Study guide written by Gwendolyn Kelso

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to provide you with valuable information about approaching Lear in the classroom. The overall goals of this guide are to connect to the Common Core with standards-based information and activities; to reinforce and encourage critical thinking and analytical skills; and to provide you with the tools and background information necessary to have an engaging and inspiring experience at BAM.

This guide has been designed to use in conjunction with BAM student study guides. Throughout, you’ll find enrichment activities and ideas that you can implement before or after seeing the production. Be sure to read both this and the student guides to identify which activities will prove most useful in your classroom.

Your BAM experience includes:
- Teacher and student study materials
- An in-class workshop led by a BAM teaching artist
- Post-show Q&A

ABOUT BAM

BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music) is a multi-arts center located in Brooklyn, New York. For more than 150 years, BAM has been the home for adventurous artists, audiences, and ideas—engaging both global and local communities. With world-renowned programming in theater, dance, music, opera, film, and much more, BAM showcases the work of emerging artists and innovative modern masters.

PREPARING YOUR STUDENTS FOR THEATER

The role of the audience is important in any theater going experience. Help enrich your students’ visit by having a pre-show class discussion on general theater etiquette (no cellphones, applause when appropriate, etc).

To make your behavior discussion more interesting, why not talk about theater etiquette in Shakespeare’s day? Discuss with your students how, because much of the audience was comprised of rowdy Groundlings (or people who paid roughly a penny to stand in front of the stage), Shakespeare had to quickly draw the audience into the story of the play through language that made them see and feel the world.
ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

This production of King Lear first opened October 2013 in England (West Sussex) at the Chichester Festival Theatre.

Learn more about the Chichester Festival Theatre here

MEET THE ARTISTS

Frank Langella (King Lear) earned one of his three Tony Awards for his performance as Richard Nixon in the acclaimed production Frost/Nixon (Donmar Warehouse, West End and Broadway). He was also the recipient of an Olivier Award nomination, and was nominated for an Oscar for the play's film version. His additional Tonys were for roles in Seaside and Fortune's Fool, as well as three more nominations for Man and Boy, Dracula, and Match. Langella has spent more than four decades on Broadway, appearing in close to two dozen productions including The Father, Present Laughter, A Man for all Seasons, and Amadeus.

In 2013—14 Langella will star in six films, including Grace of Monaco opposite Nicole Kidman, Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight (directed by Stephen Frears) opposite Christopher Plummer, and Draft Day opposite Kevin Costner. Among his 65 films, recent screen credits include the critically acclaimed Robot and Frank, Starting Out In The Evening, Good Night and Good Luck, Dave, and Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps.

Chichester Associate Angus Jackson (Director) directed the 2013 Olivier Award-winning production Goodnight Mister Tom, and will direct two Festival 2013 productions, If Only, and Neville's Island. Jackson's other Chichester credits include The Browning Version (also West End), Bingo (also Young Vic), Wallenstein, and Funny Girl. He has also directed Elmina's Kitchen, Fix Up, Rocket to the Moon, and The Power of Yes for the National Theatre.

Robert Innes Hopkins (Designer) renews his collaboration with Jackson following their previous Chichester productions: Goodnight Mister Tom (UK tour and West End), Bingo (also Young Vic), and Wallenstein. Other credits include Clybourne Park (Royal Court Theatre and West End), The Malcontent and The Comedy of Errors (both RSC), and the National Actors Theatre production of The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui, which featured Al Pacino in the title role.

PRODUCTION ROLES

The role of the actor

It is the actor's job to transform into a character. With the guidance of the director, an actor must determine how his character talks, moves, and feels about everything that is happening in the world of the play. Watch an interview with Langella on acting.

The role of the director

A director has a vision (or concept) for the play that he communicates to actors and designers. A director runs rehearsals by providing the actors with ideas and feedback about their performances and offering insight about what is happening in the world of the play. Ultimately, it is the job of the director to make sure that the all aspects of the play are cohesive and make sense.

