style. His influence has never been more prominent than in the gender-reversed *Lear* production. In a published interview, Breuer specifically stated,

Lear is about power, and power fascinates Americans. In order to see what the play says about the power syndrome, I decided to reverse-cast to create a Brechtian alienation effect. I wanted to put a new edge on the play, to get to the thesis through antithesis.¹²

Gender-reversal no doubt elicited a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* which kept spectators intellectually distanced from the taken-for-granted perceptions of Shakespeare's text. To posit a female at the center of *King Lear*, the quintessential story of patriarchal power and its legitimacy whose underlying misogyny had long been the target of feminist scholars' scrutiny,¹³

argues that there is a connection between Brecht's theory of representation and the postmodernist deconstruction of mimesis.

¹² Lee Breuer, interview by Arthur Holmberg, "The Liberation of Lear," *American Theatre* (1988): 16.

¹³ For feminist criticism on Shakespearean plays, see Carolyn Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Neely, eds., *The Women's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1980). On *King Lear* in particular, see Kathleen McLuskie, "The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: King Lear and Measure for Measure," *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, eds. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985): 88-108. McLuskie argues that the narrative and dramatization of King Lear present a connection between sexual

immediately drew the audience's attention to its own preconceptions on the relationship between power and gender. And at the same time female Lear resisted a conventional reading of Shakespeare's text. Brecht wrote, "Alienating an event or character means first of all stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them."¹⁴ Instead of showing a "self-evident, familiar" patriarch, situating a woman in power cast new light on the old, familiar play and made us rethink the nature of power and its gender implication. Above all it revealed society's hidden patriarchal assumption about universal male power and the misogyny underlying it. Citing Thomas MacFarland's study, Alisa Solomon, who served as a dramaturg of Mabou's *Lear* production, similarly pointed out that if Shakespeare's "*King Lear* equates power and love, a female Lear(a female in a patriarchal culture) experiences power in opposition to love," and that Maleczech's *Lear* tested the hidden assumptions of a patriarchal society where "to lose power is to become feminine."¹⁵

insubordination and anarchy, and the connection is given an explicitly misogynist emphasis.

¹⁴ Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke* 15(Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), 301. The translation is Keith Dickson's in *Towards Utopia: A study of Brecht*(Clarendon: Oxford Press Press, 1978), 241.

¹⁵ See Alisa Solomon, *Re-dressing the Canon*(London: Routledge, 1997), 141. See also Thomas M. McFarland, "The Image of the Family in *King Lear*," *On King Lear*, ed. Laurence Danson(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 100.

Maleczech expressed a similar sentiment in her remark that “when a man has power, we take it for granted, but when a woman has power we’re forced to look at the nature of power itself.”¹⁶ In Mabou’s *Lear*, behavior one took for granted became at once bizarre and fascinating. Indeed the production was full of alienation effects.

Despite Brecht’s typically Marxist blindness toward gender relations, since the early 1980s, a group of feminist critics have persistently embraced Brechtian theory, particularly its interventionist strategies.¹⁷ Frustrated by the lack of tools available to represent female subjectivity in postmodern discourse and no longer satisfied with simply criticizing the male gaze in the conventional representations of women, feminists have sought ways to dismantle and intervene in the male gaze and to create a feminist mimesis, no matter how decentered and temporary the feminist subject might be. Just as

¹⁶ Ruth Maleczech, interview by Ross Wetzsteon, “Queen Lear: Ruth Maleczech Gender Bends Shakespeare,” *Village Voice*, 30 January 1990, 40.

¹⁷ For feminists’ active embracing of Brechtian theory, see Iris Smith, “Brecht and the Mothers of Epic Theatre,” *Theatre Journal* 43(1991): 491-505; Janelle Reinelt, “Beyond Brecht: Britain’s New Feminist Drama,” *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990): 150-159; Elin Diamond, “Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism,” *TDR* 32(1988): 82-84, “Mimesis, Mimicry, and the “True-Real,” *Modern Drama* 32(1989): 58-72. The ideas Elin Diamond explored in both articles were later developed into *Unmaking Mimesis* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

the postmodernists find the Brechtian critique of representation intersecting with their interest in deconstructing dominant ideology, feminist too find Brechtian techniques useful as intervention strategies in their quest for unmaking patriarchal mimesis. Elin Diamond has been one of the pioneers in this direction. Emphasizing the potentiality of Brechtian theory for feminism, Diamond promotes,

Intertextual reading of key topoi of feminist theory-gender critique and sexual difference; questions of authority in women's writing and women's history; spectatorship and the body-with key topoi in Brechtian theory-*Verfremdungseffekt*, the "not...but," historicization, and Gestus. Emerging from this intertexting, a proposal for a theatre-specific feminist criticism.¹⁸

The feminists' embracing of Brecht promises to revitalize his theory which has been called into question by postmodernists as being universalist and therefore oppressive. Ironically, postmodernism and its interest in identity and representation helped bring Brechtians and feminists together in their attempts to resist dominant(bourgeois/patriarchal) ideology and its representation. Mabou Mines's *Lear* became an interesting showcase which attempted to incorporate "intertextual reading" of the feminist agenda with Brechtian theory.

¹⁸ Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, 44.

III

The setting for this gender-reversed, racially integrated *Lear* production was Smyrna, Georgia, of the late 1950s. It was designed by the director, Lee Breuer. At each end of stage were the porches of ramshackle wooden houses: at stage left Lear's manor, reduced to a fairy tale shack with gingerbread carving and a narrow stoop; at stage right Gloucester's tarpaper shack with its back porch facing the audience. The interiors of the houses receded beyond the wings of the wide, floor-level thrust stage of the Triplex Theatre in Manhattan. Upstage of the stage right dwelling was an outhouse, and upstage center, a green mound topped by a droll papier-mache miniature-golf-course castle, painted in bright colors. Breuer left empty the large, unlocalized, center-stage playing area, which served alternately as backyard, battlefield, heath, and parking lot, and in which two period convertibles transported Lear and her entourage between her sons' houses. This deliberately hyperreal, dilapidated, and cartoonish setting warned the spectators to be prepared for anything but a traditional Shakespearean production.

Instead of the usual Shakespearean entrances and exits, the production was presented as a cinematic flow of sequences and shots. Instead of five acts, thirty-two sequences were presented in a seamless continuum with the aid of lighting designer Arden Fingerhut.¹⁹ As in films, the sequences were separated from one another by cross-fading and cross-cutting lightings between scenes. Body-miking created an impression of close-up acting and the original score by Pauline Oliveros provided constant underscoring music as in a film. In fact, the production seemed to be inspired more by movies than by theatrical productions. Breuer has frequently admitted Orson Welles's influence on his particular choice of cinematic techniques in staging *Lear*:

There's a lot of close-up acting, under-the-chin shots like Orson Welles.... I started looking at all Orson's Shakespeare films. I got absolutely fascinated by how he made them voluptuous, melodramatic, stagey.... I decided to get rid of all the entrances and exits in *Lear*, so there's no time wasted with people walking on and off stage.... I tried to make it feel like a Welles movie.²⁰

Not only the staging, but the nightmarish atmosphere and grotesque quality of set, sound, and characters seem to have been influenced by Welles,

¹⁹ Arden Fingerhut was also lighting designer for Tadashi Suzuki's *Tale of Lear* production.

²⁰ Lee Breuer, quoted in Margaret Spillane, "King Lear, Queen for a Day," *These Times*, 31 January-6 February 1990: 19.

particularly his films noir.²¹ The production created an impression that a kind of live-action cinema was presented right in front of the audience.

When the lights came on, the first scene was set in Lear's backyard for her birthday barbecue. Everyone on stage was waiting for Lear, matriarch of a working-class, white-trash family. As in a typical Southern barbecue, family members and friends gathered together, playing football, boozing, and gossiping: Lear's two elder sons, Goneril and Regan, and their wives, Albany and Cornwall, Lear's favorite son, Cordelion, and his lady suitors, Burgundy and France, matronly friends of Lear's, Gloucester and Kent, the latter white and the former African-American, Gloucester's two daughters, Edna/Edgar and Elva/Edmund, and housemaid Wilda/Oswald.²² When Lear and her transvestite Fool finally showed up on stage, waltzing deliriously across the stage to Pauline Oliveros's accordion accompaniment and trailed by a troupe

²¹ Iris Smith singled out one of Welles's films noir, *Touch of Evil*, set in a murky Southwestern border town, as an inspiration for the grotesque quality of Mabou's Lear production. See Iris Smith, "Mabou Mines's Lear: A Narrative of Collective Authorship," *Theatre Journal* 45(1993): 283.

²² The cast included Ruth Maleczech(Lear), Greg Mehrten(Fool), Bill Raymond(Goneril), the late Ron Vawter of the Wooster Group(Regan), Isabell Monk(Gloucester), Lola Poshalinski of the Ridiculous Theatre Company(Kent), Black-Eyed Suzan of the Ridiculous Theatre Company(Albany), Honora Fergusson(Cornwall), Lute Ramblin'(Cordelion), Maya O'Reilly(Burgundy), Clove Glilee(France), Karen Evans-Kandel(Edna/Edgar), and Ellen McElduff(Elva/Edmund), and Kimberly Scott(Wilda/Oswald).

of her sycophantic family and followers, the tableau of a motley group of country grotesques in procession elicited what one critic described as a “sense-bending” moment.²³ From her first appearance on stage, Lear’s power over these people was unmistakably asserted. Although small in stature, leaning on a cane, she held them in suspense. As soon as the procession was completed, Lear got to the business of dividing her property among her sons with the speech “Now we shall express our darker purpose.”²⁴ From Lear’s reaction to Goneril and Regan’s sleazy testimonials of their love, to her denouncing of inarticulate, sullen Cordelion’s simple answer, “Nothing,” the wonder of Maleczech’s performance lay in her complete ease with her use and abuse of power, assuming that this matriarch’s power, personal and economic, was the most natural thing in the world. It became obvious that she was as much responsible for the corruption and disorder of her family as her sons. As most critics noticed, in an exquisitely modulated performance, Maleczech demonstrated gentleness and rage with subtle change of her voice. Flipping from sweetness to ranting in the batting of an eye, this powerful woman did not evoke the image of a patriarch, nor was she an overbearing harpy. Maleczech created a role which had no stage precedents.

²³ Iris Smith, 284.

²⁴ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Arden Edition, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1952), Act I, scene i, 36.

Actresses have often taken on the roles of Shakespearean heroes. Sara Bernhardt, Judith Anderson, and Charlotte Cushman all dressed in breeches to play Hamlet. Marianne Hoppe played King Lear as a man in Robert Wilson's production. But no actress has played Lear as a woman. Quoting Peter Brook, Maleczech claims,

Lear was a mountain impossible to climb, and on the way up you trip over the corpses of Orson Welles here, Charles Laughton there, Gielgud and Olivier over yonder. Women don't tackle the part, so I'm not likely to stumble over the corpse of Elenora Duse.²⁵

Maleczech might not have stumbled over the corpses of other great actresses, but she did have to face the challenge of representing a woman who was as confident as any man in power and whose fall was as tragic as that of a monarch. That was not an easy task, but not impossible. In fact, no actress could have been better prepared for the role than Maleczech. Throughout her career Maleczech created strong maternal characters.²⁶ In fact, the initial

²⁵ Ruth Maleczech, interview by Chris Farlekas, "Mabou Mines from Spotlights to Storm King," *The Times Herald Record*, 22 July 1988, n.p. Maleczech's quotation is from Peter Brook's *Empty Space*.

²⁶ Particularly Maleczech's roles in *The Screens*, *Hajj*, and *Vanishing Pictures* created memorable maternal characters.

impulse behind this project came from Ruth Maleczech's desire to "speak Lear's language."²⁷

Maleczech's fascination with Lear's language began when both Breuer and Maleczech were involved in the 1961 San Francisco Actors' Workshop production of *King Lear* directed by Herbert Blau starring Michael O'Sullivan.²⁸ However, Maleczech's gender seemed an insurmountable obstacle to satisfying her seemingly simple desire to speak Lear's language. Maleczech had to wait for almost three decades to finally fulfill her dream, until a Rockefeller Foundation Playwriting Fellowship allowed Lee Breuer to develop an early script for a *Lear* production in 1986. In an interview, Maleczech confided,

All I ever wanted was just the chance to say Shakespeare's words.... I am not drawn to roles usually, but I was drawn to Lear's language. And I couldn't figure out any reason why a woman couldn't say those words as a woman.²⁹

²⁷ Maleczech, interview by Ross Wetzsteon, 40.

²⁸ See Jerry Talmer, "Lear with a Switch," *The New York Post*, 9 January 1990, n.p. In fact, it was their first professional theatre jobs, Maleczech as a wardrobe seamstress and Breuer as an assistant director. Maleczech confessed in the interview that by the time the production finished its run, she had witnessed a total of 53 performances and memorized Lear's lines.

²⁹ Maleczech, interview by Ross Wetzsteon, 40.

Even though Maleczech had longed to speak Lear's language, she was not interested in playing Lear as man. What attracted Maleczech to Lear's language was not just the beauty of it but the power attached to it. To claim male language as her own is to challenge the patriarchal symbolic--linguistic and theatrical--authority. It was a feminist statement to resist the patriarchal representation. Understandably Maleczech's performance became the center of both spectators' and critics' attention. Her performance earned unanimous praise from the critics, though their responses to the production itself varied greatly. Maleczech was finally recognized as "one of the transcendent performers in America today."³⁰

At particular moments, gender-reversal seemed to lend a new piquancy to many lines and scenes, uncovering nuances not readily apparent in conventional readings of the text. For instance, Lear's curse, "Dry up in him the organ of increase,"³¹ took on new potency as an image of castration. Given the double jeopardy of her raving mind and her female body, Lear's speech "Let me not be mad"³² raised the specter of the historic exclusion and persecution of the insane, especially women. When Lear raged against female

³⁰ Ross Watzstein, 39.

³¹ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act I, scene iv, 288.

