Director Harold Scott and featured actor Avery Brooks, long-time collaborators, have set Yale Repertory Theatre’s production of King Lear amongst the Olmec people, who flourished between 1200 and 400 BC in Mesoamerica, a vast terrain that includes most of present-day Mexico and the countries of Central America. Although the Olmec origins are still a mystery to us, the archeological evidence indicates that Africans made their way to the New World thousands of years before the European colonizers and formed the civilization’s foundation. The Olmec are credited with introducing and spreading the cultural elements that characterized Mesoamerica up until the period of conquest ushered in by Columbus. These innovative elements run the gamut from sports to philosophy, from new sources of material wealth to new ways of thinking about time and space.

In her introduction to The Olmec: Mother Culture of Mesoamerica, Laura Minelli summarizes their legacy: "First, the Olmec gave rise to Mesoamerican cosmic geometry, the ordered division of space horizontally by the four cardinal points and vertically into two levels, High and Low, a division they expressed in the construction of their ceremonial centers, or cities. The Olmec also seem responsible for the invention of hieroglyphic-ideographic writing (above) and the concept of the Mesoamerican calendar, based on a combination of the solar calendar of 360+5 days and the ritual calendar of 260 days. To them as well seems to belong the creation of the complex ritual sport of the Mesoamerican ball game (pelota) contested by two opposing teams. They were also the first to consider jade not only as a symbol of spiritual and material wealth but also as an expression of the fertility-happiness-life cult, a concept still quite active at the time of the Conquest. Montezuma II, the last, unfortunate king of the Aztecs, pointed out to Hernán Cortés that the gold the voracious conquistadores were seizing was worth nothing beside a dagger of jade."

To achieve all of this, a centralized form of governance was probably essential. Many archeologists believe that Olmec power, originally distributed throughout separate farming communities, gradually coalesced around a central ruling class, mighty leaders who inspired the creation of monumental art. To build and transport these colossal heads, Olmec rulers must have commanded the labor of thousands in far-flung villages, with a power structure on the scale of the one at stake in Shakespeare’s King Lear.
WHO'S WHO?

Although our production is set among the Olmecs in Mesoamerica, the events of King Lear were originally set in Britain. Thus, some of the character descriptions below contain references to British and French seats of power that do not figure into the Yale Rep production.

**Lear**
King of Britain, a very old man who is weary of ruling; while he still wants to be treated like royalty, he is ready to hand over his kingdom to his children.

**Goneril**
(pronounced: GON - uh - ril) Lear's eldest daughter, a princess; a middle-aged woman married to Albany.

**Regan**
(pronounced: REE - gun) Lear's second daughter; also a princess and also middle-aged.

**Cordelia**
(pronounced: cor - DEEL - ya) Lear's youngest daughter; when she marries the King of France, she becomes his queen.

**Duke of Albany**
Goneril's husband; also called simply "Albany"; as a duke, he rules part of the British realm.

**Duke of Cornwall**
Regan's husband; also called simply "Cornwall"; like Albany, he rules part of Britain.

**King of France**
Cordelia's other suitor; also called simply "France"; he marries Cordelia after she's disowned, making her a queen, and takes her home with him; towards the end of the play, he returns with his army.

**Earl of Gloucester**
(pronounced: GLOU - ster) An aging British nobleman with a large estate; also called simply "Gloucester"; as an earl, he has a hereditary title which, along with his estate, will be passed on to his children when he dies.

**Earl of Kent**
A British nobleman, loyal to King Lear; also called simply "Kent"; when Lear banishes him, he disguises himself and returns to serve him.

**Edgar**
Gloucester's eldest son, half-brother to Edmund; he disguises himself as Tom o' Bedlam, a lunatic beggar named after the Bethlehem Hospital, the insane asylum in London.

**Edmund**
Gloucester's illegitimate son, younger than his half-brother Edgar; although Gloucester loves him, he is regarded as a "bastard" and will probably not inherit his father's wealth or title.

