Olivier's *Lear*

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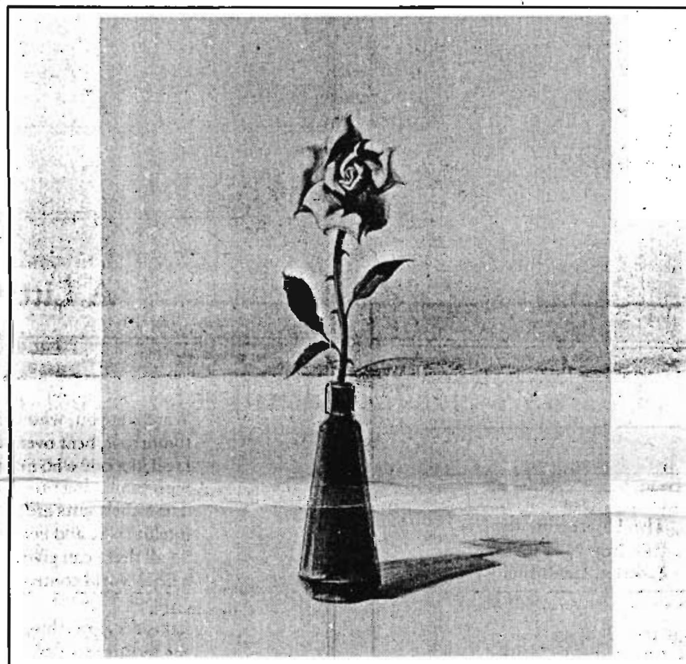
King Lear
by William Shakespeare.
A Granada TV production with
Laurence Olivier, John Hurt,
Diana Rigg, and others, televised in
the United States in February 1984.

WHAT MAKES Laurence Olivier such a continued inspiration to those of us who love theater is—as much as his stature—his nobility. Most great actors would have retired under the pressures of debilitating illness, but Olivier only *began* to slow down a couple of years ago. (He is seventy-six.) Through the 1970s, he gave a series of wonderful supporting performances in movies like *Three Sisters, Marathon Man, The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* and *Dracula,* while saving his occasional *tours de force*—Shylock or Doc in *Come Back, Little Sheba*—for the television cameras. And at seventy-four he chose, rather than settling for the usual fate of old actors (the odd, non-strenuous comeback role or a new career in self-parody), to play *King Lear* in a TV production that finally received an American airing early this year.

Because of the moments he has selected for attacking each of the great Shakespearean roles—at least, the ones he has preserved on film or video—Olivier always gives the impression that he has grown into them. He did Henry V and Hamlet while he was still young enough to play romantic heroes, Richard III as he approached fifty, Othello when he had both the strength and maturity for this most physically demanding of the tragic protagonists, Shylock in his sixties. *Very few actors actually* wait until their seventies to attempt Lear, because who besides Olivier could bring it off so late in life? And so, because it is normally a part enacted by strong middle-aged men, Lear is customarily depicted as powerful, tyrannical, a dragon whose wrath terrifies everyone around him and whose vicious curses rend the air and shrivel the hearers. But Shakespeare wrote a play about willful, childish old men (Lear and Gloucester) whose far more potent daughters and sons dominate and trick and abuse them, who are reduced to curses when action is no longer feasible. Confronted with a pair of daughters who refuse to let him have his way, Lear cries, "I will do such things—/What they are, yet I know not," and Olivier takes that line as the center of his performance. His Lear is a feeble old man whose tragedy is not the fall from power but the descent into madness which he struggles in vain to stave off.

If Olivier's frailty places certain constraints on the interpetation—notably in the heath scene, which in any case goes awry because the director, Michael Elliott, practically drowns out the verse with excitation music and sound effects—the benefits far outweigh the losses. Suddenly the opening scene, a terror to actors and directors, becomes a human drama rather than the weird, ritualistic exhibition it usually appears. This Lear's insistence on having his daughters make public declaration of their filial affection is a special treat he's prepared for himself, the way a child demands to be told a bedtime story he's heard a hundred times. He crows merrily over the lavish manner in which his second daughter, Regan (Diana Rigg), outdoes the first, Goneril (Dorothy Tutin), and when it is the turn of his best-loved Cordelia (Anna Calder-Marshall) to speak, he can barely contain his anticipatory delight. That she, in an ill-advised display of integrity, refuses to flatter like her sisters, startles him, and he puts his hand to his ear when he says, "Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again"—he's sure he misheard her. Olivier's Lear doesn't explode at Cordelia; he pouts and punishes her for disappointing him by claiming



she is no daughter of his—and then he is too obstinate to revoke words said in haste. Played this way, the first scene of *King Lear* draws us in emotionally as it has in few productions: Lear no longer seems an inscrutable monster whose behavior is dictated by a grand theatrical whim, but "a very foolish fond old man" who makes a childish error the implications of which he cannot guess at.