³² Ibid.

sexuality on the heath, instead of becoming an expression of the unexamined misogyny of a male Lear, she seemed to suggest a tragic disgust with her own biology, even, perhaps, with being forced into a procreative role.

Maintaining *Verfremdungseffekt* throughout the performance was a very difficult task for both audience and actors. It required a careful manipulation of alienation devices and thorough attention to the details of the text. Brecht himself recognized this problem in his production of *Mother Courage*, in which the audience often chose to sympathize with Anna Fierling's struggle to stay in business, rather than to censure her for complicity in the evil business of war. Similarly in the second half of the Mabou Mines production, Lear tended to become a sympathetic character. As soon as Lear's initial poise and cool distance were consumed by her misery and rage, Maleczek's performance became a familiar reminder of maternal misery. Played as an old matriarch humiliated and tortured by her sons, Lear rang with emotional truth. The helpless rage seemed somehow more appropriate to a mother than to a father. Lear ceased to astonish spectators. The Pieta-like image of Lear holding Cordelion's dead body instantly made spectators identify with Lear's tragedy and pity replaced spectators' engaged detachment.

The presentation of female violence, however, resulted in a far more fascinating alienation effect. Despite the gender reversal of the *Lear* production, the violence of Shakespeare's text was not diminished at all.

Rather, violence was graphically depicted to an extreme degree. From lynching and the subsequent hanging of the Fool by Elva to the cold-blooded gouging of Gloucester's eyes by the female Cornwall with sticks and broken beer bottles, the portrayal of violence committed by women who are normally portrayed as victims of male violence immediately challenged spectators' preconceptions of violence in relation to gender. Breuer told an interviewer;

I wanted to distance the play from our culture's received idea of male behavior, which includes a high level of aggression-we associate power and violence with men. When one substitutes women for men in the play while retaining the same aggression, one sees that violence is not exclusively male, that it's the result of power, not maleness. Power-how to get it, how to keep it-triggers violence.³³

The most striking alienation effect of female violence was created by the final duel between Gloucester's two daughters, Ellen McElduff's Elva and Karen Evans-Kandall's Edna. The fight took place in a parking lot, and the weapons included saws, pitchfork, knives, and broken bottles. The scene ironically quoted stage fights, male boxers, and wrestlers. McElduff and Evans-Kandall wore black leather, gloves, and chains. Elva slammed head first into Edna's belly. Edna dashed her to the ground. They groaned, panted, and sweated, trading punches, kicks, flips, strangleholds, until Edna finally

³³ Breuer, interview by Arthur Holmberg: 16-7.

thrust an icepick into Elva's gut. The fight went on for a long time. By the time it was over, the audience felt as though it had its own brains dashed out. The scene mimicked the excess of male violence not only in its intensity but in its length. The Edna-Elva duel exhibited the apotheosis of female violence through a grotesque, parodic imitation of male hand-to-hand combat.

"Mimicry," Elin Diamond notes, "can function, in other words, as an alienation effect, framing the gender behavior dictated by patriarchal models as a means of recovering the places of her exploitation."³⁴ Because this mimicry is deliberately parodistic of patriarchal mimesis, Diamond finds it very effective to deconstruct patriarchal representation from within and to expose its ideological trappings. Mimicry achieves its purpose through disruptive and excessive imitation of the stereotypical gender behavior and thus defamiliarizes taken-for-granted gender behavior and exposes its patriarchal ideology.

Mimicry's deliberately and productively parodistic relationship to patriarchal mimesis reveals the same strategic characteristics of parody defined by postmodernists. Like mimicry, parody exploits the idiosyncratic styles and concepts it challenges. Defining postmodernism as "a contradictory phenomenon that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges," Linda Hutcheon describes parody "as a perfect

³⁴ Elin Diamond, "Mimesis, Mimicry, and the 'True-Real'," 66.

postmodernist form in some sense, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies.”³⁵ Against the charges that the postmodern practice of parody is an empty pastiche of forms and that the resulting clashing of narratives is schizophrenic,³⁶ Hutcheon defends the subversive potential of parody. Hutcheon argues that parody as well as humor and irony contest the universalizing pretensions of serious art, and that the clash of representations and narratives embodied by parody engages the audience’s attention in the process of signification because such references demand interpretation by the very fact of their formal perversity. Parodic imitation of male violence in the Edna-Elva duel scene required the spectators’ engagement, as one critic observed that “the parody elicited not laughter, but rather a prolonged fascination, and attentiveness that is the mark of a well-staged piece of estrangement.”³⁷ By deliberately parodying stereotypical gender behavior, in this case, aggressive male violence, the Lear production

³⁵ Linda Hutcheon, “Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism,” *A Postmodern Reader*, eds. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 251.

³⁶ See Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146(1984): 53-92.

³⁷ Iris Smith, “Mabou Mines’s Lear: A Narrative of Collective Authorship,” 289.

challenged the audience's patriarchal perception of violence in relation to gender.

Mimicking/parodying the stereotypical behavior of the opposite sex is the essence of drag performance. Greg Mehrten's performance as a transvestite Fool in outrageous drag with blond wigs, high heels, and a feather boa brought a wonderful alienation effect to dominant ideas about gender behavior. When he lipsynched "I'm a Woman Naturally," a 70s feminist anthem for women juggling household chores, while holding a dildo as a microphone, Mehrten's Fool clearly illuminated the postmodern notion of gender as both performance and social and cultural construction. Besides, his brilliant use of the dildo instead of the Fool's coxcomb enabled him to make an explicit sexual pun with his speech, "Sometimes I'm whipped for holding my peace."³⁸ In fact, the dildo became one of the most effective Brechtian devices in Mabou's *Lear* production. It functioned as *gestus* in that it represented "both a familiar sex toy mocking the heterosexual couplings of Lear's sons, and an ironic comment on the artificiality of phallic power," as Elin Diamond's penetrating review pointed out.³⁹

In a way, Shakespeare's Fool is a quintessential postmodern character. In addition to his sexual ambiguity, the Fool functions as an agent in

³⁸ *King Lear*, Act I, scene iv, 191.

³⁹ Elin Diamond, "Review of *Lear*," *Theatre Journal* 42(1990): 483.

deconstructing power. His ironic status as both parasite to and critic of power, puts him in-between, inside and outside of the court. His privilege to tell the obvious, but often unflattering facts opens up the contradictions of seemingly harmonious order. Greg Mehrten's transvestite Fool perfectly embodied the parodic function of Shakespeare's Fool. He challenged and made fun of the nature of Lear's power. At the same time he became a surrogate son, a faithful companion in a way that her sons had never been. It was the Fool who cleared the way for Lear, silencing the raucous family and bringing out the fake birthday cake for the purpose of dividing Lear's property. It was the Fool who accompanied Lear to the heath until he was murdered by a lynch mob. It was also the Fool who made the Brechtian indictment, reminding Lear of her own participation in creating the chaos of her world. In addition to the critique of power, Mehrten's performance also commented on identity politics. When the Fool's wig was shed, revealing his masculine cropped hair under the blond wig during the storm scene, the simultaneous display of Mehrten's masculine body and his feminine drag mocked the notion of unitary, coherent identity. With his outrageous drag performance, Mehrten both hilariously and affectingly managed to project the Fool's irony and dignified loneliness, as well as his love for Lear. Above all,

with his gendered body in display while mimicking the opposite sex, the Fool demonstrated how gender is constructed and misrepresented.

In an interview, Lee Breuer summed up the nature of his work as follows: “Most of my large work has a political intent, but I don’t mount works with leftist dialogue and fist-shaking. I try to mount the work as a political statement, not that says the political statement.”⁴⁰ Such a remark represents an essential feature of postmodern political theatre. Since postmodern political theatre concerns itself with the processes and apparatuses of representation, the aesthetic choices of the production cannot be separated from political concerns. Instead of plainly stating the political intent of the production, postmodern directors seek to incorporate it structurally

Just as gender-reversal gave Mabou Mines a chance to explore the relationship between gender and power, the 1950s Southern setting allowed the production to examine race relations in the United States. In addition, the 50s Southern setting accommodated Mabou’s long-standing policy of casting as many minority actors as possible. But as an ardent opponent of color-blind casting, Mabou would rather provide a context that would make the use of

⁴⁰ Lee Breuer, interview by William Harris, “Mabou Mines’s *Lear*,” *The New York Times*, 23 January 1990, 5.

black actors natural and logical than cast black actors for white roles. By setting its *Lear* production in the 1950s South, an appropriate context was provided to explore racial concerns and to introduce African-American actresses.

During the critical and stage history of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the Gloucester subplot has sometimes been seen as making *King Lear* inferior to other Shakespearean tragedies notably by Johnson and Tolstoy. However, Mabou's production attested that the Gloucester story was not redundant, and that his ordeal both mirrored and contrasted with Lear's. More importantly in Mabou's *Lear* production the Gloucester story provided a racial counterpoint: Isabella Monk's Gloucester and Karen Evans-Kendel's Edna(Edgar) were black, making Ellen McElduff's Elva(Edmund)'s fair skin, blond hair, and Madonna-ish pout the signs of illegitimacy. The production at once upset the familiar reception of race relations and hinted at the historical sexual exploitation of black women by white men, by casting Gloucester's bad daughter Elva as illegitimate trying to pass as white, while casting black Edna as the good and faithful daughter. By situating the play in the 1950s South, the horrific scene of gouging out Gloucester's eyes by white characters including Lear's sons, Goneril and Regan, and Cornwall brought reminders of black persecution by the KKK.

It turned out that the gender-reversal and racial overtone of Gloucester story were the least controversial alienation devices among the directorial choices. The production constantly attempted to employ such devices to keep the audience off balance. Its heavy reliance on electronic technology was one of these. Breuer is extremely fond of electronic technology, which he considers is crucial medium to connect classics with contemporary American spectators: in *The Tempest*, Breuer introduced a helicopter instead of a ship in the storm scene and a samba band in the masque scene, and outfitted the actors with microphones; in *Lulu*, filmed scenes from the play, often shot in extreme close-up, were projected upstage while the live actors behaved in sync with or in contrast to the looming, filmed background images; and in *Gospel at Colonus*, set during a Pentecostal church service, electronically mediated presentation of gospel music, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll sought to elicit genuine catharsis from a contemporary American audience. In the *Lear* production, the most conspicuous use of technology was body-miking. As in *The Tempest*, Breuer outfitted each actor with a body mike to accentuate what he saw as the filmlike construction of the play and thus to elicit a close-up effect as in a film. Whatever his intention was, the effects were both intimate and distancing, depending on the actors' delivery and technical performance. When most successful in creating intimate moments, amplification made Shakespeare's lines reverberate, creating an effect of throwing the voices of the actors directly into the audience's ears. Most

memorable were the soft-spoken voices of Regan and Goneril as they sat on their mother's stoop, swigging liquor out of a hip flask, grumbling and plotting. The timbre of these cinematic Southern voices, languid, full of self-possessed cruelty and irony, might have been lost by declamation. Miking also became a stage technique that allowed the actors to deliver the characters' interior monologues as demonstrated in the testimonial scene when Cordelion protested Goneril and Regan's ludicrous testimony of love to Lear. However creating such an intimate effect required consistent technical subtlety, which unfortunately Mabou's Lear production lacked. In most cases the obtrusive technology of reproduction seems to have dissociated the voice from the body. In concept and in execution, body-miking functioned better as an alienation device. The disembodied projection of the voices from the speakers seems to have destroyed the intimacy Breuer was looking for between actor and text and between performer and audience. It removed actors and spectators from the very fleshly agonies of the story before them. Sometimes the blocking of the scenes made it difficult to determine who was speaking. The actors seemingly made random movements and frequently stood with their backs to the audience. By separating Shakespeare's language from the actors' bodies, body-miking kept spectators on edge and disrupted their tendency to easily identify with the characters and their tragedy in horrible scenes such as an old woman being thrown out by her sons or a gay man being hung by a lynch mob.

Considering the lack of technical subtlety in using body-miking and the emphasis given to the language in Shakespeare, it was predictable that body-miking became one of the most controversial directorial choices in this *Lear* production. Almost every reviewer had an opinion about it. Overwhelmingly the responses were negative, even though the reviewers did not make it clear whether their responses were to the failure of technology or the concept of body-miking. To them body-miking seemed to disrupt the flow of Shakespearean language, prohibiting any kind of appreciation of the poetry in Shakespeare's text. The choice of an Appalachian accent for the production annoyed the already hostile reviewers who considered tampering with Shakespeare's language as the greatest sacrilege. Mabou Mines's choice to use Appalachian dialect instead of a typical Shakespearean stage accent was inspired by the PBS program, *The Story of English*, which established the link between the distinctive accent of the isolated Appalachian communities and the dialect of the English North and West countries from which their ancestors had emigrated. According to the documentary, early English settlers brought the Elizabethan accent to Jamestown, Roanoke, and the Carolinas, and it dispersed into the mountains of the South, where it is still alive. Mabou thought that this Appalachian dialect with a tie to the Renaissance English of Shakespeare's own time was well suited to its *Lear* production set in a culture with a strong matriarchal tradition. Despite Mabou's rationale, listening to the twang of a backwoods accent from Shakespeare's characters must have

been the most shocking alienation effect for the spectators and critics who insisted on the primacy of Shakespeare's language. One indignant critic wrote, "Strip *Lear* of its words and all is lost."⁴¹ But there were also enthusiastic supporters. David Berreby, writing for the *New York Law Journal*, praised the production's choice of accent:

The most striking effect of these transpositions is the joy you feel hearing a genuinely American Shakespeare—that is to say, Shakespeare spoken not in actorly accents but in a style true to American idiom.⁴²

Breuer claimed, "*Lear* is not an interpretation.... It's an adaptation, but a very extreme one. More along the line of Kurosawa's *Ran* than *Kiss Me Kate*."⁴³ Surprisingly, however, Shakespeare's text was almost completely intact, except for the changes made to accommodate gender-reversal and American context. Mabou's production did not attempt to fragment or denarrativize Shakespeare's text, as one might expect from a postmodern production. However the way in which Shakespeare's language was used or abused through the use of body-miking and the Appalachian accent drew

⁴¹ Robert Crew, "This Southern-fried *Lear* Is Just a Plucked Chicken," *The Toronto Star*, 18 March 1990, c5.