**The Fool**
One of the servants in Lear's court; he is paid to entertain the King with jokes, tricks, and general merriment.

**Oswald**
A steward in charge of the affairs of Goneril's household; supervises the estate's kitchen and servants, manages the accounts, etc.

**Other characters** include Cornwall's Servant, Edmund's Captain, the Doctor, Lear's Knight, and Curan, a member of his court.
King Lear is the story of the disintegration of two royal families, Lear's and Gloucester's. It begins with a dramatic scene at King Lear's palace. When the play opens, the Earl of Gloucester is introducing Edmund, his illegitimate son, to the Earl of Kent. The King comes with the rest of his court to proclaim his decision to step down and divide the realm among his three daughters, the princesses. Who gets what depends on each daughter's public declaration of how much she loves her father.

Goneril and Regan both speak in grandiose terms; they earn Lear's praise. But because her deep love cannot be expressed in words, Cordelia, the youngest, says nothing. Misunderstanding her true meaning, the King disowns her. When Kent defends Cordelia and accuses her father of rashness, Lear banishes him. Without a dowry, Cordelia is abandoned by Burgundy, her suitor. But the King of France values Cordelia's honesty and agrees to marry her. The kingdom is split between Goneril and Regan; Lear will live alternately with each of them.

Meanwhile, the “bastard son” Edmund tricks Gloucester into thinking that Edgar is plotting against him. When Edmund tells his brother that their father is enraged, Edgar flees. Then, the illegitimate son shows a fake letter to their father, making Edgar look even worse.

Back at Albany's castle, Lear's men are out of control, and Goneril is getting fed up. Kent returns, disguised, and wins Lear's acceptance; he helps the King against Oswald, Goneril's impudent steward. Then, in a rage against her criticisms, Lear curses his eldest daughter and leaves, accompanied by the Fool, to make his home with Regan and Cornwall.

Kent takes a letter announcing the King's imminent arrival; his loyalty leads him into a violent confrontation with Oswald, for which he is punished and detained. When Goneril and Regan tell their father he doesn't need his men anymore, he berates them and takes off into a stormy night, vowing revenge. Deeply regretting his rejection of Cordelia, Lear begins to go mad. He wanders around outside Gloucester's castle, on the heath - a tract of open wasteland covered with low shrubs. Kent and the Fool stay by his side until Gloucester comes and leads them to shelter.

Kent reports that Cordelia has landed with a French army to fight for her father. Gloucester, lamenting the princesses' treatment of the old King, entrusts Edmund with news of France's approach. Meanwhile, the group on the heath discovers that Edgar, disguised as a beggar, has also taken refuge in the hovel. He, the Fool, and the mad king help each other through the storm until Gloucester leads them to a barn, where Kent joins them. Under Lear's direction, these three stage a mock trial of the King's daughters.

Edmund has been charming Lear's two elder daughters, and they are becoming jealous of one another. Edgar intercepts a secret love-letter from Goneril and gives it to her husband. The British army, led by Edmund, overpowers the French forces, capturing Lear and Cordelia, who are sentenced to death. Goneril poisons Regan, and Edgar wounds his brother fatally in a duel. Seeing no way out, the oldest daughter takes her own life. Edmund confesses his wrongs, but not in time to save Cordelia. With his loyal daughter in his arms, Lear dies of a broken heart, leaving Albany and Edgar to restore the kingdom. The two families, however, are no more.
What to Look for: Characteristic Deeds

Today we use the word "tragic" loosely. A fatal house-fire can seem tragic to us, but so can a prodigy's unrealized potential; the death of a young person is always called a tragedy. In drama, however, the term has a more narrow meaning, and in Shakespearean drama it is narrower still. Ever since British professor A.C. Bradley clarified the matter with his groundbreaking book Shakespearean Tragedy (1904), scholars and theater audiences have paid close attention to the "characteristic deeds" of these great plays. As Bradley puts it, "the calamities of tragedy do not simply happen, nor are they sent; they proceed mainly from actions, and those the actions of men."

