

BACKGROUND NOTES

King Lear has ancient roots. The original story first appeared in a 12th century chronicle, *History of the Kings of Britain*, by Geoffrey of Monmouth, which tells of a pre-Roman, Celtic King 'Leir' from the 8th century B.C.E. After a 60-year reign, the old king devises a love test to determine which of his three daughters will succeed him. Monmouth has since been revealed to be a writer who employs 'alternative facts.' A modern historian describes *History* as, 'a pastiche of myth, song and outright invention masquerading as straightforward history.'

When Shakespeare began writing *Lear*, he consulted *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* by Raphael Holinshed, which borrowed from Monmouth. As always, the wily playwright used the so-called history as a starting point for 'outright invention.' He cut the happy ending, and added the subplot of the Gloucester family, an Earl and his two sons who serve as mirror and contrast to Lear and his three daughters. He put the frail king alone and raving on a heath in a cataclysmic storm. And he created the character of *The Fool*, Lear's nimble jester, the only one who can speak truth to him.

In Shakespeare's hands, the story became a consideration of power, aging, and family. How can the older generation cede its power gracefully? How will the younger generation honour their elders and also forge their own path? If someone has always been in charge, who are they when they are not in charge? How can we care for our fragile elders in a humane and compassionate way even as they insist that they do not need care?

The roots of the play may be ancient, but the story is as relevant as right now. In a world where the peaceful transfer of power seems to be under constant threat, where long-simmering tensions explode into open conflict, where collapses – governmental, environmental, and emotional – abound, *King Lear* speaks so powerfully to our own lives that director Kim Collier has set it in our time.

For extra immediacy, we present this production alongside a modern companion play, *Queen Goneril* by Erin Shields. The actors – with Tom McCamus as Lear – perform the same roles in Shakespeare and in Shields, giving them, and us, the opportunity to experience this old story from two very different perspectives. Whether you see one or both plays, we hope you savour the connections and confluences you discover.

PLAYWRIGHT BIOGRAPHY

William Shakespeare was born April 23, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. In his 20's, the married father of three relocated – alone – to London, joining the famous Lord Chamberlain's Men. From 1594, he was the leading player (and writer) of this theatre. He wrote 38 plays, most of which were produced in his lifetime. Many consider *King Lear* to be his masterpiece. It was first performed at Christmas in 1606 for King James. Shakespeare retired to his hometown, where he died on the same day he was born in 1616. His theatrical works continue to be celebrated, especially in the English-speaking world.

Background Notes by Paula Wing