⁴² David Berreby, "Powerful, Moving Sex-Reversed *Lear*," *New York Law Journal*, 2 February 1990, n.p.

⁴³ Lee Breuer, quoted in Alisa Solomon "Cracking Nature's Molds," *Village Voice*, 12 January 1988, n.p.

hostile responses from the reviewers. This fidelity to Shakespeare's text while deliberately disrupting an appreciation of the language seemed more irreverent and subversive to them than drastic textual changes. Frank Rich, quoting Edward Bond, thus insisted "an icon like *King Lear* may have to be dismantled entirely to make cogent new ideological points.... A radically rethought script would have better served that mission."⁴⁴ Statements like this actually did not mean to encourage a radical reinterpretation of Shakespeare's play but implicitly promoted the primacy of Shakespeare's language.

However, Michael Feingold, one of the strong advocates of the production, praised Mabou's experiment, basing his defense of the production on the original textual characteristics of Shakespeare's play:

This *Lear* is not about the words-you can't understand a good many of them. But *King Lear* is, in any case, the play in which Shakespeare made poetry by dismantling his own poetic forms, filling the text instead with broken lines, exclamation, single "no"s and "never"s repeated again and again, or great flooding gusts of jargon and abuse; Breuer has only completed the process.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Frank Rich, "Mabou Mines Creates a *King Lear* All Its Own," *The New York Times*, 26 January 1990, 3. Clive Barnes of *New York Post* expressed similar view.

⁴⁵ Michael Feingold, "A Mythic Immediacy," *Village Voice*, 8 February 1990, 95.

In Feingold's view, by adding body-miking and an Appalachian accent to the already dismantled text, Mabou Mines's *Lear* completed a long process of deconstructing Shakespeare's poetry that Shakespeare himself initiated.

The collective and collaborative nature of Mabou Mines's work gave its work originality and historical importance. The loosely structured, open-ended nature of its collaboration necessitated a long rehearsal period during which all sorts of ideas about plot, characters, set, and costumes could be tried, discarded, and expounded. It took Mabou Mines three-and-a-half years to be able to finish and bring its *Lear* production to the Manhattan Triplex Theatre in January 1990. For this reason, Iris Smith declared its *Lear* production to be "a signature piece of the 1980s Mabou Mines."⁴⁶ Besides its collaborative nature, funding was another significant reason for such a long rehearsal period. According to Alisa Solomon, who served as dramaturg of the production, Mabou Mines refused to squeeze into a standard four-week rehearsal period to get hired on at a regional theatre, and could not possibly afford to pay the enormous cast for the full year they needed to mount the play.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Iris Smith, "Mabou Mines's *Lear*," 281.

⁴⁷ Alisa Solomon, *Re-dressing the Canon* (London: Routledge, 1997), 133.

Initiated by the Rockefeller Foundation playwriting Fellowship in 1986, Mabou's project was developed through a series of workshops and several public performances of partial scenes as work-in-progress, whenever funding was available. Rehearsals began with a workshop funded by The Southern Arts Foundation and Margaret Cox at the Theatrical Outfit in Atlanta in 1987. Later in 1988 selected scenes were presented at the George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick, New Jersey, as a part of 1987-88 season of the playhouse. The Wallace Fund and the Inter-Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts were provided for this occasion. That summer Mabou Mines took a four-week residence at the Theater Institute at Storm King during which the heath scenes and many technological possibilities were explored. The outcome of this summer residency was presented as a part of "A Day in the Country" program. There was one more public presentation of a partial production at Smith College in March 1989 before *Lear* was ready for its premiere in New York in 1990. By this time, however, the cost of the production became prohibitive. Mabou Mines frantically sought to find funds to support *Lear*'s New York premiere. Then came the AT&T Foundation. AT&T's sponsorship of *Lear* drew critics' scrutiny almost as much as the production itself. Seeing Mabou Mines as a part of an older, more established avant-garde, David Kaufman accused both

corporate and institutional sponsors and Mabou Mines of coaxing the public into thinking of *Lear* as “the best of what’s not mainstream.”⁴⁸ Susan Bennett saw corporate sponsorship of *Lear* production as proof of the postmodern commodification of Shakespeare.⁴⁹ However the most balanced view came from Iris Smith who observed that corporate sponsorship was an integral part of postmodern avant-garde art:

Attempting large-scale, nationally visible, artistically innovative work put a contemporary theatre group in the position of embracing strange bedfellows-artistic, administrative, or financial liaisons that become integral to the work and invest it with its postmodern character. It is this conjunction of interests and discourses that best characterizes postmodern avantgarde theatre.⁵⁰

Despite the risk of commodification, this uneasy collaboration between one of the most eminent avant-garde groups and a corporate sponsor was the inevitable fate of a postmodern avant-garde theatre in this conservative era when public funding for the arts, particularly for experimental, risk-taking works was drastically cut.

⁴⁸ David Kaufman, “This Way Madness Lies,” *Downtown*, 7 February 1990, 2.

⁴⁹ See Susan Bennett, “The Hybrid King Lear: Crossing Culture, Crossing Gender,” *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past* (London: Routledge, 1996), 69-78.

⁵⁰ Iris Smith, 302.

As clearly manifested in the controversy surrounding the use of body-miking and Appalachian accents, among critical responses to Mabou's *Lear* production there existed what Breuer described as "the enormous canyon between the two sets of opinions,"⁵¹ between those who called it a "demonstration of the intellectual and aesthetic bankruptcy of our leading avant-garde troupes"⁵² and those who called it a "masterpiece,"⁵³ between "the worst excesses of bad Shakespeare"⁵⁴ and "one of the most powerful Shakespeare productions."⁵⁵ Surprisingly, a female *Lear* did not seem to bother even the most hostile critics. The production's deliberate lack of grandeur appeared to reduce the mythic, poetic scale of Shakespeare to crude naturalism and the characters to a joke: Lear's birthday cake replacing a map in the division of the kingdom scene; Lear's favorite dogs replacing his hundred knights; a chicken coop with live chickens replacing the stocks to

⁵¹ Lee Breuer, interview by Jon Kaplan, "Mabou Mines Opens Possibilities by Gender-bending the Bard's *Lear*," *Now* 9(1990): 15-21.

⁵² Howard Kessel, "Steer Clear of The *Lear*," *Daily News*, 29 January 1990, 37.

⁵³ Tish Dice, "Review of *Lear*," *Plays International* (March 1990): 9.

⁵⁴ Seamus McGraw, "Lear Falls Prey to Worst of Shakespeare," *The Register*, 13 January 1988, n.p.

⁵⁵ David Sterritt, "What if Lear Had Been a 50s Southern Belle?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, 7 February 1990, 10.

imprison Kent; leather and guns replacing spears; the distraught Lear railing against the elements while climbing a telephone pole and brandishing a golf-club; and the Fool's speech set to the tune of "Singing in the Rain" during the storm scene. One of the most negative reviews came from Robert Crew:

It's a four-hour flop.... Breuer is offering a *Lear* that has been filtered through a contemporary and unmistakably American psyche.... This postmodernist *Lear* is fragmented, technological and filled with parody and half-loving, half-scornful references to American culture: Faulkner and Tennessee Williams, obviously; Elvis and other country singers (I'm a Woman); maybe even *The Wizard of Oz*.... Strip *Lear* of its words and all is lost. It is through the poetry that Shakespeare defines and shapes character, examines in stark, elemental terms our position and relationship to nature, and explores the meaning of power, loyalty and love. Concentrate solely on the plot and this play becomes little more than Lamb's old man tottering about in the rain.⁵⁶

Crew criticized the production for adopting American analogies and a postmodern aesthetic strategy. Crew's criticism represents the sentiments of the mainstream critics who tended to judge the production with their modernist standards. A typical modernist prescription for a Shakespearean production would require a coherent, poetic interpretation of the play which elicits the universal meaning of the text, without tampering with its narrative and poetry. That is what the Mabou Mines production tried to avoid. By

⁵⁶ Robert Crew, *The Toronto Star*, c5.

providing the production with an American context, Breuer rather sought to foreground issues relevant to the contemporary American audience and to reveal the instability and contradictions of the text and the ideological dimension of all styles and representations. Crew's animosity toward the postmodern aesthetic and the political impulse behind it led him to dismiss the production as a complete flop.

The constantly shifting tone of the production, flipping from parody to terror, hard-edged humor to tragedy, grotesque to sublime, and the mixture of grotesque nightmarish visions with cartoonish settings and campy use of costumes, shoes, and cars from the 1950s, of half-gritty realism with half-lurid fantasy cliché, engendered an impression that the production did not have any solid aesthetic ground except for the director's whim, or at best playful directorial conceits. Some reviewers dismissed Breuer's style as a garish gimmick which called attention to its own devices. Adding more confusion to the production were irreverent, grotesquely funny insertions of American pop-culture iconography from an American subculture most of its audience knew best from pre-1960s fictional renderings of such writers as Erskine Caldwell, William Faulkner, and Tennessee Williams. As Robert Brustein's review of Breuer's *The Tempest* declared, references to the icons of American popular culture in his production seemed to transform

Shakespeare into an “idiomatic glossary of our time.”⁵⁷ Reviewers found in Lear and her sons, Goneril and Regan, memories of Big Mama and the good ol’ boys of Tennessee Williams’s plays and in McElduff’s Elva’s seductive acts reminds of such Hollywood sex symbols as Monroe, Elvis, and Brando. Such heavy reliance on popular culture brought the charge of exploiting and reinforcing crude media stereotypes. Erika Munk, writing for *Village Voice*, criticized Breuer:

The Southern world Breuer creates has more to do with media than with any real place, and my suspicion is that it was chosen because it rouses an instant, stereotyped expectation of mindless violence and sexy primitivism in the mind of an urban audience.⁵⁸

Munk’s criticism seems to have pointed to the innate danger of the parodic nature of postmodern political theatre which forces artists to carry out their critique of representation by means of dominant representation and thus to “walk a tightrope between complicity and critique.”⁵⁹ Instead of being critically and intellectually distanced by the clashing of heterogeneous

⁵⁷ Robert Brustein, “Review of *The Tempest*,” *New Republic*, 22 August 1981, 23.

⁵⁸ Erika Munk, “Subversion by Concept,” *Village Voice*, 6 February 1990, 98.

⁵⁹ Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 31.

images and stereotypes, Munk found the production's reliance on stereotypes and popular images empty parody that simply exploited the audience's instant recognition of ready-made popular culture. Arguably though, Breuer seems to avoid imitating wholesale Hollywood's depiction of Southern life through his characteristic directorial strategy that involved "striking a balance where it was all parody and all straight at the same time,"⁶⁰ as Breuer himself confided. While deconstructing the conventions of representation and foregrounding the contradictions of the text, this strategy encouraged the audience's active involvement in the process of signification. Joe Jeffrey observed,

Breuer's productions are enactments of intellectual wrestling matches. The author and Breuer are pitted against each other, literally head to head, text against interpretation, in a battle of ideas, wit, and cultural relevancies.... He fights with tooth and nail his audience's preconceptions and his author's text while working with and against them.⁶¹

Reactions of the feminist critics to this strategy were far more complicated than mainstream critics, due to the prospect of the potential

⁶⁰ Lee Breuer, quoted in Tish Dice, "Mabou Mines Collaborative Creation," *The Soho Weekly News*, 18 May 1978, 23.

⁶¹ Joe E. Jeffrey, "Mother Lear and Her Children on a Hot Tin Roof," *Out Week* 11 February 1990, 65.

feminist critique in Mabou's gender-reversed production. Initially excited, most feminist critics seemed to grow frustrated by the lack of stronger feminist indictment of Shakespeare's play. Of course gender-reversal foregrounded the relationship between power and gender, creating many wonderful moments of alienation, as discussed earlier in this chapter. But to be able to dismantle patriarchal practices, they felt, much more careful attention should have been paid to the details of the text. One of the most striking instances of such negligence occurred in Lear's speech, "this mother swells up toward my heart; *Hysteria passio!*"⁶² Shakespeare's *King Lear* feared being overtaken by the female hysteria which, according to the popular belief of the Elizabethan era, was thought of as wandering in the body, shutting off access to breath, and regarded as the symptomatic manifestation of the gasping of hysterical fits.⁶³ However in this production, Maleczek's Lear seems to have made no attempt to frame or foreground what patriarchal

⁶² *King Lear*, Act II scene iv, 56-57.

⁶³ See Kenneth Muir's note on this passage in his Arden *King Lear* edition. Citing Edward Jordan's *A Brief Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother*, Muir explains that "this disease is called by diverse names amongst our authors, *Passio Hysterica*, *Suffocatio*, and *Priefocatio*,... i.e. in English, the Mother or the Suffocation of the Mother, because, most commonly, it takes them with choking in the throat; and it is an affect of the mother or womb."

science had made of her woman's body. Demonizing her own body, Lear merely testified to her complicity in the man-made world she tries to control.

The production's heavy reliance on technology was also criticized as a device to undermine the powerful performance of Maleczech's Lear, shifting the focus of the production away from the feminist critique to the deconstruction of representation in general. Erika Munk once again complained;

Ruth Maleczech's Lear is strong, surprising, monstrously maternal, eloquent in rage and madness. But she is subverted from the start. First by the technology; who is this noble, arrogant person with the silly mike taped, like a worm, to her cheek?... Breuer swamps Maleczech's performance in techno shtick. Is this his male unconscious rebelling against the woman king?⁶⁴

Feminist critics seem to have been troubled not just by the disruptive use of the technology but also by the production's postmodern preoccupation with questioning all forms of cultural hegemony, which would avoid the specificities of sexual, racial, and gender differences. Breuer's postmodern preoccupation is well expressed in his observation of contemporary American culture;

⁶⁴ Erika Munk, *Village Voice*, 95, 98.

