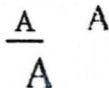


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ENTERTAINMENT WHAT'S ON

Three girls – lucky me! says Geoffrey Rush as he plays in King Lear

By Elissa Blake
19 November 2015 – 6:11pm



Posing for pictures, Geoffrey Rush doesn't seem to be taking the role of King Lear too seriously. Not today. "Do I have that regal stud-muffin quality coming through?" he asks the photographer.

He casts an approving eye over his three stage daughters. "I hand-picked them," he cackles. "I couldn't be more thrilled. The chemical balance feels right."



Geoffrey Rush and his stage daughters (from left) Eryn Jean Norvill, Helen Buday and Helen Thomson are exploring the workings of one of Shakespeare's most dysfunctional families.

Photo: Nic Walker

Taking a break from his recurring part in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Rush is "embracing his sexagenarianism" in preparation to play the title role in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, one of the most demanding roles in classical theatre. Helen Buday, Helen Thomson and Eryn Jean Norvill are Lear's daughters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia.

Rush and director Neil Armfield talked a great deal about creating a sense of family before embarking on rehearsals for the Sydney Theatre Company's production, Rush says. To create an intimate feel, they cast actors Rush had known for years and had worked with previously.



Rush and director Neil Armfield worked on creating a sense of family among the cast before embarking on rehearsals.

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"Helen [Buday] and I go way back," Rush says. "We were in *The Importance of Being Earnest* back in the day [in 1988]. But even before that I spent time as a teacher at NIDA doing clowning and there was this amazing young woman in first year. Helen actually taught me how to trip."

Rush and Helen Thomson go back a way, too. "Helen played a hooker in a production of a minor Jacobean comedy I was in called *The Dutch Courtesan* [in 1993]," Rush says.

This production marks the first time Rush has worked with Norvill, however. "I saw EJ play *Ophelia* in *Hamlet* for the MTC [Melbourne Theatre Company] and I developed an immediate stage-door Johnny crush," he confesses. "But you won't print that, will you?"

Together, Rush and his colleagues are probing the workings of one of Shakespeare's most dysfunctional families, beset by vicious sibling rivalries and shaken apart as an elderly patriarch descends into madness.



Rush (left) plays the Fool to John Gaden's King Lear in a 1988 version of the play.

Photo: Supplied

"We're working on the idea that these girls have all been reared to rule, to want and hold on to power," Thomson says. "When things go to pot, they behave in the only thing they know how. Regan thinks, well, the kingdom is up for grabs and I'm an idiot if I don't go for it. That's appropriate behaviour for her – even if she is killing and torturing people along the way."

Rush says there may be some family secrets in the closet. "There's more than one mother involved, I think. Cordelia may have a different mother. It's been fascinating finding out how each daughter relates to dad and how he relates to them. They are so different."





Ian McKellen as King Lear.

Photo: Supplied

Thomson likens the play to *Game of Thrones*. "Every now and then it really feels like *Game of Thrones* to me. Who's got the power now? And right at the top of the play you get a king announcing he is going to abdicate. The Elizabethan audience would have drawn a breath because straight away everything is up for grabs. That would have been a frightening idea back then."

Rush says the play's reputation as "difficult" arises from the demands it places on its actors, not because it is hard for audiences to understand. "People might think *Lear* is going to be long and heavy," he says. "But it's exciting in its awfulness. You plunge into what drama should be. It's gripping and not a chore. If *Lear* were made today, it would be a box-set thriller. If it was on TV and ran for 10 hours, you'd be watching thinking, 'I'll just do one more episode.'"



King Lear (with John Bell in the role, left) has always been a magnet for famous actors.

Photo: Wendy McDougall

At the heart of the play is Lear's madness and over the years, many have speculated about its nature, Rush says. Is this an early depiction of dementia?

"Medical people reading the play have said Lear is suffering from Arteriosclerotic dementia or a bit of Alzheimer's," says Rush. "It's interesting to me that one of the actors in Shakespeare's own company, Ned Alleyn – Ben Affleck played him in *Shakespeare in Love* – had a father who ran the Bedlam hospital at the time. I reckon Shakespeare would have gone down there to see what was going on."

Whatever the reason for it, madness is almost impossible to play, says Rush. "For me it's about finding the dramatic impact in the moments of his mania. What seems to work best is finding a vulnerability or a point of empathy, where an audience can look at Lear and think how shocking it must be to be that old and to be banished from your family into the open air in a storm. That's a level of impoverishment you would never want to see in any other human being, ever."

