



## CHAPTER IV

### **Shakespeare on the Home Front: Donald Wolfit's Production of *King Lear***

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The British actor/manager Donald Wolfit's *King Lear* had its first performance during the opening week of his 1942 provincial tour at the Prince of Wales Theatre, Cardiff, with Nugent Monck directing and designs by the German émigré Ernest Stern. Wolfit continued to play the role throughout that tour (lasting until December), even though “[air] raiding was frequent ... [and] gun fire smattered the [...] buildings [of each city]” (1938: 53, 33). *Lear* had its London premiere in the week of January 30, 1943 at the St. James’ Theatre. Alan Dent described Wolfit himself as “the best and maddest Lear we have set eyes on” (1943: 6). Wolfit himself noted that the production had attracted a “magnificent press and [the] public began to stir” (1938: 53, 35). He included it in his touring repertoire until his second London season, opening in the week of February 15, 1944 at the Scala.

The reaction was if anything even more ecstatic than the previous year: James Agate described Wolfit's *Lear* as “the greatest piece of Shakespearean acting I have seen since I have been privileged to write for *The Sunday Times*” (1946: 54). Wolfit continued to play the role in London, in the provinces, as well as abroad – Canada, the USA, Belgium, and Egypt – until he disbanded his company in 1953. He repeated the role for BBC Radio, and recorded a truncated version of the play in 1962 for *The Living Shakespeare* project. Even today, those who were fortunate enough to witness Wolfit's performance call it “most extraordinary” – one which inspired them to read and/ or act Shakespeare for themselves (Sanders 2011).

What is less known or appreciated, however, is the contribution Wolfit's *Lear* made to sustaining public morale both during the Second World War and in the immediate aftermath. At one level, the production was designed to sustain belief in the nation's past as well as its future. Wolfit was a great believer in tradition; his Shakespeare revivals were inspired by the great actor/ managers of the past, including Henry Irving, Frank Benson and the lesser-known Randle Ayrton. By invoking their efforts through his productions, he could demonstrate the strength of the British tradition of acting Shakespeare, and how it reaffirmed a collective belief in patriotic values. In an interview designed to publicise his lunchtime performances at the Strand Theatre in late 1940, he asserted that "Shakespeare represents more than anything else the fighting spirit of our country" ("Dared to Put" 1940: 2). This was as true in the 1940s as it had been during the great days of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, when Irving crisscrossed the country like a latter-day Colossus. By creating traditional productions, incorporating stage-business developed by great Shakespeareans of the past, Wolfit tried to "teach people to love Shakespeare," and thereby instil a sense of patriotic pride into them ("Donald Wolfit" 1944: 2).

However, Wolfit also understood that *King Lear* would only mean something to his audiences if it dealt with important wartime issues. He conceived the world of the play as brutal, dominated by cruelty and indifference: Lear abused Cordelia (Rosalind Iden), and suffered in turn at the hands of Goneril and Regan. Gloucester favoured Edmund instead of Edgar and lost his eyes in consequence.<sup>1</sup> Such acts of wanton violence struck a nerve at a time when Nazi atrocities in Europe were gradually coming to light in the British press. James Redfern of *The Spectator* observed that it took a world war to make playgoers appreciate "the greatness of King Lear or realise the degree of Shakespeare's conception of man's inhumanity to man" (1943: 12). Lear was finally restored to Cordelia in a scene of almost unbearable emotional intensity: reconciliation was possible between people if only they listened to one another. The same principle also applied to Wolfit's audiences: by listening to one another (irrespective of class, race or nationality), they could wage a communal campaign of resistance to the enemy, as well as contemplate a better world in the future – one which could offer equality of opportunity to everyone.

Using materials drawn from the Wolfit papers (prompt-book, production photographs, extracts from Wolfit's letters and diaries, and fan-mail), as well as reviews and interviews, I will recreate the experience of what it was like

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1 Rosalind Iden (Wolfit's wife) played Cordelia through the ten-year run of Wolfit's *Lear*. However, the other roles were played by different actors in different seasons.

to witness *Lear* performed at a time of social and political upheaval. It will show how Wolfit's revival was shot through with contradictions: although very traditional in approach, it communicated a radical political message about the importance of people from different backgrounds learning to co-exist with one another. Wolfit himself was no socialist; his politics remained conservative, not to say reactionary, throughout his life.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless he understood the importance of bringing playgoers together; this is what inspired him to perform *Lear* for a decade during wartime and in the post-war era.