As you watch King Lear, be on the lookout for the actions that express a person's character. These actions typically set in motion a chain of events that lead to a catastrophe; we can trace these events back to their source in an individual. Why does Lear divide his kingdom? Why does Cordelia refuse to sing her father's praises like her sisters? Why does Edmund deceive his brother? Why does Gloucester fall for the trick? The answers to such questions are not simple. In many cases they depend as much on people's character traits as on the circumstances they've been placed in. But trying to figure them out will bring you close to the heart of King Lear, a dramatic universe shaped by bold individuals operating under extreme conditions, revealing their "true colors."

A LITTLE THEATER NOW AND THEN

In Shakespeare's day, the theater experience was quite different from the one you'll have at the Yale Rep...

THEN

The theater space was open-air, and the floor was made of dirt. Typical arenas held between 1000 and 3000 people. Most of them stood in the pit area in front of the stage - for two hours straight - cracking nuts and munching on them as they watched.

Scenery was very limited; the stage backdrop was basically always the same. No matter when or where the play was set, be it Rome or London or an imaginary island, the players almost always wore contemporary Elizabethan clothing.

The playwrights indicated time, location, and weather with a few phrases at the beginning of each new scene, and the audiences used their imaginations to fill in the details. Distinctions of rank and occupation could be conveyed by simple props and ornate (or plain) costumes.

NOW

Theater patrons expect all the modern conveniences, including cushioned seats and refreshments in the lounge at intermission. Typical regional theaters like the Yale Rep hold a few hundred spectators; the maximum capacity of the King Lear space is 654.

Theaters hire a director who makes a deliberate choice about where and when to set a new version of a Shakespeare classic. Professional designers research the particular period and culture to get ideas for their unique settings and costumes.

With the most advanced technologies at their disposal, theaters spend tens of thousands of dollars constructing sets, building costumes, and engineering sound and lighting effects so spectacular that they often get as much attention as the actors' performances.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: CHARACTERISTIC DEEDS

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"We made a decision to start by looking at what happens when you put a 20-foot head on stage," says Scenic Designer Blythe Quinlan, a 3rd-year MFA student at the Yale School of Drama. Her research on the Olmec culture led her to their enormous basalt statues, as well as the jade green color, which dominates her set, and carvings of Olmec god-symbols. "The space itself doesn’t look primitive - things fly in, we see lighting instruments. The carvings keep it from looking too industrial, and jade is a natural element, with lots of depth - it’s connected to the earth."

Other elements of Quinlan’s design that help tell the King Lear story include

- **the stone throne in the first scene, with its ceremony for dividing the kingdom**
- **moving walls that can quickly define the space in different ways to suggest various interiors and a shift to the outdoors**
- **the cyclorama and water system used to create the impression of open sky and rain for the heath scenes**

Notice also the minimal use of furniture throughout the production, enabling the play to move to new locales without interruption, in keeping with the Elizabethan practice of "open staging."

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**BEFORE YOU SEE THE PLAY:**

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

**FAMILY**

What obligations do children have to their parents? How do we express the love we bear to our mothers and fathers? Should we honor and respect them no matter what?

**NATURE**

What makes people greedy and power-hungry? What makes them generous and forgiving? Is it just what kind of person you are (Nature), or does it depend on your environment, how you’re raised, and the conditions in which you live (Culture)? What does our society promote more - sharing or hoarding? cooperation or competition? open-heartedness or shrewdness?

**MADNESS**

How is insanity defined? Is the line between "mad ramblings" and modern poetry all that clear? Could it be that the people we call "insane" just see the world from a different perspective? What if their perspectives are closer to the truth than the views of the mainstream? Would society be better off it tried to understand "insane" persons, instead of "curing" them?