There are cultures of race, cultures of gender, cultures of generations, all kinds of cultures, and each has its own behavior patterns, language, rules, moral structure, and so on. Now every one of us belongs to many of these cultures—what interests me is which culture determined the way we behave in which circumstances.⁶⁵

Frustrated with the production's emphasis on the heterogeneous experience of American culture, Laurence Senelick complained, "By adding all sorts of modern American signifiers of class and race, he hopelessly confused the issue, muddying the reversal of gender with other signifiers that were occasionally apt but more often irrelevant."⁶⁶ This criticism seems to represent a dilemma facing feminists in postmodern theatre. As Philip Auslander observes, the whole project of political theatre, its concerns and strategies under the postmodern condition, has changed since the 1960s. Considering that it is extremely difficult for a postmodern political project to encompass the diverse racial, sexual, and class experiences of people, therefore, the postmodern feminist project is most effective when it concerns itself with exposing the apparatuses of patriarchal representation and its ideological preconceptions, and in the process intervenes and dismantles them.

⁶⁵ Lee Breuer, interview by Ross Wetzsteon in *Village Voice*, 39.

⁶⁶ Laurence Senelick, ed., "Introduction," *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts* (Hanover, NH: Tufts University Press, 1992), xvi.

No one connected with the production claimed that this was a definitive *Lear*. All they asked was that audiences shake up their preconceptions and open themselves up to the possibility of fresh perception. The work “asks more questions than it answers,”⁶⁷ said Breuer. One of the questions that the production asked was whether it was possible to find in a female Lear’s downfall the same tragic dimension as was assumed in a male Lear. Elin Diamond’s review seemed to answer the question: “Mabou Mines has made maternal vanity, rage, and pain the stuff of high tragedy and that alone merits interest.”⁶⁸ Perhaps feminists should be content with this no small accomplishment.

IV

Postmodern political art reveals the instability of master narratives, exposing the ideological dimension of all styles and representations. Likewise, Mabou’s *Lear* destabilized the meaning of Shakespeare’s text with

⁶⁷ Lee Breuer, quoted in Dan Aubrey, “Mining for a new version of Lear,” *The Times*, 8 January 1988, n.p.

⁶⁸ Elin Diamond, *Theatre Journal*, 483.

provocative concepts and performance. Quoting Jonathan Dollimore, Susan Bennett claims of Shakespeare's *King Lear*,

This Shakespeare play is not a manifesto for essentialist humanism nor a nihilistic and chaotic vision of Jacobean tragedy, but an exploration of man "in order to make visible social process and its forms of ideological misrecognition."⁶⁹

In a way, Mabou Mines's *Lear* fulfilled Dollimore's idea about Shakespeare's *King Lear*. It made visible patriarchal ideology and the underlying heterosexism, misogyny, and racial and class injustice of the play through gender-reversal, cross-racial casting, and an American Southern setting. The production demystified Shakespeare's *King Lear* in a theatrical style that was distinctively postmodern and American in its ironic mixture of pop imagery, parody, and multi-media, with its political interest in gender, race, and class relations in the United States. It also presented the possibility of revitalizing Brecht for the postmodern political theatre and particularly for the feminist theatre through its mastery of *Verfremdungseffekt*.

⁶⁹ Susan Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia*, 77-78. See also Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 191.

Chapter V

Robert Wilson's *Lear*: Schizophrenia and the Sublime

I

During a rehearsal for his 1990 *Lear* production, Wilson claimed,

I don't have to make theatre with *Lear*. Shakespeare already made the theatre. What I have to find is a way to put his theatre on a stage with enough room around those words so that people can hear them and think them. I don't believe in talking back to a masterpiece. I let it talk to me.¹

Notorious for denying that he interprets texts, Wilson does not intend to explain the text of *King Lear*, nor to discover hidden truth within it. Rather he intends to play with many variations of the play's theme and with certain images extracted from the play, setting them in a spatial and gestural arrangement that is strictly controlled. Wilson frequently describes his theatrical production style as an "architectural arrangement in space and time."² *Lear* was to be no exception. Wilson executed *Lear* in his long-established formal arrangement. Despite Wilson's protestations, it can be

¹Robert Wilson, interview by Arthur Holmberg, "*Lear* Girds for a Remarkable Episode," *The New York Times*, 20 May, 1990, 7, 36.

²Robert Wilson, interview by Ariel Goldberg, "Robert Wilson," *In Contact with the Gods?: Directors Talk Theatre*, eds. Maria M. Delgado and Paul Heritage (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 306.

argued, however, that any theatrical presentation is a mediation, an act of interpretation. He may not have intended to provide a literal, monolithic, and linear interpretation. However, a formalistic approach is his way of interpreting the play. This chapter will attempt to explore the aesthetics of Wilson's formalism as manifested in his 1990 staging of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the result of his formalistic interpretation of the play.

For more than three decades since beginning his theatrical career in the mid-1960s, Robert Wilson has developed a distinctive theatre aesthetics.³ Stunning visual imagery intensified by the masterly use of lighting, unique architectural stage compositions, stylized, abstract, and slow-paced movements, dissociation of the visual and the verbal, and epic scale in length and size are among the characteristic signatures of a Wilson production. Despite or perhaps because of its distinctive aesthetics, Robert Wilson's work has drawn a wide range of, sometimes conflicting, critical assessments. To some critics, his work seems to contain the traits of such modernist avant-garde approaches to theatre as Surrealism, Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Craig's *Ubermarionette*, and Metaerlinck's symbolist theatre.⁴ For others,

³For a detailed description of Wilson's entire career, see Arthur Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For Wilson's early work, see Stefan Brecht, *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978).

⁴See Ralph Willett, "The Old and the New: Robert Wilson's

Wilson's obsessive interest in the role of language in theatrical representation and the subsequent adoption of a strategy, the famous Wilsonian uncoupling of the visual and the verbal, represent postmodernism's skepticism over language's referentiality.⁵ Undoubtedly the formalistic qualities of his work, particularly abstraction and stylization in creating stage pictures, resonate with high modernist art. Equally noticeable are the postmodern concerns of Wilson's production which foreground the crisis of language and the resulting crisis of subjectivity. In other words, his formalism seems to be in conflict with his postmodern concerns. Such contradiction prompted one critic, Johannes Birringer, to declare, "the heightened formalism of Wilson's abstract, atemporal images remains one of the stumbling blocks of postmodern performance."⁶

Yet, I would argue that certain modernist techniques prominently featured in Wilson's work do not make "stumbling blocks." Rather their

Traditions," *Studien zur Ästhetik des Gegenwartstheaters*, ed. Christian W. Thomsen (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1985), 91-98. See also Arnold Aronson, "Postmodern Design," *Theatre Journal* 43(1991): 1-13. Arguing that in the modern mise-en-scene, the text, the performance, and the scenography unite into a seamless, beautiful whole, Aronson includes Robert Wilson in a group of modernist directors descended from the line of Craig and Appia.

⁵See Katherine Arens, "Robert Wilson: Is Postmodern Performance Possible?" *Theatre Journal* 43(1991): 14-40.

⁶Johannes Birringer, "Wilson/Wagner," *Performing Arts Journal* 43(1993): 65 .

presence is in the nature of postmodern art. Andreas Huyssen observes that "all modernist and avantgardist techniques, forms, and images are now stored for instant recall in the computerized memory banks of our culture,"⁷ and that it is impossible to completely sever postmodernism from modernism.

Huyssen thus argues that "postmodernism is far from making modernism obsolete. On the contrary, it casts a new light on it and appropriates many of its aesthetic strategies and techniques inserting them and making them work in new constellations."⁸ In other words, the modernist tradition will always be part of postmodern art. In this sense, it seems pointless to attempt to argue whether Robert Wilson is a postmodernist or modernist. Postmodern art is not concerned with formal, stylistic purity. Rather it operates in a field of tension created by the collision between disparate forms and contents. And the contradictory tension between form and content constitutes one of the most exciting parts of Wilson's aesthetics. It seems, thus, more appropriate to explore how such tension between form and content produces Wilson's unique formalism and what kind of effect can be experienced in Wilson's theatre, in this case, in his 1990 *Lear* production.

⁷Andreas Huyssen, "Map the Postmodern," *After the Great Divide*(Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 196.

⁸Ibid., 217-218. However, Huyssen was skeptical about the revival of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* as postmodern spectacle in Syberberg and Robert Wilson.

II

Theorists of postmodernism identify skepticism about referentiality as the essence of a postmodern perspective.⁹ This crisis of language in turn destabilizes the concept of self, closely bound up with language.¹⁰ To posit language as problematic is to posit self as problematic. This postmodern crisis of language and identity results in entirely new emotional and aesthetic experiences. The loss of depth and the play of surfaces have been identified as among the most noticeable consequences of this postmodern crisis. A prominent cultural critic, Fredric Jameson, observes that in the postmodern the fundamental depth models -- such as the "dialectical one of essence and appearance, the Freudian model of latent and manifest, the existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity, the hermeneutic model of inside and outside, and the great semiotic opposition between signifier and signified,"-- have been repudiated. "What replaces these various depth models," Jameson explains, "is for the most part a conception of practices, discourses, and

⁹See Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Steven Heath(New York: Hill & Wang, 1972), *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller(New York: Hill & Wang, 1974), and Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

¹⁰See Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan(New York: . W. Norton, 1977).

textual plays.... Here too depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces."¹¹ Robert Wilson's theatre seems to perfectly reflect the postmodern symptoms of the loss of depth and the interest in playful surfaces. It seems that Wilson's formalism is an attempt to create an accessible surface when it is no longer possible to establish a reliable link between depth and surface, signifier and signified, and inside and outside. The outer form does not indicate deep, inner meaning. Rather the form becomes the content. In Wilson's production what's under the surface is not important or is inaccessible. The secret is in the surface. In his conversation with Umberto Eco, Wilson himself acknowledged the privileged status of the surface in his work: "This is why I prefer formalism in presenting a work because it creates more distance, more mental space.... The mystery has to be deep in the surface, but the surface itself must be accessible."¹² In Wilson's theatre, the surface holds the key to unlock the mystery of his aesthetics. The denial of depth, however, doesn't mean Wilson's production is meaningless or apsyhological. Rather meaning can be generated through what is formalized

¹¹Fredric Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *A Postmodern Reader*(Albany : State University of New York Press, 1993), 318.

¹²Robert Wilson, "Robert Wilson and Umberto Eco: A Conversation," *Performing Arts Journal* 43(1993): 91. The conversation between the two took place on the occasion of Wilson's exhibition, titled *Robert Wilson: Mr. Bojangles' Memory*, at the Centre Goerges Pompidou, Paris in 1991.

in the surface.

Despite Wilson's intention to present an accessible surface, it is not always easy to comprehend Wilson's formalism. A viewer's insistence on finding a meaning under the surface seems to have prevented him from appreciating Wilson's theatre of surface, as well represented in the review of the *Lear* production by a leading German theatre critic, Peter Iden:

The confusion that some of the audience experiences stems from the fact that the harmonious and elegant beauty of the mise en scene, the unquestionable brilliance in the use of space, light, and the positioning of the actors...actually only create a *cultivated surface* and a *monotonously minimal, shining appearance* of things--of tragedy itself. On the other hand, very little is of consequence, except perhaps a slight upset now and then.¹³

Wilson's skepticism toward language's referentiality along with the visual virtuosity of his work may give the impression that Wilson's aesthetic is anti-language. Nothing seems to be further from the truth. Wilson's theatre is obsessed with language, though his approach to language is by no means traditional. One of the most significant contributions of Robert Wilson to the theatrical world will be his achievement in experimenting with language and broadening its theatrical possibilities in the process.

¹³Peter Iden, "Queen Lear-More 'Vogue' Than Meaning," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 28 May, 1990. Quote in Holmberg, . Emphasis is mine.

In his early "silent opera" era, Wilson was mostly concerned with the destructive hegemony of verbal language in theatrical communication.¹⁴ Wilson's work with Raymond Andrews, a deaf-mute, led him to explore an alternative by silencing language and resorting to the power of visual images and movement. Inspired by an autistic child, Chris Knowles, who plays with language like puzzle games and mathematical formulas, Wilson gradually began to recognize the potential of language as a theatrical code, not as the source for meaning. Focusing on its physicality, Wilson used language as pictorial composition, visual design, and sound effect. Such a strategy culminated in his 1974 production of *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, in which Wilson used patterns from Knowles's language game(writing compositions) as a scenic design of the production and used the record of his word game as sound effect. Gradually through *Einstein on the Beach*(1974) and *The CIVILwarS*(1983-84), Wilson developed a deconstruction strategy which consisted of the fragmentation of the linear narrative and the dissociation of the visual and the verbal. By not corresponding these two modes of representation, visual and verbal, but making them compete with and contradict each other, Wilson highlighted the arbitrary and inadequate nature of all systems of representation. By disrupting linear narrative, Wilson

¹⁴Wilson founded the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrd in 1968. Through workshops and rehearsals with amateur actors and dancers, Wilson explored the techniques that could foreground the problematics of language as a communicating medium.

challenged theatrical realism which is based on the illusion of the coherence of the self and of its experience of reality. Gradually Wilson's metalinguistic inquiries have led him to the metatheatrical inquiries that question the apparatus of theatrical communication. A preeminent Robert Wilson scholar, Arthur Holmberg, aptly sums up Wilson's career in relation to his evolving relationship with language;

Looking at the overall evolution of Wilson's career, one sees that he pulled language apart only to put it back together again.... In the process of assaulting the linguistic codes he questions, Wilson reveals the full range of their possibilities. Wilson's theatre forces the audience into a different relationship with languages.¹⁵

Naturally language was the strongest attraction in Wilson's decision to stage Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In an interview during a rehearsal for the *Lear* production, Wilson admitted:

I love Shakespeare because of his language. I like to read Shakespeare and listen to the rhythm. Shakespeare's words are indestructible, solid as a rock. You can put them anywhere--sink them to the bottom of the ocean, fly them to Jupiter, or drop them into Vesuvius. Nothing

¹⁵Holmberg, 43. This chapter is deeply indebted to Holmberg's book. An insightful record of rehearsal process and the comments from and interviews with the performers and the director himself was invaluable in understanding Wilson's work process.

destroys them.¹⁶

Wilson's statement implies that he likes Shakespeare's language not just for its poetic quality but for its physical, material tenacity. It also implies that rock-solid quality of Shakespeare's language would allow him to experiment with the text, and that no matter how the text is fragmented and deconstructed, Shakespeare's language would hold the production together. It turns out that Wilson's 1990 *Lear* production was not his first encounter with the play. Notably Wilson used Cordelia's death scene in the epilog in the Cologne section of the *CIVILwarS* in 1984. The scene was included as a part of the fragments he and Heiner Muller assembled to foreground the theme of civil struggle and the death of the innocent.