It also tests the actress cast as Cordelia severely; when Lear's longing for the pleasure of his daughters' protests of love is so transparent, we may well ask why she so stubbornly holds out. As Anna Calder-Marshall plays her, she is Goneril and Regan inverted: tough on the outside, tender within. To Calder-Marshall's credit, she allows Cordelia to grow more comprehensible (and more sympathetic) as the play unfolds. I couldn't fathom Lear's fondness for Dorothy Tutin's Goneril (though the actress has a couple of strong scenes in the final hour), but Diana Rigg, as Regan, does some marvelous, unexpected things in her scenes with Olivier. This Regan babies her father, and he loves every minute, though we may be disturbed by what we see—by how carefully she controls the situation, and by the unmistakable sexual component in the kind of control she wields. (As Rigg plays her, Regan is a study in sexual power and hypocrisy.) Nowhere is Lear more blind than in his trusting Regan: when she becomes a stern nursemaid, forbidding him a home with his hundred knights, he doesn't recognize her—he doesn't understand that she has just shown her hand for the first time. Rigg reads her lines to Olivier in a put-on sing-song nursery voice; when she turns on him ("I pray you, father, being weak, seem so"), she simply changes the music.

Olivier plays Lear's shifts in mood, his contradictions, as evidence either of an approaching second childhood or of a determination not to go mad—a determination that requires all his physical and emotional strength, and then of course gives way because he can't summon up all the strength he needs. When Lear feels Goneril and her servants are mistreating him, he waffles at first, fearful of learning that the division of the kingdom and the rejection of Cordelia were dreadful mistakes. When he arrives at Gloucester's castle, where Regan and her husband Cornwall are guests, and they fail to meet him, he thinks up excuses for them. Olivier identifies Lear's desperate, weakening grasp on his sanity by having him stumble to his knees to plead, sobbing, "O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!" And when he cannot complete his curse on his daughters and has to be led away by his Fool (John Hurt), Olivier's meticulously crafted through-line allows us to recognize exactly what has occurred: an old man, over every effort to hang on, has fallen into madness.

The mad scene, in which Lear decks himself with flowers and recites doggerel with a curious, interior punning sense to it, clearly inspired Olivier to search for a new style. I've never seen anything like the way he plays this scene; it's as though he dug inside himself and found a whole new actor. This Lear's insanity is astonishingly serene (it isn't until he wakes from it that he's "bound upon a wheel of fire"): he has cut the pain out of his mind and holds it away from himself to examine it. This is a very unusual kind of emblematic acting, because though it has a radically different texture from the rest of his performance, we feel it came from the same place—the soul of the world's greatest actor in his old age. Olivier could no more have given this performance twenty years ago than Michelangelo could have carved "Moses" at forty.

Uneven as Michael Elliott's direction is, the production surrounds Olivier with a once-in-a-lifetime cast: there are no embarrassments in the acting, though there are disappointments. As Edmund, Robert Lindsay could use a little more flamboyance and humor—he seems too resolute and single-minded, though he actually manages to make Edmund's eleventh-hour repentance work. Much of the Fool's part has been cut, but even when John Hurt is speaking we tend to tune him out and watch Olivier. I'm not sure this is as much a criticism of Hurt, whose line readings are unerringly intelligent, as a comment on the way the play operates—if it's got a great Lear, the Fool passes into the background. (In Peter Brook's grotesque filmed *Lear* in 1971, Jack MacGowran's Fool furnished relief from the stolid, frozen Lear of Paul Scofield.)

Diana Rigg fares best in her scenes with Olivier; in other moments she seems to be playing a cocktail party hypocrite better suited to a modern-dress Molière comedy. David Threlfall, the heartbreaking Smike of the Royal Shakespeare's *Nicholas Nickleby,* lends Edgar a sweet, bumbling quality in the early scenes, so that we can believe what his villainous half-brother, Edmund, says of him: "a brother noble, /Whose nature is so far from doing harms/That he suspects none." He offers us an Edgar whose love for his father, which he can articulate no more successfully than Cordelia can voice hers, finds expression in theater—in the roles of Tom o' Bedlam, the peasant who cares for the blinded Gloucester, the faceless knight who takes arms against Edmund. This is a brilliant metaphor for Edgar, but Threlfall's acting contains too much mannerism; it needs simplifying.

Olivier receives ablest support from Colin Blakely's earthy, humorous Kent and Leo McKern's Gloucester. McKern gives a near-great performance—he makes Gloucester fatuous, distracted, sensual, yet so poignant that even poor staging and camerawork can't destroy the emotional effect of the blinding scene. McKern speaks in blurry, almost drunken tones that match up well with the way Olivier pushes his consonants, as if he had to work hard to make himself understood distinctly.

Olivier seems to have thrown away technique this time—his is a breathtakingly *pure* Lear. In his final speech, over Cordelia's lifeless body, he brings us so close to Lear's sorrow that we can hardly bear to watch, because we have seen the last Shakespearean hero Laurence Olivier will ever play. But what a finale! In this most sublime of plays, our greatest actor has given an indelible performance. Perhaps it would be most appropriate to express simple gratitude. □