**POWER**

What constitutes authority? Is it given to you, or do you have to earn it? When, if ever, is it necessary to seize authority from someone who has a legal right to it?
As an ancient civilization, the Olmec left behind no written chronicles about their culture, but we do have a wealth of visual clues. For our production of King Lear, we tried to use some of this evidence to give ourselves a sense of what life in that time was like. The following excerpt from a book by a famous Mexican archeologist provides a fascinating glimpse into the past. Piña Chan traces the development of the civilization from separate villages to a unified society, probably organized as a "theocracy" - government by a class of priests or divinely sanctioned rulers. As you watch King Lear, try to observe how this kind of information influenced our production.

Some social aspects of the Village Olmec can be observed through their figurines, which express considerable sculptural feeling and display perfect anatomical balance and a realism uncommon for that time. These figurines were modeled of very fine clay; they were white, cream or ivory in color and highly polished. The statuettes show us how rich and imaginative the clothing of the inhabitants was. They wore loincloths wrapped around the waist with one end passed between the legs, kilts, short capes, blouses, and shorts with tassels, perhaps of cotton. The heads of the figurines are decorated with hats, turbans, or kerchiefs knotted under the chin, while the faces may be concealed by masks or veils. Earrings of various materials, pearl necklaces and other ornaments complete the personal attire.

We can imagine that the society of those times included gaudily dressed shamans and witch doctors. They adorned themselves with wigs, masks, headaddresses, and collars, wore false beards, rattles, bunches of leaves or grass, and other ritual objects, such as hematite mirrors - all contrived to amaze the population during acts of healing and agricultural ceremonies. Mesoamerican ball (pelota) players are represented with one gloved hand (for striking the rubber ball) and wearing knee protectors, perhaps of leather. Many statuettes portray musicians playing small drums, dancers wearing skirts, and acrobats with arched bodies and one foot above their heads. Tombs have been found to contain terracotta whistles shaped like dogs and birds, clay flutes, resonators of deer-bone shoulder blades, and rattles in the form of hollow clay balls with pebbles inside. All this demonstrates the existence of festivities supervised by the local shamans and accompanied by music, dancing, pelota matches, and other forms of entertainment.

In the villages, patrilineal and totemic clans may have been the early forms of social organization. Sorcerers or shamans probably exerted partial control over their communities, since they were the keepers of knowledge and functioned as intermediaries between individuals and their ancestors, who were regarded as supernatural beings. There may also have been councils of elders or of prestigious persons who decided on the collective action of the community. The rest of the population looked after food production and other economic activities.

Toward 900 BC, there was a great expansion of villages and a significant increase in population, which was made possible by greater food production, linked in part to new farming techniques, such as terracing and irrigation, and to new forms of grain storage. The activity of the shamans also became more specialized and sought-after (for, e.g., establishing the proper periods for planting and harvesting, based on their knowledge of astronomy and the calendar) so that they came to form a true class of priests. With their increasing prestige and power, the priests transformed the shamanic cult of the past into an institutional religion, creating the basis for a theocratic society. The rise of this new caste over the rest of the population caused relations of inequality, subjugation, and servitude within the major cities.

Adapted from Chapters Four and Five of Román Piña Chan’s The Olmec: Mother Culture of Mesoamerica (New York: Rizzoli, 1989).

**Interpreting Evidence: Olmec Village Life and Government**

**Social Studies Vocabulary Builder**

- **caste**: an exclusive and restrictive social class or occupational group
- **hematite**: an important iron ore, brownish red or black and crystalline
- **patrilineal** (pa-tri-LIN-ee-ul): descending through the father’s line (as opposed to a matrilineal society, where you would belong to your mother’s clan)
- **shaman**: a medicine man
- **totemic** (toe-TEM-ic): believing in totems - animals or natural objects related by blood to, and symbolizing, a particular social group
In Shakespeare's time, it was easier to get away with changing your identity; people who got into deep trouble sometimes disguised themselves and fled their homes. It is a 'motif' (or pattern) that typically appears in Renaissance comedies. In King Lear, however, disguise is a very serious matter. (Look at Act II, Scene 3 and the beginning of Act I, Scene 4.) Has there been a time in your life when you wanted to 'disappear'? Try to remember the experience:

- When did you wish to have a disguise?
- What had happened that made you feel this way?
- Who were you hiding from?
- What did you do to solve the problem?