Another reason for Wilson's strong attachment to the play seems to have been the emotionally explosive subject matter. From his own early work such as *Deafman Glance* to the recent productions of classical texts, Wilson's work has dealt with such emotionally charged themes as child abuse, madness, apocalypse, and death. Contrary to the detached, cool surface, there is deep emotion in Wilson's work. *King Lear* is certainly a play that elicits a wealth of intense emotions. There are too many deaths, and of the wrong people, too much cruelty and violence, and too much confusion and

¹⁶ Robert Wilson, quoted in Holmberg, 42.

irresolution. These are the reasons why Charles Lamb insisted that the play was better read than staged, and why Samuel Johnson preferred Nahum Tate's adaptation which tidied up the plot to satisfy his sense of poetic justice.¹⁷ However in Wilson's theatre of the surface, such explosive emotion is almost never communicated directly, but distanced through formal patterns and metaphors. Underneath the formal beauty lies a wealth of raw emotion. This contrast gives Wilson's work rich texture and tension, and provides different kinds of emotional, aesthetic experiences.

III

From the early 1980s, Wilson began to work more and more in Europe, particularly in Germany, largely due to the kind of resources a typical Wilson work requires. A more conservative political and artistic atmosphere and the drastic cutting of funding for the arts during this era made it difficult for an avant-garde artist like Wilson to continue to work in the United States. Since his production *Death Destruction & Detroit* was invited to Peter Stein's *Schaubhne am halleischen Ufer* in 1979, Wilson found his artistic shelter at German state theatres. Here Wilson found the place to present his grand scale, high-tech productions, and he has thrived in resourceful German state

¹⁷See Jonathan Bate, ed. *The Romantics on Shakespeare*(New York: Penguin Books, 1992).

theatres. Here Wilson learned to work with professional actors and dramaturgs and was provided with the material assistance which helped improve the technical subtleties of his work. Wilson's collaboration with Heiner Müller and the preeminent sound designer, Hans-Peter Kuhn, had a tremendous influence on perfecting his unique theatrical aesthetics.¹⁸ One distinctive outcome of his work in German theatre was Wilson's new-found interest in directing classical texts. Encouraged by his experience of directing Müller's *Hamletmachine* in 1986 and *Quartet* in 1987, Wilson presented a series of productions of classical texts, among them Euripides' *Alcestis* in 1986, Chekhov's *Swansong* in 1989, Shakespeare's *King Lear* in 1990, Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken* in 1991, and Buchner's *Danton's Death* in 1992.

After collaborating on the *CIVILwarS*, Wilson asked Müller to provide a text for his staging of *King Lear*.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Wilson was given an opportunity to conduct a workshop production of Shakespeare's play with students at the University of California in 1985. In the end, however, Müller,

¹⁸For more information on Wilson's collaborators, see Laurence Shyer, *Robert Wilson and His Collaborators* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1989).

¹⁹For a detailed description of the nature of the collaboration between Wilson and Müller, see also Andrej Wirth, "Heiner Müller and Robert Wilson: An Unlikely Convergence," *Heiner Müller: Contexts and History*, ed. Fischer Gerhard (Tubingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1994), 213-219. Arthur Holmberg credits Müller for drawing Wilson's interest toward directing the classical texts and the plays written by other writers.

who was himself involved in his own *Hamlet* project, could not meet Wilson's request. With Heiner Müller's adaptation unavailable for the production, Wilson settled for the nineteenth-century German translation by Wolf Graf Baudissin.²⁰ The director, then, had the dramaturg, Helen Hammer, adapt Baudissin's translation. Keeping only the skeleton of the plot, the dramaturg cut the narrative into a series of the fragmented scenes which dissolves the structure of the story into a succession of situations, motifs, and images.²¹ This dramaturgical treatment of the text transformed the five-act structure into fifteen scenes prefaced by a prologue. For the prologue, Wilson introduced William Carlos Williams's poem about the death of his grandmother, "The Last Words of My English Grandmother."²² The production had a premiere performance on May 26, 1990, with Marianne Hoppe as Lear in the Frankfurt Schauspielhaus.

²⁰The choice of Baudissin's translation puzzled many critics. Notably Patrice Pavis found the "diffuse, long-winded" text clashing with Wilson's minimalistic, abstract formalism. See Patrice Pavis, "Wilson, Brook, Zadek: An International Encounter?" *Foreign Shakespeare* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 270-289.

²¹This echoes Bernard Beckerman's observation of *King Lear* that there is no single climactic scene, but a series of intense moments. See Bernard Beckerman, *Shakespeare at the Globe* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

²²See figure 1.

The Bockenheimer Depot of the Frankfurt Schauspielhaus, where Wilson's *Lear* production was presented, had an open picture-frame set. The back wall was covered with a white canvas onto which Wilson's elaborate lighting was to be projected, creating diverse images and atmosphere in the course of the performance. When a piercing, whirring sound and drum roll signaled the beginning of the performance, a narrow vertical rod of light passed from left to right in the frame of the proscenium arch, dazzling the audience. As the glare subsided, a tableau of twelve actors spaced out over the entire stage emerged, slowly miming stylized gestures of unbuttoning.²³ Immediately after the unbuttoning mime, a spotlight focused on the face of Marianne Hoppe, while she recited Williams's poem in English. By framing the production with the unbuttoning mime and Williams's poem, the prologue established a visual vocabulary as well as a thematic guide for the audience.

The unbuttoning mime recalls the two moments in the text when Lear crosses the boundaries into madness and death. In Act III, scene iv, the scene of Lear's madness and enlightenment, and the scene in which the border between sanity and insanity is blurred, Lear requests Edgar disguised as Tom

²³The cast included Marianne Hoppe(Lear), Jutta Hoffman(Goneril), Rold Idler(Albany), Astrid Gorvin(Regan), Hans-Jörg Assmann(Cornwall), Alexandra von Schwerin(Cordelia), Mario Melzer(France), Jürgen Holtz(Gloucester), Christoph Waltz(Edgar), Richy Müller(Edmund), Andreas Seifert(the Fool), Thomas Thieme(Kent).

to unbutton him.²⁴ And towards the end of the play, in Act V, scene iii, when Lear finds out that Cordelia is dead, he begs those around him to undo his button.²⁵ It is Lear's last favor to ask before he dies and an act of a total resignation from life. Wilson selects one crucial gesture of the play which points to the dramatic transformation of Lear. The act of divestment on stage not only symbolizes Lear's loss of power, sanity, and life, but at the same time, leads Lear to self-discovery and new awareness of suffering and injustice in life. Lear realizes the true nature of power and humanity via madness and death. The unbuttoning mime brilliantly captures the paradox of Lear's world: through madness Lear can reason, and at the cost of sanity comes the real understanding of people and the world. This choice of the unbuttoning mime hints that Wilson's production will focus on the process of Lear's transformation, both physical and spiritual, and that it will foreground the ironical, contradictory nature of the play.

Williams's poem provides a thematic connection between the story of a dying grandmother and that of Lear: the death of old people. In addition, the

²⁴*King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 3.4.105-112. Lear: "Is man no more than this? Consider / him well. Thous ow'st the worm no silk, the / beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. / Ha! Her's three on's are sophisticated; / thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man / is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal / as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come; / unbutton here."

²⁵*Ibid*, 5.3.309. Lear: "Pray you, undo this button."

poem contains a multitude of motifs that are picked up again and echoed in the course of the performance: the cry for food, "Gimme something to eat!," corresponds to Lear's call for food, "Dinner, ho! dinner!"²⁶; the triple "no, no, no," with which the grandmother objects to being carried off to the hospital is taken up again in scene 12 when Lear turns toward the blind Gloucester in Act IV, scene v; the "stretcher" is picked up again on both visual and textual levels as the shape of Lear's bed in scene 13 and as Kent's words on Lear's death: "O! let him pass! He hates him. / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer"²⁷; the grandmother's accusation, "Oh you think you're smart / you younger people, she said, but I'll tell you / you don't know anything," is taken up in Edgar's last words: "The oldest hath borne most; we that are young / Shall never see so much nor live so long,"²⁸; and the fuzzy-looking "trees", the last elements of reality that the grandmother can relate to, find visual echo in the tree that stands on the stage in scene 14 under which Gloucester dies.

This formal structure of the production using the prologue as a framing device appears at first to be an attempt to contain within a unified whole the production's fragmented scenes, each of which becomes a kind of installation

²⁶Ibid, 1.4.45.

²⁷Ibid., 5.3.312-314.

²⁸Ibid., 5.3.325-326.

art built around particular images and motifs such as tree, sick old woman, and stretcher.²⁹ It turns out, though, that the prologue provides more complex and conflicting results than at first seems. The fact that the poem is recited by Hoppe in English significantly undermines the supposed intertextual effects of the poem discussed above. While there can be no doubt about the prologue's function as a framing device of the production in terms of visual and thematic motifs, the degree of the intertextual connection evoked by the prologue would vary depending on the individual spectator's understanding of English. The creation of the intended effect will entirely rely on the audience's reception. In addition, in Wilson's theatre individual spectators are given a vast space and time within which to receive and respond to a series of images and verbal texts offered for their viewing at their own paces.³⁰ This emphasis on the audience's reception in Wilson's production reflects a postmodern shift of the basis of the work of art from the object itself to the

²⁹ Wilson's use of Williams's poem as a prologue resembles a convention of the Japanese traditional *noh* theatre, *shidai*. *Shidai* is a short poetic opening passage in a *noh* play that provides the central image around which subsequent action crystallizes. I will discuss the influence of the *noh* theatre on Robert Wilson's theatre shortly.

³⁰See Katherine E. Kelly, "Staging Repetition: Parody in Postmodern British and American Theatre," *Repetition in Discourse: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Barbara Johnstone (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Pub. Co., 1992), 55-67. Kelly sees Wilson's use of slow motion, repetition, and large scale as parodic, in its broad sense of definition, and argues that they are essential strategies in his attempt to decenter the theatre event.

transaction between the spectator and the object. This shift also negates the possibility of a representative objective viewer. When asked about the role of the audience in his theatre, Wilson answered,

The audience has the same role as the author, the director, or the actor. All of us are engaged in the process of asking "What is it?" We don't try to say what it is or what it means. We're all the same from that point of view. Our theatre is so an open-ended form, and the audience has the responsibility to bring an open mind.³¹

By presenting the prologue in English along with a vast time and space, Wilson diffuses the authority of performance and of his own direction.

Marianne Hoppe's performance as Lear became the center of critical attention partly due to the ambiguous identity of Lear's gender in her performance. Marianne Hoppe, one of Germany's preeminent stage and screen actresses, began her career at Max Reinhardt's Deutsches Theater in the 1920s. Over the years, Hoppe has played some of the great classic roles for women in the plays of Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, and Shakespeare. The choice of Marianne Hoppe for the role of Lear generated much interest and

³¹Robert Wilson, interview by Arthur Holmberg, "A Conversation with Robert Wilson and Heiner Müller," *Modern Drama* 31(1988): 455.

speculation from the critics. Typically, cross-gender casting³² tends to comment on gender politics, as was the case with Maleczech's Lear in Mabou Mines's *Lear* production. Maleczech's Lear provided gender critique on Shakespeare's text and explored the relationship between gender and power in contemporary American society, as discussed in the previous chapter. However, Hoppe's Lear in Wilson's production appears to lack such an overt gender critique. Wilson told an interviewer that he cast eighty-year-old Hoppe, because "she had Lear's face. She had Lear's voice."³³ To the director, not Hoppe's gender but her age and physical appearance mattered most. In her performance, Hoppe's gender becomes indeterminate.

Throughout the performance Hoppe's Lear is not identified as masculine through costume, makeup, or wig. Her movement and gesture do not represent typically male behavior. Lear's outward appearance clearly defines the character she portrays as a woman, while the lines she speaks prove irrefutably to be those spoken by a man. Wilson does not change the text to accommodate a female Lear. In addition, the image of grandmother invoked by the Williams's poem constantly overlaps with that of Lear. Whereas Maleczech's Lear was unquestionably a Southern matriarch in every

³²Hoppe's Lear was not the first gender-reversed casting in Wilson's staging. Frederick the Great in the *CIVILwarS* and Franz Kafka in *Death Destruction & Detroit* were also played by actresses.

³³Robert Wilson, quoted in Holmberg, "Lear Girds for a Remarkable Episode," c7.

way, in Hoppe's *Lear* gender is suspended between man and woman, grandmother and old king. During a rehearsal, Hoppe acknowledged, "I will not try to play a man, but I will forget I'm a woman. It's difficult being suspended between male and female."³⁴ However, Erica Fischer-Lichte sees this indifference to gender in Hoppe's performance as a kind of feminist critique on gender, for it counters sexism which is based on the insistence on the difference between male and female. By deliberately being indifferent to *Lear's* gender, Hoppe's *Lear* is, Fischer-Lichte argues, a step toward abolishing such sexism.³⁵ With gender being irrelevant, the death of Hoppe's *Lear* represents the death of an old person. Fischer-Lichte sees *Lear's* death as a rite of passage, and as a rite of passage, death seems to be wholly indifferent to gender; "Death, the theme of this performance, is thus not the death of a specific individual such as *Lear* or Gloucester.... But the death as the ritual transition at the end of a long life into a new condition, a new reality".³⁶ While Fischer-Lichte's analysis of Wilson's *Lear* production provides a detailed semiotic description of the performance and an inspiring

³⁴Marianne Hoppe, *ibid.*, interview by Holmberg, c7.

