



ELIZABETH SWAIN
DIRECTOR

SOUTHWEST Shakespeare COMPANY
KING LEAR

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

In Celtic mythology Lear was the god of the sea and many legends surrounded him. Around 1535 he appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Story of the British Kings*, a rather fictional account of history, but he does give Lear ungrateful children. In 1594 *The True Chronicle of the History of King Leir*, author unknown, was produced and again presented in 1605. This was clearly source material for Shakespeare's play, written in 1606, though in it Lear is happily restored to his kingdom. He also drew on Holinshed's *Chronicles* which tell us that Lear lived in 800 BC.

There are two chief and often somewhat different texts that we draw on, *The History of King Lear* published as the First Quarto in 1608, and the *The Tragedy of King Lear* published in the First Folio of 1623. We are not sure which one Shakespeare settled on, though it is believed that the Quarto version is the play as Shakespeare first wrote it, but did he re-write it in the form of the First Folio? We really are not sure. This production draws on both texts and we are creating our own world and time, definitively not modern., maybe not 800 BC, but certainly pre-Christian.

The play is described by scholar Marjorie Garber as "a sublime account of the human condition." In it an authoritarian monarch oversees the disintegration of his family, his kingdom and his mind, but emerges a wiser old man, having learned compassion, humility and the nature of love. A secondary and parallel plot, derived from Spencer's *Arcadia*, concerns Gloucester, another patriarch whose moral blindness causes his family's upheaval and dreadful suffering for him and his son, culminating in his own humility, compassion and recognition of love.

The play comes after his so called "problem" plays, *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well* and in the sequence of his tragedies, after *Othello* and before *Macbeth*.

King Lear is his darkest play and some critics have deemed it unactable. In the Seventeenth century Nahum Tate rewrote it with a happy ending and that version held the stage until the 1840s, when it was restored to the stage as Shakespeare wrote it. The twentieth century saw many notable productions and its darkness seemed appropriate to a world recovering from two world wars.

Today major actors seek to play the role as their crowning achievement, and, as with *Hamlet*, women are also claiming the role.... as in our production.

I am honored to take on the challenge of this production for Southwest Shakespeare. One of my chief goals is textual clarity. If we can get that we will have broken down that awful barrier of: "I don't understand Shakespeare" that plagues so many young people today.

-- Elizabeth Swain, Director of *King Lear*