The role of the designer:

There are many types of designers in theater: sound designers, scenic designers, lighting designers, and costume designers. A sound designer works with the director to create the sounds you will hear (music, sound effects, etc.) A scenic designer collaborates with the director to create the set you see on stage. A lighting designer works with the director to determine how a show should look (is it bright, dark, are there special lights that illuminate one actor at a time)? Costume designers determine what the actors will wear on stage. Ultimately, all designers collaborate with the director and each other to create a uniform look and feel to the production.
Before the Show

Encourage your students to think about all the elements and people that make a play come together: director, actors, designers (lights, costumes, set, sound). When they are at the play, pay careful attention to how these elements come together to tell the story.

After the Show

Have your students reflect on specific aspects of the production. What story do they think the director was trying to tell? How did the design serve that story?

- What sound effects did the designer use? What effect did that have on the scene?
- What did the costumes tell us about the characters? What about the costumes made you think that?
- What effect did the lights have on the mood of the play? How did it make you feel? What did the lights tell you about what was happening in that moment on stage?
Teacher Resource: Free digital versions of the text can be found on the Folger Theatre website

Shakespeare wrote his plays to be performed, not read quietly. Reading out loud is key to unlocking the meaning of the lines. You don’t have to read the whole play. Feel free to pick scenes and acts to focus on in class. It’s better to unpack the play bit by bit than attempting to tackle the entire text.

DID YOU KNOW?
Shakespeare wrote his plays scene-by-scene. Actors would receive their “role”, or a scroll that contained only the actor’s lines and their cue (the line before). The complete texts as we know them today were compiled after the production by the stage manager and members of the acting troupe.

Because the actors did not have much time to rehearse their plays, Shakespeare wrote many clues into the text. Ask your students to pay close attention to how the words appear on the page: is it prose or verse? Does it rhyme? Are the verse lines shared between characters? (clue: don’t pause!) What do these clues tell us about what the character is feeling or going through in that moment?

Believe it or not, even the most seasoned Shakespearean has to “tune their ears” to Shakespeare’s language. It usually takes reading a scene or two out loud before the hearer can adjust to the language.

THE CHARACTERS

**King Lear** * titular character; aging king full of pride and rage. As Lear’s plan to divide his kingdom unravels, he slowly goes mad.

**Goneril** * Lear’s eldest daughter. Although she is married to Albany, she wants Edmund to be her husband. Goneril poisons Regan and then commits suicide.

**Regan** * Lear’s middle daughter. Married to Cornwall; she also wants a relationship with Edmund. Poisoned by Goneril.

**Cordelia** * Lear’s youngest and most honorable daughter. She is banished by her father at the beginning of the play for refusing to exaggerate her love for him. She marries the King of France and returns to save her father. Cordelia is imprisoned and then killed on Edmund’s command.

**Gloucester** * Edmund and Edgar’s father; believes Edmund’s lies and turns against Edgar. Blinded by Cornwall. His heart “bursts smilingly” at the end of the play.

**Edmund** * the illegitimate son of Gloucester. Plagued by being born out of wedlock, Edmund turns to treachery. He woos the married Goneril and Regan. Killed by his brother Edgar.

**Edgar** * legitimate son and heir of Gloucester. He is forced to flee and assume the disguise of Poor Tom. Helps his blinded father.

**Kent** * nobleman loyal to Lear. After confronting Lear about his treatment of Cordelia, Kent is banished. Kent returns to Lear’s service disguised as Caius.

**Duke of Cornwall** * husband of Regan. In an act of violence, he blinds Gloucester. He is later killed by a horrified servant.

**Duke of Albany** * husband to Goneril. He is a supporter of Lear and disapproves of his wife’s behavior.

**The Fool** * remains by Lear’s side for most of the play. He teases and challenges Lear. He is hanged at the end of the play.

* dies or is killed
THE STORY

King Lear, written around 1605, is considered one of Shakespeare’s greatest and most challenging plays. It deals with complicated themes, complex relationships and explores the vulnerability of humanity.

SYNOPSIS

The play takes place in ancient Britain. At the top of the play, Lear is king. He has three daughters: Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia.