³⁵Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Between Difference and Indifference: Marianne Hoppe in Robert Wilson's *Lear*," *Gender in Performance: the Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*, ed. Laurence Senelick (Hanover: University of New England Press, 1992), 86-98.

³⁶Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Passage to the Realm of Shadows: Robert Wilson's *King Lear* in Frankfurt," *The Show and Gaze of Theatre: A European Perspective* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 216.

anthropological model to assess the production, her celebration of indifference to gender as feminist critique tends to overlook Wilson's interest in the self, which gender is a significant part.

Throughout his career, Wilson has been interested in deconstructing the notion of coherent self in which gender is an important part. In Wilson's theater, the sense of constantly shifting, unstable self is frequently illustrated by the fluidity of gender boundaries. For instance, in his *St. Sebastian* production, Wilson had Saint Sebastian played by both an actor and an actress. In *Quartet* Valmont and Merteuil switched gender by switching each other's lines. As David Savran observes, Wilson is a "director surely most adept at splaying the unitary subject."³⁷ Rather than just providing gender critique, Hoppe's sexually indeterminate Lear, hence, draws attention to the gap between gender and identity. In other words, cross-gender casting points to the instability of the concept of the coherent self.³⁸

Cross-gender casting of Lear fulfills another important aspect of

³⁷David Savran, "Whistling in the Dark: *Doctor Faust Lights the Lights*," *Performing Arts Journal* 43(1993): 26.

³⁸In addition to indeterminate gender, Wilson's other noticeable strategy of deconstructing the notion of coherent self is splitting a role among many actors. He assigned the role of Ophelia to four actresses in his *Hamletmachine* production, thus fragmenting self into a series of speakers. Wilson also divided the role of Irene between two antithetical actresses in his *When We Dead Awaken* production, revealing self as other.

Wilson's aesthetic: anti-realism. In an interview, Wilson explicitly stressed cross-gender casting as a formalistic strategy of his anti-realism:

The fact that I chose a woman to play Lear moves the production away from Realism. We must do this play formally. I don't know what people mean when they talk about Realism in the theatre. Realism on stage looks false and sounds false. It's not real. It's a lie. Theatre is not life. We must acknowledge that theatre is art. Only then can we be truthful....The best "realistic" actors aren't realistic at all. They're formal.³⁹

Instead of attempting to create the illusion of reality, Wilson wants to accentuate the artfulness of his production through cross-gender casting of Lear. Wilson's strategy seems to be directly influenced by Russian Formalism in his view of art as a technique of defamiliarizing the object of art and his emphasis on experiencing the artfulness of theatrical production.⁴⁰ However, Wilson's formalism is different from Russian Formalism in that it stems from his skepticism toward language and its referentiality. If Russian Formalists attempted to find a perfect form to convey the content, Wilson's formalism is an attempt to accentuate the gap in theatrical representation between the form

³⁹Robert Wilson, quoted in Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 155.

⁴⁰See Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," *Russian Formalist Criticism*, ed. Lee Lemon and Marion Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 3-24.

and the content.

When Wilson takes on a new theatrical project, the first step is to draw what the director himself calls a story board, a series of pictures for each scene of the production.⁴¹ Each drawing has a different spatial composition indicated by horizontal and vertical lines. This story board becomes a kind of master plan of the production. Wilson is quoted to have emphasized the importance of this story board:

Architectural structure is crucial in my work. If we don't know where we're going, we can't get there. So this is where we're going, and we'll figure out together how to get there. I have no sense of direction until I have a sense of the stage space.⁴²

Once a sense of direction is set, a long, rigorous rehearsal process begins. During the rehearsals, actors have to learn to adapt to Wilson's direction. It is not an easy task for the actors to give up their usual realistic training and follow Wilson's abstract, stylized gestures and movement.

In Wilson's production, characterizations are to be made through the actors' walks, gestures, movement patterns, and even the color of their costumes, not through their expression of the inner selves of the characters.

⁴¹See figure 2.

⁴²Robert Wilson, quoted in Holmberg, "Lear Girds for a Remarkable Episode," 36.

Actors are not allowed to react to each other, nor to address the audience directly. The relationship among the characters is decided, not by their interaction with one another, but by their spatial relationship, in its proximity and distance. The stage configuration, who stands where with whom, reveals their relationship. Claiming that "your walk is your character," the director, for instance, drew three lines on a piece of paper and gave three daughters their distinctive walks: straight line for Goneril, zigzag for Regan, and curved for Cordelia in the division of the kingdom scene. Wilson also gave actors specific images and sounds that capture the essence of the characters they were playing. Wilson requested the antagonists of the play to imitate stylized animal movements and their sounds. Both Goneril and Albany imitate the movement of a cat. In the division of the kingdom scene, Goneril stretches out on the floor in front of the crown like a cat. Regan constantly squawks and makes claws like a vulture. Edmund imitates a peacock's walking.⁴³

One of the distinctive characteristics to emerge in postmodern theatre has been interculturalism. Particularly conventions of Eastern traditional theatres have been routinely adopted by many Western avant-garde directors, notably in the works of Peter Brook and Arianne Mnouchkine. Robert Wilson's formal, theatrical vocabulary certainly includes intercultural

⁴³This imitation of animal movement by the antagonists seems to reflect the animal metaphors interspersed throughout the play.

influence. The presence of two Japanese collaborators in the *Lear* production-- choreographer, Suzushi Hanayagi, and costume designer, Yoshio Yabara-- hints at the influence of Japanese traditional theatre, particularly that of *noh* theatre. Wilson's attraction to *noh* theatre is understandable, considering its striking resemblance to his own: minimalistic staging, highly stylized gestures and movement, abstract meditation on death, loss, and madness, to name a few similarities.

In Wilson's theatre, however, any traces of other theatrical traditions are neutralized and absorbed into Wilson's distinct formalism so as to negate the original sources. Hanayagi, trained both in *noh* theatre and modern dance, helped translate the physical vocabulary of *noh* theater into Wilsonian vocabulary of stylized, abstract gestures and movement. Ever since Hanayagi collaborated with Wilson on the *CIVILwarS* project as a choreographer, she became one of the most significant Wilson collaborators, providing movement workshops and demonstrating specific gestures for the actors during the rehearsal process. In *Lear*, such abstract *noh* gestures as a slow raising and lowering of an arm or leg were directly quoted and stylization of the unbuttoning mime and stabbing with daggers suggested the influence of *noh* performance. Wilson's emphasis on the performer's physical movement, particularly the walk, seems to be directly lifted from *noh* aesthetics.⁴⁴

⁴⁴Wilson's emphasis on the actor's walk echoes Japanese avant-garde director Tadashi Suzuki's acting method. In the chapter on Suzuki's

In addition to the abstraction and stylization of gesture and movement, perhaps the most important influence of *noh* theatre seems to be the economy of its use of time and space. On the *noh* stage, an actor's mere walk on stage would indicate the passage of time and the change of location. This convention is particularly useful in *Lear* in dealing with numerous Shakespearean changes of location and the passage of time by making the performers walk in various patterns on stage. They either follow horizontal lines parallel to the picture plane or diagonal lines for dynamic contrast. Very rarely do they walk in straight lines directly toward or away from the audience. As with any movement structure, one must pay close attention not only to the pathway, but also to the point of origin, the destination, the pace, and rhythm. Like the *noh* stage, Wilson's space is almost empty except for the occasional use of props. The scene changes are made by stagehands in black without interrupting the performance, mirroring Japanese stagehands. There are ramps on the right and left side of the apron stage, reminiscent of *Hanamichi* in *kabuki*. Hans-Peter Kuhn's sound design includes repetitive and various drum sounds and flute notes similar to those of *noh*, along with a wealth of other various sounds and noises. In scene 15, Regan performs a melodious singsong intonation reminiscent of *noh* theatre.

Tale of Lear production I will conduct a more detailed comparison between them.

Any audience members familiar with Robert Wilson's work would recognize Wilson's visual vocabulary that is recycled in the *Lear* production: a chair, a long, narrow table, a rod of light, and a tree. They have been seen not only in Wilson's other theatrical productions but also exhibited in museums around the world. Lifted from his previous theatrical works, they are recontextualized as sculpture and furniture in a new environment. Wilson explains his practice of recycling to Umberto Eco during the Pompidou Center exhibition of his sculpture and furniture;

Many of the pieces were previously seen in the context of a theatre piece. Now they are seen in a museum and arranged in a certain way. They are in a completely different context. They are like molecules that break apart and recombine. They change through the deconstruction process.⁴⁵

Because of Wilson's minimal use of stage props and their state-of-the-art qualities, any props in Wilson's production draw the spectators' attention to themselves. Particularly when they are such familiar Wilsonian props as chair, table, and tree, it is hard not to draw an immediate intertextual connection with his other works where the same props were used. Among them, the chair has been one of the most distinctive props in Wilson's

⁴⁵Robert Wilson, "Robert Wilson and Umberto Eco: A Conversation," 94.

productions. In his *Lear*, Wilson uses a minimalistic, high-back, wooden chair. Once a symbol of his power and now an object of torture which reminds Lear of his past glory and present powerlessness, Lear's chair brings an instant recollection of the chairs in Wilson's past work, particularly Stalin's chair in *The Life and Times of Stalin*. The long, narrow table in Lear's trial scene has a striking resemblance to the table in *Hamletmachine*. And the use of a rod of vertical light reminds the audience of practically almost every production of Wilson's theatrical work. Instead of drawing the spectators into the unique world of *Lear*, this intertextual association expands the audience's attention to the outside of that world which collides with and parallels it. By recycling such familiar props, Wilson at once deconstructs the contained world of his *Lear* production and creates a theatrical world of self-reference.

Wilson's practice of recycling his visual vocabulary is based on his aesthetic belief that each of the theatrical codes is equally important. Wilson's refusal to illustrate the verbal text with the visual best represents this aesthetic, though it has been misunderstood as anti-language. As Wilson implicitly reveals in his conversation with Eco, theatrical codes are like loosely connected "molecules" which can exist independently within a production and can be taken apart and reassembled in a new work. Thus in a Wilson production, not only are gestures detached from the simultaneously spoken text, but individual modes of the production, sound, design, text, and action, follow separate tracks. Heiner Müller regards this disjunction of

theatrical codes as one of the most significant achievements of Wilson's theatre: "Bob achieved what Brecht only dreamed of doing; the parting of the elements. Bob's theatre offers a more complicated pleasure than normal theatre."⁴⁶ By juxtaposing and contrasting them with each other, Wilson recombines these disjointed theatrical codes, creating a sense of dissonant and dissociated surface. And Müller's "complicated pleasure" arises from the tension and richness based on the experience of this formal dissonance and dissociation in Wilson's production.

Experiencing dissonant and dissociated realities is a typical symptom of schizophrenia. Wilson's formal practice of parting of each theatrical code results in a theatrical experience of schizophrenia, which Fredric Jameson describes as a prevalent cultural style of the postmodern.⁴⁷ Borrowing from Lacan's study on the connection between the (mal)function of language and the psyche of schizophrenia, Jameson defines schizophrenia as "a breakdown in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or a meaning."⁴⁸ According to

⁴⁶Heiner Müller, interview with Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 52.

⁴⁷See Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalism," 312-332.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 323. Jameson found Lacan's account of schizophrenia useful because his description seemed to offer a suggestive aesthetic model.

Jameson, meaning is generated by the movement from signifier to signifier, not to signified. The signified is rather a meaning-effect that is projected by the relationship of signifiers among themselves. When that relationship breaks down, when the links of the signifying chain snap, a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers creates schizophrenia. In other words, the linguistic malfunction results in schizophrenia.

While insisting on schizophrenia as a cultural style of late capitalism, in other words, as a postmodern condition, Jameson argues that the "postmodern artist is one who shows the schizophrenia in presentation, in lieu of becoming a schizophrenic."⁴⁹ Because schizophrenia becomes a cultural style of postmodern society, it, however, ceases to be associated with a morbid mental disease. Rather a kind of playful euphoria, what Müller refers to as "complicated pleasure," displaces the older affects of chaos and terror. Robert Wilson's formalism perfectly embodies such postmodern schizophrenia. In Wilson's production, there no longer exists a stable signifying chain among signifiers: the verbal is separated from the visual, outer gesture from inner thoughts, sound from design. These disjointed signifiers create playful joy, clashing with and complementing each other.

Scene 10, titled "Three sisters, /collage," epitomizes Wilson's formal aesthetic of the parting of the theatrical codes and its resulting experience of

⁴⁹Jameson, "Consumer Society," *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1984), 118-119.

schizophrenia. The director creates a short collage out of the four separate scenes in order to show Lear's three daughters together but at conflicting, cross purposes. Wilson lifts from the original scenes the daughters' lines reflecting their conflicting inner thoughts and recombines them into one short scene. For this scene, Wilson chooses Goneril's lines in Act IV, scene ii and Act V, scene I: "But being widow, and my Gloucester with her, / May all the building in my fancy pluck / Upon my hateful life."⁵⁰ and "I had rather lose the battle than that sister / Should loosen him and me,"⁵¹ Cordelia's lines in Act IV, scene iv: "O dear father, / It is thy business that I go about, / ... No blown ambition doth our arms incite, / But love, dear love, and our ag'd father's right. / Soon may I hear and see him!"⁵² and Regan's dialogue with Edmund in act V, scene v: R: "Now, sweet lord, / you know the goodness I intend upon you. / Tell me but truly, but then speak the truth, / Do you not love my sister?" E: "In honor'd love." R: "But you have never found my Brother's way / To the forfeited place?": E: "That thought abuses you." R: "I am doubtful that you have been conjunct / And bosom's with her-as far as we call hers." E: "No, by mine honor, madam." R: "I never shall endure her. Dear

⁵⁰*King Lear*, 4.2.84-86.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 5.1.18-60.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 4.4.23-29.

my lord, Be not familiar with her." E: "Fear me not."⁵³ By making big cuts, Wilson brings the three sisters together, highlighting the clash of their conflicting desire: Cordelia's love for Lear, and two sisters' desire for Edmund and distrust for each other.