Playing a father whose actions destroy a family inevitably leads one to thinking about one's own life, Rush says. He has two adult children, Angelica and James, with his partner Jane Menelaus. "I respond particularly to Cordelia. My own daughter is of Cordelia's age and while our lives are nothing like the Lears, you imagine what might be if that tragedy actually happened. That's the stuff you have to access as an actor."

At 64, Rush feels he's the right age to play Lear. Any older, he chuckles, and he wouldn't be able to carry Cordelia's body on to the stage at the end of the play. "It's comforting to know that in my 60s I'm playing an octogenarian," he smiles. "But people have played the role at many different ages."

The British actor John Gielgud, for example, was in his late twenties when he played Lear in 1931. "I actually got to work with Gielgud twice," Rush says. "He was the Pope in *Elizabeth*, so I only went and watched him film scenes, and he played the old mentor at the Royal College of Music in *Shine*. He was inspiring. There he was, one of the greats, and still a jobbing actor. I remember after shooting a scene with him for *Shine*, he went off to do an ice-cream commercial. He was 92!"

Despite the heaviness of the material, the atmosphere in the rehearsal room has been very light, says Thomson. "I was talking to [incoming STC artistic director] Jonathan Church and he was saying that in UK there has been a run of Lears that have been quite intellectual and that's just not Geoffrey."

Rush laughs. "I'm a low comedian! Wearing a crown! Rehearsal is a playpen for me to do cheap jokes."

Working with Rush for the first time, Norvill is appreciating that playfulness. "I love Geoffrey's ebullience and that's really something because this play looks into some deep dark holes in humanity," she says. "Sometimes fear can get into a rehearsal room and rot it. Nervousness, formality, all that bullshit. But Neil and Geoffrey work from moment to moment and we're all on the same journey together."

The production team Armfield has assembled is also part of a wider family, Rush adds. "It's basically the team who did the *Ring Cycle* in Melbourne. That went for 16 hours and

it was constantly inventive. Not over-designed, or over-conceptualised. Just full of ideas. To do three hours of *King Lear* after that must be like doing *No No Nanette* by comparison."

***King Lear* runs from November 24 to January 9 at Roslyn Packer Theatre; \$90-\$120.**

Hail to the King

King Lear is one of the most performed of all the Shakespearean tragedies and a magnet for stage and screen stars late in their careers.

John Gielgud played King Lear multiple times, first when he was in his 20s, and last when he recorded a radio version of the play in his 90s.

Laurence Olivier played the king in a production he also directed and 40 years later starred again in a small-screen production for Channel 4.

Donald Wolfit played the role while German bombs fell on London and Charles Laughton was lured back to England from Hollywood to play Lear in 1959.

"The further you get into that play," Laughton would later write, "the more you feel that never, never will you, or any other damned actor, be able to act it fully."

Despite that, Peter Ustinov, Michael Gambon, Michael Hordern, Anthony Hopkins, Christopher Plummer, Nigel Hawthorne and Jonathan Pryce have all stepped up to the plate since.

Australia has seen its fair share of Lears over the years. British actor Timothy West played the role in a 1972 touring production. Geoffrey Rush played the Fool to Warren Mitchell's Lear for the Queensland Theatre Company in 1978. At the height of his *Lord of the Rings* fame, Ian McKellen played Lear in a Royal Shakespeare Company production that toured to Melbourne in 2007.

John Bell and John Gaden have each played the role three times. Robyn Nevin was a Queen Lear in Melbourne in 2012 and, in an interesting casting twist, she plays the Fool to Rush's Lear in the coming Sydney Theatre Company production.



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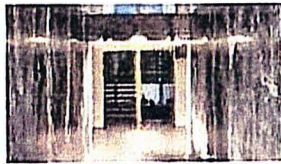
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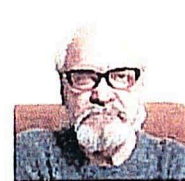
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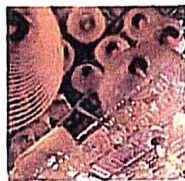
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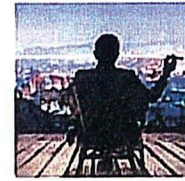
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