

King Lear 2.2.461-472

Open: Two chairs next to each other, with acute angle of about 45 degrees between them, the end of their seats furthest apart, their near back legs only inches apart

L1 stands close to the right of stage right chair, with left arm on its back right

L2 sits on ground in front of stage left chair seat, tearing a sheet of paper into small segments and making little paper balls out of them, each no bigger than a pebble. Some paper balls have been made in advance. He continues doing this until "No" (467)

L1 sits in chair, claps hands lightly between his legs

Opens left hand and rests it on left thigh

Opens right hand and rests it on right thigh

Hands clench into fists, arm muscles all tense

Hands come together flat against each other in prayer

Parts hands, left hand points with index finger forcefully upward

Left hand crosses to lie onto right side of breast

Left hand opens, fingers spread but relaxed, facing downward and draws arc slowly in front of chest

Completing arc, L1's left hand falls onto L2's right shoulder, simultaneously

You see me here, you gods, a poor old man

As full of grief

as age,

wretched in both

If it be you...

fool me not so much...

touch me..

And let not...

No...

as L2 raises left hand in forceful, tense upward pointing with index finger

L2, with explosive, directed force, begins flicking his paper balls outward in different directions, flicks timed to the stresses of the iambs

L2's flick misses the ball

L2's spreads arms, elbows to about 90 degrees, with fingers spread and tense (bones, tendons, prominent), and slams them on ground

L2 grabs a handful of paper balls with one hand and stands up simultaneously as L1 stands up from his chair

L2 lets the paper balls rain down in front of him from his hand, raised about eye level as L1 simultaneously runs both of his hands through his hair

L2 stomps off (exaggerated steps, though not too loud landing) while L1 braces himself against his chair then sinks to the floor

I will...

Shall...

What they are yet...

but they shall be...

The terrors of the earth

You think I'll weep,
No I'll not weep

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My exercise this week is an attempt to choreograph a series of movements that embody some significant aspects of King Lear's speech at Act 2, Scene 2, from line 461 to 472. On the one hand, my choreography has aspects that are rather literal-minded and mimetic: some of the gestures are legible expressions of the lines' meaning. For instance, the L1 performer mimes a prayer motion that couldn't be more recognizable at the same time the speaker of the lines is addressing the gods; or, his finger shoots up as if making a determined point at the phrase "fool me not." On the other hand, the choreography has aspects that are anti-realist and could never be considered for a dramatic staging of the play. They avail themselves, instead, of the licenses with the literal that dance can take. Most immediately noticeable in this category is the fact that I have two performers running very distinct but coordinated movements for a set of lines spoken in the play by one character. In a play, one body must speak the lines. But in a dance, multiple performers might be needed to embody the lines.

Because the latter quality of the choreography is of more interest than the former, I want to say a bit about my choices regarding it. There are two "Lear" performers (L1 and L2), first, because the lines have two very distinct modes of address: an apostrophe to the gods (461-466) then a direct address to Goneril and Regan (466-471). Therefore, the focus of the choreography falls mostly on one performer then another. But, second, there are multiple tones at work in the lines, which seemed also to call for multiple performers. Roughly, we can see the tone of the speech dividing with its address. While both halves of the speech combine a sense of rage and

powerlessness, the first half of the speech reads as imposing but impotent. The lines are fluent and forceful, but the address is deflected upwards; no action or answer seems forthcoming. The second half of the speech reads instead as vengeful but impudent—the grammar breaks in the middle of his empty threat because he’s so worked up. Thus L2 is cast as if he were almost an angry child on the playground, flicking harmless paper balls at big bullies, and L1 is cast as a tired man, kingly throne swapped for what can seem like variously a prayer stool or La-Z-boy. That said, we can also see that conflicting tonalities cut across the neat division of address, so that “You think I’ll weep, / No, I’ll not weep” sounds both defiant and already untrue. Here I could deploy both performers at once to have one undermine or throw into relief the other: the child stomps off as the man collapses. And all the childish sound and fury, nothing to his daughters, redounds on his own aged head, as the paper balls seem to be his downfall. Throughout, my choreography reimagines what is typically staged as a tempestuous moment with thunder cracking in the background in the more pitiful, pitiable tones of the lines themselves.

For what was the most difficult exercise yet (for me personally anyway), I relied on simple motions that I made more detailed in choreography (“explosively,” “tense,” “lightly,” “relaxed,” etc.) by means of direction from the four qualitative dimensions of movement that Johnson outlines: tension, linearity, amplitude, projection. Because the movements themselves aren’t quite as captivating as Merce Cunningham’s, I’m hoping, instead, that they generated conceptual interest by the way they refract Lear as single character into multiple tonalities that become two bodies. Even with my minimal palette, though, difficulties arose. How, for instance, was I supposed to pass the baton from L1 to L2 so that the audience would start paying more attention to the latter and less to the former? I settled on a twofold solution: To mark the change,

L1 draws the audience's eye to L1 by drawing a wide arc that ends up pointing to him. To sew up the seam, L2 immediately raises his index finger in a gesture that echoes one made just moments ago by L1. I tried to make the entire sequence of movements just as deliberate and interwoven by incorporating a number of symmetries, parallels, and inversions.