The scene begins with three sisters standing in three separate zones of light. At stage right, Goneril is dressed in armor, looking like a samurai ready to command her troops into war. Regan exchanges sexual blandishments with Edmund at stage left. On center stage, Cordelia, turned three-quarters away, looks at the audience over her shoulder. Although the sisters are on stage at the same time, each inhabits a different reality. Goneril is on the brink of losing control of herself due to her lust for Edmund. Goneril's warrior-like composure begins to collapse when provoked by the thought of Regan's possible liaison with Edmund. Regan and Edmund are engaged in a dance of mating where their expression of affection contradicts their inner thoughts. Cordelia is engrossed with her plan to rescue Lear. Each speaks her lines of conflicting desire in rapid succession. This simultaneous presentation of the three daughters allows the audience to witness what Marvin Carlson calls the "psychic polyphony" of Lear's three daughters.⁵⁴

⁵³Ibid. 4.5. 1-16.

⁵⁴Marvin Carlson, *Theatre Semiotics*(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 98. Carlson defines psychic polyphony as one of theatre's distinctive abilities to "allow simultaneous statements to be made by variety of presences."

The experience of psychic polyphony gets even more complicated when the director asks the actors to keep tension between speech and gesture. Goneril's violent speech in denouncing Regan's affection for Edmund contradicts her tender embracing of the white handkerchief she associates with Edmund. Edmund, while denying to Regan his involvement with Goneril, caresses a rich jewel Goneril has given him. Edmund's speech counters his gesture. Most of all, Cordelia's action during her speech presents the most complex embodiment of Wilson's aesthetic. While expressing her hope of rescuing Lear, Cordelia peels a large onion.⁵⁵ When she finishes her speech and looks down at her onion, nothing was left. During a rehearsal, Wilson told the actress,

The action of the onion is totally different from what's going on in your mind. In your mind you picture Goneril and Regan, and you're saying 'fuck you' to them over and over. Don't look at the onion. Look over your shoulder as if you're staring into the eye of time.⁵⁶

In other words, Cordelia's speech, thought, and gesture are to be presented contradictorily and independently. This demand of separating theatrical codes

⁵⁵Sheryl Sutton, one of the major Wilson collaborators, suggests the onion to be the emblem of Wilson's theatre: layer upon layer with no core. See Laurence Shyer, *Robert Wilson and His Collaborators*.

⁵⁶Robert Wilson, quoted in Holmberg's *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 32.

is what makes Wilson's production interesting and complex. The scene provides an equivalent of schizophrenic experience, on the one hand, by layering against each other the multiple, dissonant realities and desires of each character and, on the other, by keeping contradictory tension among the thought, words, and gestures of each daughter.

While Fredric Jameson sees schizophrenia as the cultural style of the postmodern, Jean-Francois Lyotard finds the sublime as the emotional tone and the aesthetic of the postmodern.⁵⁷ Noticing that both the postmodern and the sublime foreground the fact that the unrepresentable exists, Lyotard makes the sublime fundamental to his definition of the postmodern. While defining the postmodern as a recurring stage within the modern itself,⁵⁸ Lyotard claims that "the postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts

⁵⁷See Jean Francois Lyotard, "Complexity and the Sublime," *Postmodernism: ICA Documents*, ed. Lisa Appignaresi (London: Free Association Press, 1989), 19-26, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," *Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 196-211, and "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 73-82.

⁵⁸Lyotard writes in his *Postmodern Condition*, "What, then, is the postmodern?... It is undoubtedly a part of the modern.... A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant." (76)

forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself.”⁵⁹ Lyotard turns to the Kantian sublime for his theory of the nonrepresentable. Such Kantian strategies as “formlessness” and “abstraction” in presenting the sublime provide Lyotard with an insight for his postmodern theory of the unrepresentable:

Kant himself shows the way when he names “formlessness,” the absence of form as a possible index to the unrepresentable. He also says of the empty “abstraction” which the imagination experiences when in search for a presentation of the infinite: this abstraction itself is like a presentation of the infinites, its “negative presentation.”...It will therefore avoid figuration or representation.... It will enable us to see only by making it impossible to see; it will please only by causing pain. “Allusion”...is perhaps a form of expression indispensable to the works which belong to an aesthetic of the sublime.... it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented.⁶⁰

Lyotard’s observation that allusion through abstraction and its negative presentation is an indispensable strategy to indicate the unrepresentable implies that the incommensurability of representation lies at the center of aesthetic discourse of both the sublime and the postmodern.

The sublime entered into critical and aesthetic discourse with the Romantic philosophers and artists of the second half of eighteenth and early

⁵⁹Ibid., 81.

⁶⁰Ibid., 80-81.

nineteenth century. Edmund Burke described the sublime as an experience bordering on terror, the fitful glimpse, in astonishment and awe, of what was so enormous as to crush human life altogether. For Burke nature and its overwhelming, apocalyptic power--a storm at sea, and an erupting volcano--, or an equivalent powerful force such as death and extreme violence are the sources of the sublime.⁶¹ Emanuel Kant shifted the focus of the theory of the sublime to its representation. He questioned problems related to the representation of the sublime. According to Kant, the sublime sentiment takes place not only when faced with such sheer powerful forces, but when the imagination fails to present an object which might come to match such forces. Kant foregrounded the limits of figuration and the incapacity of the human mind to give representation to such enormous force. Kantian philosophy of the sublime implies incommensurability of reality to concept.⁶² It is this incommensurability of representation that draws Lyotard to the Kantian philosophy of the sublime.

⁶¹See Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Enquire into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), and Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime: A study of Critical theories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960).

⁶²See Emmanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), and Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

In the same observation on the Kantian sublime Lyotard also discovers another Kantian contribution to the theory of the sublime: the contradictory nature of the sublime sentiment. With the idea of the sublime, Kant observes, the feeling when faced with a work of art is no longer the feeling of pleasure, nor simply one of displeasure. It is a contradictory feeling of joy and anxiety, pleasure and pain. Not only does the sublime carry with it both pain and pleasure, but in the sublime, pleasure derives from pain. Robert Wilson's staging of Gloucester's blinding scene seems to embody the aesthetic of the postmodern sublime in that it presents unrepresentable, unspeakable human cruelty and violence in an artistic way that elicits both pain and pleasure.

Regarded as one of the most brutal scenes written for the stage, Gloucester's blinding scene in Act III, scene vii has provided the greatest challenge to directors. The text of *King Lear* abounds with the images of tortured bodies and bruised flesh. So far in Wilson's production, however, the violence has been represented through metaphors. Wilson's production builds up the anticipation that there is going to be an enactment of the cruel infliction of violence on body. The eyes are to be gouged out from bleeding sockets. Both Regan and Cornwall's sadistic, beastly cruelty is to be revealed. Cornwall tears out Gloucester's remaining eye, even while dying from the attack of a servant. Regan's shrieking and howling urging of violence in Cornwall's blinding of Gloucester and her refusal to help the fatally wounded Cornwall show animal cruelty, obliterating any hint of humanity. After this

overpowering, apocalyptic violence is to come a serene realization of one of the central motifs of the play: the paradox of (in)sight, seeing better in blindness and madness. The realization that he has wronged his son, Edgar, and that he was blind when he was able to see is more painful and cruel to Gloucester than the actual blinding. Gloucester can truly see only after he became blind. Since the scene is often set to precede the intermission,⁶³ the spectators are to witness in full view Gloucester's painful realization of his fatal mistake in his bloodied eyes. The entire scene is set to elicit powerful emotional responses from the spectators of both terror and empathy.

Wilson placed the scene after the break, opening his part two. In the middle of the dark stage a square of intense white light appears. Cornwall and Regan are standing near the square. Two servants bring in Gloucester in a long black robe to where Cornwall and Regan are waiting. They place him in the white light square and disrobe him to the waist. A ring of steel falls around him, then rises as a spiral cage, gleaming cruelly in the bright light. First, Regan approaches Gloucester. With an abstract, formal gesture, she mimes plucking a hair from Gloucester's face and makes an almost beastly sound of laughing and shrieking. Then Cornwall moves forward to Gloucester with a long steel spear and mimes blinding of Gloucester's eye with the spear. Gloucester slowly bends forward to meet Cornwall's spear, without making

⁶³See Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 240-243.

an actual contact with it. Immediately after, the white light square is flooded with blood-red light. The sustained image of blind Gloucester in a blooded spiral cage makes visible his pain and torture. Then Cornwall is stabbed by the servant who is, in turn, stabbed by Regan, which triggers a succession of frantic movement, exiting, reentering the stage, and walking on various parts of the stage across and horizontally by the entire cast on stage except Gloucester. Throughout the sequence, Hans-Peter Kuhn's hallucinatory soundscape provides an atmosphere of chaos. When they finally exit the stage, leaving Gloucester alone, the spiral cage drops to the floor. Gloucester walks slowly toward the audience in dead silence. Since the director hardly allowed the actors to walk directly toward the audience throughout the entire performance, the effect is very striking and unusually confrontational. In the completely darkened stage, a spotlight is on Gloucester's face. Suddenly, the black velvet cloth hanging in the back drops, revealing a wall of translucent white light. The lighting almost blinds the spectators, foregrounding the irony of the scene, that of seeing. Blind, Gloucester finally can see.

In Wilson's staging, emotion is hardly communicated directly. It is formalized on the surface through his tightly controlled formalism. The dialogue is stripped to the minimum, relying heavily on howling, cries, and groans and sometimes on silence. Stylized, abstract movement and gestures replace realistic representation of human violence and cruelty. And the highly

calculated mixture of the tempo and rhythm, slow, trance-like sequences mixed with frantic ones, constantly disrupts the spectators' emotional involvement. Wilson takes up this violent and emotionally charged scene, turning it into an aesthetic experience. Elegantly stylized mimes and the artistic quality of the stage props help generate the sense of beauty amid extreme violence, assisted by Wilson's controlled use of lighting and Kuhn's soundscape. This formalism keeps the spectators distanced from the violently emotional content and lets them experience its cold beauty. Wilson's staging aestheticizes violence in a way that pleasure arises from witnessing it. Even beauty is found in it. Paradoxically, though, the formal beauty enhances the brutality of violence. Wilson's sublime presentation of Gloucester's blinding scene results in one of the most memorable moments of the production.

IV

Postmodernism and its skepticism toward referentiality require new artistic strategies to foreground the incommensurability of representation and to articulate new emotional, aesthetic experiences. Wilson's formalism, in its abstract, stylized presentation of gestures and movement and its parting of the theatrical codes, particularly uncoupling of the visual and the verbal, seems to be a strategy to reflect the postmodern crisis of referentiality and

subjectivity and the sense of the loss of depth resulting from it. Wilson's formalistic staging put Shakespeare's *King Lear* in the abstract, postmodern no man's land where the cultural baggage of the Shakespearean tradition and the world of kingship were hardly shown. Instead, Wilson's *Lear* created the space on stage where such emotionally charged themes of Shakespeare's *King Lear* as madness, violence, and death were explored as a series of architectural constructions, the themes clashing with the beautifully controlled, cool surface of the production. This clash between the form and content resulted in an experience of schizophrenia and the sublime, which are distinctive characteristics of the postmodern.

Fig. 1

The Last Words of My English Grandmother

- William Carlos Williams-

There were some dirty plates
and a glass of milk
beside her on a small table
near the rank, disheveled bed-

Wrinkled and nearly blind
she lay and snored
rousing with anger in her tones
to cry for food,

Gimme something to eat-
They're starving me-
I'm all right I won't go
to the hospital. No, no, no

Give me something to eat
Let me take you
to the hospital, I said
and after you are well

you can do as you please.
She smiles, Yes

You do what you please first
then I can do what I please-

Oh, oh, oh! she cried
as the ambulance men lifted
her to the stretcher-
Is this what you call

making me comfortable?
By now her mind was clear-

Oh you think you're smart
you young people,

she said, but I'll tell you
you don't know anything.
Then we started.
On the way

we passed a long row
of elms. She looked at them
awhile out of
the ambulance window and said,

What are all those
fuzzy-looking things out there?
Trees? Well, I'm tired
of them and rolled her head away.

Chapter VI

Conclusion: Postmodern *King Lear*

I

Gary Taylor writes in the conclusion of his study on the history of Shakespearean reinvention, “We find in Shakespeare only what we bring to him or what others have left behind; he gives us back our own values.”¹ Taylor’s statement does not mean to suggest that Shakespeare’s plays are inexhaustible, all-encompassing, universal texts, but that what makes a text contemporary is how much the text permits the production to explore the possibilities of performance in the present, explore the present itself. It implies that it is not possible to get at Shakespeare’s authoritative, essential meanings due to changing concretization of the text and the widening gap of the social contexts between the production and reception of the text. It also means that as a cultural icon, Shakespeare’s plays and their meanings have been deeply implicated by the political and cultural hegemony of the time. It also means that theatrical representation of Shakespeare’s text is an active inscription of contemporary activity reflecting particular cultural, aesthetic

¹ Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare* (London: Hogarth Press, 1990), 411.

concerns of the time, not just an interpretation of his meaning. The reading of a Shakespeare play, whether literary or theatrical, reveals more about us, our understanding of the world, our value system, and our aesthetic taste than about the “universal truth” of his text. From David Garrick’s sentimental production using Nahum Tate’s adaptation to Peter Brook’s bleak existential production, the stage history of *King Lear* productions vividly attests to this practice of inscribing contemporary activity, incorporating new theatrical technologies and changing views about the play’s characters and subject matters. *King Lear* productions I have discussed in the previous chapters certainly engaged in inscribing the distinctive postmodern aesthetic and cultural concerns. This final chapter will explore what makes *King Lear* a postmodern text par excellence and what the postmodern *King Lear* has been on stage.