By 1943 Britain had been at war for three and a half years. Most of its major cities had experienced severe bombing, and would continue to do so for the next eighteen months with the commencement of the flying bomb campaign. Morale was often low, especially amongst those faced with the responsibility of sustaining some kind of a normal life. Phyllis Noble, living in Lewisham, south London, looked round her beloved city in 1941 with its mined buildings and smashed glass, and recorded in her diary that, "It was hard to believe that what I was seeing could be real. Yet, with a lump in my throat and tears welling in my eyes, I knew that it was" (qtd. in Nicholson 2011: 87). During the darkest days of the bombing in 1941-2, homemaker Nella Last, living in Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, gave a bleak picture of how cheerless could be, as absences, shortages, unhappiness and fear undermined the spirit of a local community. The men were too busy fighting abroad to farm, fish, or look after their families: "Such senseless, useless waste ... so wrong and twisted" (qtd. in Nicholson 2011: 110).

Yet even the depths of despair a new spirit of togetherness emerged. J. B. Priestley caught the mood of the times in his *Postscripts*, a series of immensely popular Sunday night broadcasts on the BBC's Overseas Service broadcast between June and October 1940. On July 21 he described the people's sense of community as "a desire which could soon become a controlled but passionate determination to model and recreate this life of ours" (Priestley 1940: 38). This determination was the product of a nation who had been transformed by the experience of war into "more pleasant-easy, more giving and taking [among the citizens], [with] none of the graces and courtesies of life" (Priestley 1940: 95). Despite heavy bombardment during the autumn of 1940 and beyond, the Nazis failed to "break the morale of the people": on the contrary, the Blitz inspired "the growing hope in

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2 Ronald Harwood recounts an occasion during the early 1960s when Wolfit went to see Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop perform Frank Norman's socialist musical *Fings Ain't Wot They Used To Be*, set in London's East End. Wolfit saw the first act and stormed out, exclaiming that he had "Never heard such filth or seen such obscenity on the London stage. No – it isn't even funny – just FILTHY – I vomit and proceed" (Harwood 1983: 265).

decent folk everywhere that civilisation can be saved to take root and take flower afterwards [after the war ended]" (Priestley 1940: 97-9). The determination to sustain a civilised world in the midst of conflict inspired Donald Wolfit to perform Shakespeare in theatres all over the country, even during air raids. His lunchtime season at London's Strand Theatre took place under hazardous conditions: after one performance in October 1940 a water-pipe burst in the wings, filling the deserted pit with filthy water ("Talk of the Town" 1940: 8). The season started sluggishly, but by January 1941 a newspaper-seller was heard to observe to all passers-by: "Full 'ouse, by the looks of it, guv'nor. Does your 'eart good to see 'em all, doesn't it?" (qtd. in Brown 1941: 2).

Wolfit's productions inspired similar reactions in the provinces. During a week at the King's Theatre, Edinburgh in November 1942, which was frequently punctuated by air-raids, a correspondent wrote to *The Scotsman* describing his reactions to a performance of *Hamlet*: "[I returned] to the series of mud-craters we miscall the road, re-entered to the black-out to the stack of unwashed dishes ... [yet] the Prince of youth was still with us, and our question was answered in the glowing eyes of youth, which was a new consciousness of that heritage for which, in the air, at sea, and on the desert our men fight and die" ("An Occasion" 1942: 2). While other theatre companies – the Old Vic, for example – confined themselves to specific areas of the country, Wolfit was the only manager prepared to travel all over Britain, showing how Shakespeare could inspire loyalty to the nation, its people, and the cause they were fighting for. Thus it was hardly surprising that he should have built up a devoted following by the time he chose to revive *King Lear* in early 1943.

In an undated letter to his friend David Maitland, Wolfit acknowledged that his interpretation of the play was inspired by Harley Granville Barker's masterly essay in *Prefaces to Shakespeare* ("David Maitland" nd). First published in 1927, this piece argued that *Lear*'s greatness lay in its "grandeur and simplicity" (Granville Barker 1963: 23). The central role placed considerable demands on the actor, who "must start with a top note [...] yet have in reserve the means to a greater climax of another sort altogether (Granville Barker 1963: 24). Playing Lear represented the supreme task of the actor's technique, which explains why Wolfit wanted to revive it.