An aging Lear decides to divide his kingdom between his three daughters and spend the remainder of his years rotating living with each of them. Lear asks each of his three children to prove they love him the most in order to win a piece of the kingdom. Both Goneril, the oldest, married to the Duke of Albany, and Regan, the middle child, married to the Duke of Cornwall, express their affection for their father. Cordelia, the youngest and most beloved daughter, refuses to exaggerate her love, which enrages Lear. He divides the kingdom between Goneril and Regan and banishes Cordelia. One of Cordelia’s two suitors, the Prince of Burgundy, promptly withdraws his suit. The second suitor, the King of France, proposes marriage and takes Cordelia with him to France. Kent, a loyal servant to Lear, accuses the King of rashness; Lear in turn banishes him from court. An ever-loyal Kent disguises himself as Caius and returns to Lear later in the play.

Upon visiting both Goneril and Regan, Lear learns that his two daughters were not honest in their declarations of love. Lear is shut out of his daughters’ homes and forced to endure a severe storm in the company of his Fool and the disguised Kent. Lear begins his decent into madness.

In a parallel plot, Gloucester, a dear friend of Lear’s, is convinced by his scheming illegitimate son Edmund that his legitimate son, Edgar, is plotting to have him murdered. In order to escape his father’s vengeance, Edgar flees and disguises himself as Poor Tom.

Outraged by the treatment Lear has received from Regan and Goneril, Gloucester vows to see the King avenged. Regan’s husband Cornwall blinds Gloucester. Banished, blind, and alone, Gloucester encounters Poor Tom (his son Edgar in disguise). Without his sight, Gloucester sees the true nature of his children.

After hearing of her father’s condition, Cordelia returns to Britain with a French army to fight her sisters and save Lear. Poor Tom thwarts Gloucester’s suicide attempt, and Gloucester is reunited with Lear. Cordelia sends a search party to find her father and they are reconciled.

Appalled by Regan and Cornwall’s actions, Cornwall’s servant kills him. Afraid that the newly widowed Regan will marry Edmund, Goneril plots her husband and sister’s murders.

Cordelia’s army is overpowered, and Edmund imprisons Cordelia and Lear. Poor Tom (Edgar in disguise) challenges Edmund, and his identity is revealed. Edgar tells Edmund their father’s heart “burst smilingly” when he heard Edgar’s tale. Edmund and Edgar duel; a dying Edmund reveals that he has ordered Lear and Cordelia’s murders. As men are sent to stop the killing, Lear enters with Cordelia’s dead body. It is reported that Goneril poisoned Regan and, upon hearing of Edmund’s death, committed suicide. Lear learns that his Fool has been hanged; Lear, now totally mad and distraught, believes he sees Cordelia breathe and dies. Kent explains he must follow his master. Albany is left to rule Britain. Edgar speaks the final words of the play.

Teacher Resource: Need a visual? Look at the Folger Theatre’s Lear family tree

ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

The Role of Lear

For most actors, playing Lear is considered the ultimate acting challenge. Ask students to watch a few of the clips below to see some of the famous actors who have tackled the part of King Lear. Have them take notes as they watch: what are the differences between these portrayals? What are the similarities? Based on their observations, have them make a few predictions about Frank Langella’s performance in the production before the show. Or, after the show, have them compare the clips to Frank Langella’s interpretation and/or the text, citing specific examples.

1953 Orson Welles
1974 James Earl Jones
1984 Laurence Olivier
2009 Ian McKellen

Teacher Resource:

Additional clips:
Full production of Ian McKellen in the 2008 RSC production
Sir Laurence Olivier & John Hurt: Act 1 Scene V
CONNECTING WITH THE THEMES

Family Relationships
“How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child”  
Act 1, Scene 4

Have students pay close attention to how the relationships between fathers and children inform the play. How do the fathers (Lear and Gloucester) treat their children? How does Edmund feel about being Gloucester’s illegitimate son? How do each of the children (Regan, Goneril, Cordelia, Edgar and Edmund) react to their parents?

Nature and the Natural Order
“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!”  
Act 3, Scene 2

In Shakespeare’s time, there was a specific belief in natural order, or the Great Chain of Being. At the top of the chain was God; appointed by God was the king. When Lear gives up his kingdom, he upsets the Great Chain of Being.

Nature plays a huge role in Lear. As the world around Lear begins to crumble, nature seems to follow suit. Shakespeare’s audience would have understood that Lear’s abdication of the throne would have upset the Great Chain of Being.