In our play, Edgar and Kent disguise themselves when their lives are threatened. Ironically, they use their disguises to stay near and help the men who have cursed them. Have you ever felt unjustly accused by someone? How could you have used a disguise to convince them of your innocence?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: COSTUME DESIGN

Jessica Ford, an MFA student in her final year at Yale, created the costumes for King Lear based on the idea that the Olmecs were a sea-faring people who started in Africa and made their way to the New World. "I began by looking at West African countries, but the silhouettes weren't aggressive enough. Since I needed something war-like, I turned to tribes in Kenya and Sudan, like the Masai, the Samburu, the Dinka, and the Shilluk. They had shapes that would suggest ancient clothing, and styles that could be used in battle. I also looked at a lot of Mayan and Olmec and Aztec images. It was a matter of finding the parallels, creating our own vocabulary, and making it fit the play."

Ford's designs call for wide weaves, natural fabrics, and semi-precious materials native to Mesoamerica, both in the jewelry and the overall color palette. "You'll see a lot of coral, turquoise, jade, hematite, and tiger-eye, as well as gold. Blues, ochres, greens and jewel-tones predominate."

During the show, pay attention to subtle differences in the characters' costumes. For example:

- Edgar's development from a naïve scholar to a peasant (in disguise) to a soldier capable of challenging his brother
- the hair of Goneril and Regan, kept obscured to make them look severe, versus Cordelia, whose motives are more sincere
- in the final battle scenes, the contrast between the British camp (Albany, Goneril, Regan) and the costumes for France and his soldiers, which have a

Try to observe other ways in which the characters’ costumes reflect who they are and what they're going through.

HAVE YOU EVER WANTED TO DISAPPEAR?

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“Mr. William Shakespeare and the Internet” is a very useful collection of Shakespeare resources available on the web. It’s at http://shakespeare.palomar.edu. Another excellent site is www.allshakespeare.com, featuring critical essays, character analyses, and key quotations. *(To get complete access to all of their King Lear materials, you’ll need to establish an account, which costs $10.)*

The Shakespeare Resource Center, at www.bardweb.net, includes outstanding sections on The Globe Theatre and Elizabethan England, with a full set of links to additional web-pages on these and other topics. Finally, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust maintains a great site, with lots of information on Shakespeare’s early years in Stratford-upon-Avon. Go to www.shakespeare.org.uk/ and click on the swan logo.

For more information on the Yale Repertory Theatre, look at our website: www.yalerep.org/ and for the Yale School of Drama, see www.yale.edu/drama.

**AFTER-WORDS: WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

Many people have spoken and written about *King Lear* in the 400 years since Shakespeare penned it. What do you think about the reflections of these two individuals.

“All my life I have held that you can class people according to how they may be imagined behaving to King Lear.”


If you were a member of Lear’s court - or suddenly saw him walking through the streets, how would you behave towards him? How do you imagine your friends and family and neighbors would treat him?

“The last line of the play is unique in Shakespeare. All his other plays suggest an optimistic future; no matter how terrible the events that have passed, there is hope that they will not happen again. In Lear, the last line poses a question. Edgar says: ‘We that are young shall never see so much, nor live so long,’ and no one can give a simple explanation of this. It is loaded with [unexplainable] hints of tremendous meanings. It forces you to look at a young man, his eye naturally on the future, who has lived through the most horrifying times.”

- PETER BROOK, BRITISH THEATER AND FILM DIRECTOR BASED IN PARIS

When you look at Edgar at the end of the play, what do you see? Why does he feel that his generation won’t live as long or experience as much as the one before?