II

King Lear raises questions that are at the heart of the postmodern culture’s political unconscious: the crisis of language and subjectivity, the crisis of humanism, or rather of patriarchy, and therefore the crisis of representation. Skepticism toward language and its referentiality has been identified as the most significant, paradigm-shifting episteme of

postmodernism. The rupture between the signifier and the signified leads to the lapse of stable meaning and this crisis of language results in the crisis of subjectivity, which, in turn, questions its representation based on the assumption of the existence of coherent, universal man. *King Lear* seems to embody those postmodern crises; as Alisa Solomon succinctly points out, “In Lear’s “little world of man,” character is marginalized, language is suspect, humanism is dead.”²

King Lear indeed portrays the crisis of language in representing truth and describing the sublime experience of immense emotional, metaphysical chaos. The play repeatedly exposes the inadequacy of language in communicating true feelings, which is epitomized in the verbal love contest scene.³ The language of love is spoken by those who hate and Cordelia refuses to express her love in language. Language not only fails but also contradicts. When facing unspeakable pain and anguish as in the madness scene and blinding scene, sounds of cries, howls, and shrieks, silence, and startling visual imagery make up for the language and carry the emotion and meaning of the play.

² Alisa Solomon, *Re-dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender*(New York: Routledge, 1997), 135.

³ See Jackson Cope, “Shakespeare, Derrida, and the End of Language in *Lear*,” *Shakespeare and Deconstruction*, eds. Douglas Atkins and David M. Bergeron(New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 267-83. Cope argues that the failure of language begins with Cordelia’s “nothing,” in the love contest scene.

In *King Lear*, characters and their identities and motivations are suspect as well. "The death of character" has been identified as one of the significant aspects of the postmodern drama and theatre, which turns away from the modern dramatic preoccupation with the workings of consciousness.⁴ Instead of character searching for the inner self that longs for the coherent, unified, autonomous being, postmodern drama and theatre presents character as a more or less self-conscious entity, taking on multiple roles and self-projections. Calling the characters in *King Lear* masquerading dummies with no sense of self-determination would be an exaggeration. However, with multiple characters literally in disguises, identities of characters are always in question in *King Lear*. Lear's identity seems to be the most undefinable, projecting different persona at the varying stages of his disintegrating sanity: from omnipotent king to mad king to old fool. This impression is amplified by the lack of explanation of the character's psychological motivations. As Maynard Mack observed, "Instead of scenes recording the genesis or gestation of an action, *King Lear* offers us the moment at which will converts into its outward expressions of action and

⁴ See Elinor Fuchs, "The Death of Character," *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 169-176.

consequence.”⁵ *King Lear* does not ask us to contemplate the psychologies of its central figures. Instead, our attention is focused on their actions, which occur without the comfort of explanation. Evoking Jan Kott’s observation that there are no characters in *King Lear*,⁶ Alisa Solomon declares, “We learn nothing about the characters other than what we witness, and nothing about their histories.”⁷

Scholarship on *King Lear* for the last two decades of the twentieth century has intensely scrutinized the very humanist assumptions behind such a lack of explanation about the history and psychology of the characters. Marxist and feminist critics have been particularly productive and influential in that direction, foregrounding the ideological mechanisms of humanism and the patriarchy of the play. Jonathan Dollimore demystified the play’s essentialist humanism by revealing that human values like kindness and love are dependent upon and operate in the service of the material realities of

⁵ Maynard Mack, *King Lear in Our Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 91.

⁶ Jan Kott argues that the plot of *King Lear* would be ridiculous and its philosophical cruelty would not be palpable, if it is realistically treated, for there are no characters in this play of the absurd and grotesque. See Jan Kott, “*King Lear* or *Endgame*,” *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 130.

⁷ Alisa Solomon, *Re-dressing the Canon*, 135. By way of evoking Jan Kott, Solomon speculates that that (the death of character) is why film and theatre directors as varied as Tadashi Suzuki, Jean-Luc Godard, and Robert Wilson decided to direct *King Lear*.

power and property.⁸ Feminist scholars stress that the tragedy of *King Lear*, in fact, is not a tragedy of a human being but of masculinity in patriarchal society, questioning the misogynistic assumptions of the play.⁹ In a theatrical presentation of *King Lear*, feminism with its accompanying critique of gender and identity politics seems to have left far a more significant imprint than Marxism, because it provided directors with a variety of new performative strategies.

Feminist scholars also recognized the effectiveness of theatrical performance as a powerful tool in subverting the patriarchal ideology inherent in *King Lear*. Kathleen McLuskie specifically calls for affectless theatrical performance that can disrupt emotional, moral, and aesthetic satisfaction and pleasure arising from our sympathy with Lear's pain and ordeal, for the play, she argues, was structured to evoke our sympathies and complete engagement with Lear. McLuskie thus insists that it is important to

⁸ Jonathan Dollimore, "King Lear and Essentialist Humanism," *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984), 189-203.

⁹ See Marianne Novy, "Patriarchy, Mutuality, and Forgiveness in *King Lear*," *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 153-60, Coppélia Kahn, "The Absent Mother in *King Lear*," *Rewriting the Renaissance: The discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Margaret Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 33-49.

resist this pleasure because it endorses the play's patriarchal ideology and it also conceals the truth through its emotional power. Theatrical performance should remove "the privilege both from the character of Lear and from the ideological positions which he dramatizes,"¹⁰ and "offer the pleasure of understanding in place of the pleasure of emotional identification."¹¹ As an example, McLuskie suggests using the Fool not as an alter ego for Lear but as a potential comically undermining the focus on Lear, disrupting the narrative movement of the action, and subverting the emotional impact of the scenes.

Studies like McLuskie's and more general feminist gender critiques of patriarchal, heterosexual relationship, on the other hand, have provided directors with a variety of performative strategies in staging the play. Theatrical productions of *King Lear* included in this study have incorporated feminist's gender critique by introducing female Lears and transvestite Fools, by gender-reversal and all-male casts. The results might not have been exactly what feminist scholars envisioned. However, at least their concerns seem to have infiltrated into the conceptions of many theatrical productions. As my study has shown, whether just as a performative strategy or as a

¹⁰ Kathleen McLuskie, "The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*," *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, eds. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 106.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

challenge to the patriarchal ideology of the play, feminist critiques of *King Lear* constituted a significant part of the postmodern *King Lear* productions. Most of all, Lear and his tragedy no longer command automatic sympathy from the spectators, which prompted Benedict Nightingale, a leading British theatre critic, to lament the lack of emotionally charged productions among the contemporary British *King Lear* productions. Nightingale expresses his general dissatisfaction with the *King Lear* productions, arguing that in order for *King Lear* to be for “all time and climes, not least our own,” theatrical production should present “devastating pictures of a monstrous cruelty” and of “a full-bloodedness”:

That is a point best made by performances strong enough to overwhelm the imagination, seize the mind and heart, and, let me repeat, excite extremes of terror and pity. Do we lack actors and actresses capable of accomplishing that? Probably not; but they have often become victims of the earnest whims of their directors, the temper of a cynical era, and their own mistrust of raw, bold emotions combined with a determination to explore the complexities of character. We have not had frighteningly destructive Gonerils and Regans and we have seldom had Lears whose sufferings have wrenched and whose regeneration has thrilled. Many performances have had some powerful and moving moments, and some performances have had several; but there is a *Lear* that continues to prove elusive yet at some unreconstructed level I suspect we all yearn to see.¹²

¹² Benedict Nightingale, “Some Recent Productions,” *Lear: From Study to Stage, Essays in Criticism*, eds. James Ogden and Arthur H. Scouten (London: Associated University Press, 1997), 245-246.

Nightingale's call for a *King Lear* performance that can generate Aristotelian empathy and catharsis seems, however, antiquated and even nostalgic, for this trend of the affectless *King Lear* productions is a distinctive manifestation of the postmodern response to the questions *King Lear* evokes. The awareness of the crisis of language and character in *King Lear*, and of problematic assumptions in its portrayal of the crisis of humanism and patriarchy requires staging strategies that keep critical and ironic distances from the narrative of the play. It is also a reflection of the general "waning of affect" in the postmodern cultural and aesthetic style resulting from the collapse of the fundamental depth model in the postmodern culture.¹³ As Fredric Jameson observes, the collapse of this depth model, whether semiotic or hermeneutic, means the end of the individual subject and his psyche. Since the expression of emotion presupposes the autonomous subject, the end of such a subject leads to the end of emotion. Depthlessness results from affectlessness. It seems anachronistic to attempt the full-blooded enactment of characters or direct realization of text.¹⁴

¹³ I have incorporated Fredric Jameson's discussion of the postmodern collapse of the depth model in my chapter on Robert Wilson's *Lear* production. See Chapter V, 179.

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 15-16.

Scenography greatly contributed to the creation of the sense of the affectlessness of *King Lear* productions as well. Postmodern doubt of language drew the directors' attention to visual possibilities, and scenography became more important, frequently carrying out the messages of the productions. If the empty spaces of the modernist Shakespearean productions aimed to reveal the essential Shakespeare by stripping away what was extraneous and inorganic, the postmodern productions situated the play amidst a ludic proliferation of images, freely quoting from high and popular culture. Instead of the unified style of the modernist scenography that tends to suggest continuity between the stage images and the spectators, a trans-historical or anti-historical use of eclectic costuming and displaced scenery creates a perceptual, emotional interruption and asks the spectators to view the performance at a critical or ironic distance. It is thus no coincidence that most postmodern productions have proscenium or proscenium-like arrangements, which tend to create a distance between the stage and the spectators. Arnold Aronson observes in his study of postmodern design,

The proscenium-style arrangement of most of the postmodern productions allowed an amazing control and manipulation of space, depth, and focus.... Nonetheless, postmodern design keeps a certain distance; it requires a viewer, not a participant; it is often ironic. It may be possible to achieve this distance in a nonproscenium environment, but postmodernism is inherently theatrical, and the proscenium (or proscenium-like arrangement) remains the prime

semiotic embodiment of theatricality in the visual vocabulary of the West.¹⁵

Certainly all the *King Lear* productions I discussed in the previous chapters were set on the proscenium stage and their control of theatrical technology and their distinctive performing styles intervene in the direct transmission of emotion: Strehler's circus-arena set, Wilson's abstract formalization, Mabou Mines's parodic production set in the 1950's American Southern outback with a gender-reversed cast, and Suzuki's all-male, intercultural production set in the contemporary mental institution. Instead of emotion, the *King Lear* productions comment on the postmodern crises embodied in *King Lear* through their technical, performative, and theatrical virtuosités.

III

Tate, Lamb, and Bradley might have been surprised by the durability of *King Lear* as stage play. It has survived textual corruption, critical disfavor, political banning,¹⁶ historical tastes, and the excesses of theatrical realism. Even Jan Kott, who is, perhaps, most responsible for the modernist

¹⁵ Arnold Aronson, "Postmodern Design," *Theatre Journal* 43(1991): 12-13.

¹⁶ *King Lear* was banned in the decade before George III's death in 1820. Lear's insanity was too sensitive an issue to represent in an era when King himself suffered a violent breakdown.

recovery of the play through the influence on Peter Brook's seminal production, might not have foreseen its extraordinary postmodern proliferation on stage, when he wrote, "King Lear gives one impression of a high mountain that everyone admires, yet no one particularly wishes to climb."¹⁷ The play that nearly disappeared from the stage has become the Shakespeare text for the postmodern stage. However, it would be naïve to claim that this postmodern proliferation of *King Lear* is entirely due to the artistic reasons. Producing Shakespeare today is to engage a discursive field that extends well beyond the theatrical stage, for Shakespeare exists in multiple states, not just as literary text or theatrical representation, but as a cultural icon and authoritative institution.

As the world moved from nation state toward economic borderless globe, theatre for the last two decades has become increasingly international and intercultural, as well evidenced by frequent international touring by theatre companies and proliferating international theatre festivals, what Susan Bennett calls, "multinational free-trade marketplaces of cultural capital." In this market, Shakespeare has proven the most profitable and viable cultural product, for, as Dennis Kennedy observes, "For good or ill Shakespeare's plays constitute a common cultural inheritance for much of the world, an

¹⁷ Kott, 11.

inheritance larger in scope and wider in appeal than any other canon of dramatic and any literature for that matter.”¹⁸ The cultural capital accumulated in Shakespearean works commands an instant authority and recognition, and easily generates the interest of the heterogeneous artists and spectators of diverse nationalities.

Wilhelm Holtmann observes in his study on the twentieth century history of Shakespeare on the German stage that interculturalism and postmodernism “de-Teutonizes” the bard, who has been naturalized as a German author and “the third classic in the German Pantheon.”¹⁹ Holtmann’s observation points to the change of Shakespeare’s function in the contemporary world theatre, from a poet who facilitates the establishment of national identities to intercultural capital that appeals to the heterogeneous international audience. The postmodern theatrical internationalism not only de-Teutonizes but also de-Anglocizes Shakespeare, denying any claim of its ownership. At the moment, Shakespeare doesn’t seem to belong to England or any English-speaking nations. As well represented in my previous chapters, *King Lear* productions in this study were all international and intercultural ventures. Giorgio Strehler’s production toured extensively throughout Europe

¹⁸ Dennis Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-Century Performance*(New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 16.

¹⁹ See Wilhelm Holtmann, *Shakespeare on the German Stage: The Twentieth Century*(New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 475.

for five years; Robert Wilson's staging of *Lear* was a collaboration with the German state theatre; the Japanese director, Tadashi Suzuki, directed an American all-male cast. Even though Mabou Mines's production was not an international project, AT&T's financial support for its *Lear* production attests to Shakespeare's privileged status in this late capitalist society where arts struggle to fit into a commercial niche, competing with multinational, multi-media mass culture.

The international phenomenon of postmodern *King Lear* is thus both a reflection of the privileged status of Shakespeare as cultural capital in this postmodern world of borderless global economy and at the same time an inscription of the directors' active response to the postmodern crises *King Lear* seems to embody, creating a unique postmodern production style of *King Lear*, affectless *King Lear*.

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