Madness
“O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven”  
Act 1, Scene 5

Once Lear has upset the natural order, he begins a decent into madness. Ask students to track Lear’s madness and its meaning. Is Lear somehow redeemed by his madness? How does he grow and develop?

Grief and Forgiveness
“When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down and ask of thee forgiveness”  
Act 5, Scene 3

Much of Lear deals with loss: loss of kingdom, loss of self, loss of life. Ask students how the characters in Lear deal with grief? Who in the play is able to forgive and who is not? What point do they think Shakespeare was trying to make?

Appearance vs. Reality
“They told me I was everything; ‘tis a lie, I am not ague-proof”  
Act 4, Scene 6

Goneril and Regan have all the outward appearance of loving daughters, but in reality they behave just the opposite. Are there other characters in Lear that outwardly appear one way, but in reality are completely different?

Clothing and Disguise
“And bring some covering for this naked soul”  
Act 4, Scene 1

When they are no longer safe at home, Edgar assumes the disguise of Poor Tom and Kent becomes Caius. Lear looses his royal robes and wears a crown of weeds. Invite your students to track these disguises: How do clothes inform character?

Justice
“We that are young shall never see so much, nor live so long.”  
Act 5, Scene 3

Throughout the play there are many evil deeds. Discuss with students how and when is justice served? Does Lear find justice? Why or why not?

ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

Themes in Action

King Lear is unique to many of Shakespeare’s plays in that it has a similar main and subplot. By having similar plots, Shakespeare is able to underscore his themes and propel the main plot forward.

How is Lear’s relationship to his daughters similar to that of Gloucester and his sons? How do these men view their children? How and when do these views change? Show examples from the text that support your thoughts.

Blueprint: Theater Literacy

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2 Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Did You Know?
Shakespeare drew on a number of sources when writing *King Lear*. In particular, he would have been familiar with *Holinshed’s Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* which told the tale of an unwise king who divided his kingdom between his daughters. There were other stage adaptations of the story during Shakespeare’s time. One that Shakespeare was likely to have seen was *King Leir* in 1588 (unknown author). Interestingly enough, Shakespeare’s *Lear* is the only version with a tragic ending.

There are two different versions of *King Lear*: the Quarto of 1608 and the Folio of 1623. In the Quarto, the last lines of the play are spoken by the Duke of Albany. In the Folio, Edgar speaks the last lines.

LEAR IN ADAPTATION

In addition to being traditionally (or theatrically) staged, there have been various versions and adaptations of *King Lear*. To date, there are at least eight film versions of it. In 1971, two different directors, Peter Brook and Grigori Kozintsev, made two versions simultaneously. The directors famously compared notes and discussed their respective ventures. In 1831, Hector Berlioz wrote the orchestral piece *The King Lear Overture*. *Lear* has inspired a number of operas; Aribert Reimann’s 1978 opera being the most famous.

Adaptations to View
The final scene of the *Reimann’s opera*

*Peter Brook’s King Lear*
Act 4 scene 7 from Grigori Kozintsev

*Act 1 scene 4 Grigori Kozintsev*

*Oregon Shakespeare’s 2013 production* of *King Lear* (stage)

*Igor Dobrovolskiy’s King Lear* for the Atlantic Ballet of Canada.

ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

Endings

How important is it who speaks the last lines of a play? Why do you think a playwright would choose one character over another to close a play? If you were to stage a production of Lear, would Albany or Edgar end the play? Why? What do we know about Albany and Edgar from the play? Use examples from the text to justify your choice.
These activities can be led either in-class or by a BAM teaching artist during the pre-show workshop. Feel free to suggest relevant or interesting activities to your individual teaching artist before the in-class workshop.

The Storm as a Choral Reading

Taken from the 2011 BAM Lear Study Guide written by Heather Lester

**Supplies** Each student will need a copy of the below passage.

**Background** Lear is caught outside in a storm after he angrily departs from his treacherous daughters. His fury turns to madness and he rails against the storm. Use the passage below and have students explore the vocal and physical power of Shakespeare's language.

**Instructions** The activities should be done quickly and with lots of energy.

1. Standing in a circle, the entire class reads the speech together aloud in one strong voice.
2. Read again together loudly, sharply pronouncing every word and elongating vowels to explore sound.
3. Each student chooses one line to focus on. All together, student boldly read their lines aloud, finding an exaggerated physical movement for each word. Clarify the meaning of any unknown or unclear words.
4. Read the full speech aloud together, allowing students to use their physical gestures. Encourage bold choices and loud voices to punctuate words.
5. Try the speech again, this time quietly and intensely.

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow! You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drenched our teeples, drowned the cocks!
You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ the world!
Crack nature’s molds, all germains spill at once
That make ingrateful man!

**Discuss** What do you think is happening in the play at this point? How do you think Lear is feeling? What words provide specific clues to Lear’s mental state? What are some of the images in the speech? What do you think is more effective: having Lear rail loudly or speak quietly and intensely? Why?

**Blueprint:** Theater Making, Developing Theater Literacy, and Making Connections

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

The Great Word Wall

**Supplies:** a large piece of paper that can be hung in the classroom. The paper can be divided into sections for unknown words, consistent/theme words, and character descriptions.

**Instructions:** Clear an area of your classroom wall to hang a large piece of paper for students to write:
- words that are unfamiliar (assign one or more students to look up and write down definitions);
- words that are important or appear consistently throughout the play;
- words that are used to describe each character.

What do these words tell us about the play? Do themes emerge? Do characters become clearer?

**Once you have completed the play…**

Allow each student to pick 3—5 words from the word wall to describe what the play was about for them. Encourage discussion.

**NOTE:** to save time, this activity can be done in small groups with lively group discussion.

Blueprint: Making Connections, Theater Making, and Theater Literacy

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4** Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

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ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

Statues/Speaking Tableau

**Supplies** Each student will need a copy of one of the below lines. If you are reading the play in class, feel free to add your own!

**Instructions**

Divide students into small groups of 3—5. Have the group pick a line from the play (students may choose their own or pick one from the below list).

1. Have the small group read their line together out loud two or three times. As a group, have students discuss the meaning of the line. Pay close attention to what words are used (Are they harsh? Is it descriptive?) (2—3 minutes)

2. Once students are comfortable with their line, in their small group, allow students to use their bodies to create a group statue or tableau of their interpretation of the line. Be dramatic! Students can either say their line together (chorus) or each student may take a piece of the line to say out loud. Students may either say their line with movement before freezing into a tableau or from a frozen position. Be creative! Be the director! What is a stronger choice? Is it better to have everyone speak together or in pieces? Is it better said from a frozen tableau or while moving? (2—3 minutes)

3. Go around the room and have each group share their line tableau. (3—5 minutes)

4. Once everyone has shared their tableau, discuss:
   - What words from the line informed the choices your group made? Were there particular words that stood out?
   - If you had to pick a song that would accompany either the tableau you just created or one you just saw, what would it be? Why?

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LEAR Nothing can come of nothing, speak again (Act 1 Scene 1)

CORDELIA I cannot heave my heart into my mouth. (Act 1 Scene 1)

LEAR Come not between the dragon and his wrath (Act 1 Scene 1)

LEAR Blow winds and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow (Act 3 Scene 2)

FOOL The cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen (Act 3 Scene 4)

REGAN Go thrust him out at gates, And let him smell his way to Dover (Act 3 Scene 7)

LEAR When we are born, we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools (Act 4 Scene 6)

LEAR A man may see how this world goes with no eyes (Act 4 Scene 6)

LEAR Howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones (Act 5 Scene 3)

Blueprint: Making Connections, Theater Making, and Theater Literacy

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4** Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
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Gwendolyn Kelso is an actor and teaching artist based in New York City. She has worked for a number of theatres throughout the country including Austin Shakespeare, Saint Louis Shakespeare Festival, ZACH Theatre, Appletree Theatre (Chicago) and The Repertory Theatre of Saint Louis. In New York, Gwendolyn is the co-founder of Hedgepig Ensemble Theatre, a company dedicated to creating powerful and accessible classic work. She received her BFA in acting from the Conservatory of Theatre Arts at Webster University and her MFA from the Academy of Classical Acting in Washington, DC.

**Bibliography**