In creating the part, Wolfit did not strive for originality, but modelled his interpretation on great Lears of the past. By following their example, he believed he could sustain what he described in 1952 as "the amazing electrical current," which was "the be-all and end-all of great acting. It is in that atmosphere that actor and audience experience alike the great moments of tragedy" (Wolfit 1952). The need

to recharge that “electrical current” became more acute during periods of strife; in the First World War Frank Benson had staged a series of productions celebrating the tercentenary of Shakespeare’s death, which according to one observer proved beyond doubt that the Bard had “a fervent love for his native land” (Colmer 1916: xvii). Benson not only promoted Shakespeare as a symbol of national culture; through his characterizations (incorporating stage-business derived from great performances of the past) he paid homage to the long-established British acting tradition. In the Second World War Wolfit repeated the experiment in an attempt to forge a collective belief in the nation and its future. In a newspaper article published in August 1944, he defined his objectives thus:

1. Sincerity
2. Plenty of Change
3. Do the greatest of the old plays and teach people to love Shakespeare and those who performed him in the past.  
 (“Donald Wolfit: Greatest Actor” 1944: 2)<sup>3</sup>

His interpretation of *Lear* was principally derived from Henry Irving and Randle Ayrton, who had played the role at Stratford in 1936, with Wolfit taking the role of Kent. Wolfit was a great admirer of both actors, whom he believed had kept alive “the great heritage of drama” since the mid-nineteenth century (Wolfit 1958). From Ayrton he learned the importance of treating *Lear* as a “god-like tyrant,” full of quick-tempered rage – especially in the opening scenes. This prepared the audience for the heath-sequences, when Ayrton suggested the “native genius of the man ... [that] persists until reason crumbles” (“*King Lear*” 1936: 2). In Wolfit’s interpretation *Lear*’s tyranny was indicated in the opening scene as Cordelia refused to participate in the charade of declaring her love for him. On her reply “Nothing, my lord” (I. i. 87), Wolfit swept aside the map of the kingdom, which has been placed in front of his throne by two fawning bearers, brandished his sword and stood threateningly over his daughter.<sup>4</sup> She knelt in front of him in terror. On the lines “And as a stranger to my heart and me/ Hold thee from this for ever” (115-6), *Lear* put his sword on the throne, emphasizing the gravity of his

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3 Wolfit’s admiration for the actor/ managers of the past remained constant. His archive contains numerous unpublished papers and speeches on Kean, Garrick, as well as a survey of major figures dating from the Elizabethan era.

4 All references to the text of *King Lear* from *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Eds. John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.

words; Cordelia responded by running across the stage into Kent's arms, seeking protection. Kent protested, but Lear replied in a tone of "general vexation," as Wolfit's prompt-book suggests (Shakespeare 1946: 4). The king ended the scene by storming off stage, delivering his lines to Cordelia: "Therefore be gone,/ Without our grace, our love, our benison" (264-6) in petulant tones. By defying his will, Cordelia had inadvertently exposed his true nature. It was thus hardly surprising that Goneril should observe sardonically to her sister in the next scene: "You see how full of changes his [Lear's] age is" (I. i. 287).

Once cast out on the heath, Lear's personality underwent a significant change. Wolfit showed a tender concern for Edgar as Poor Tom. The two men walked arm in arm across the playing area to study the heavens; it seemed as if they were great friends, even if they had only recently encountered one another. They turned back toward the hovel, and Lear told the Fool to go inside and shelter from the storm. He turned towards the audience and delivered the "Poor naked wretches" soliloquy (III. iv. 28-36) in serene tones, as if leading the audience in prayer. Wolfit's reinterpretation of Ayrton's performance had a particular significance for wartime playgoers, many of whom were also "poor naked wretches," as they struggled to survive the Blitz and its consequences. He exhorted those in power "to feel what wretches feel" (III. iv. 34), and use that experience to create a better future for everyone.

Wolfit's treatment of the play's final scene was inspired by Henry Irving's interpretation, which appealed to the audience's "pity for human frailty which is the most universal of social bonds" (1994: 241). Wolfit re-entered the stage with the dead Cordelia in his arms. Illuminated by a single spotlight, he laid her on the grounds and spoke in hushed tones as he asked Kent to lend him a looking-glass (V. iii. 236). When he finally understood she had died, he held her hand and whimpered ("No, no, no life!" (V. iii. 281), feeling for each word "as if to pierce the cruel mystery of his own madness" (Baxter 1944a: 2). He fell to the ground and died.<sup>5</sup> As the curtain fell, the packed house at the Scala stood up and cheered spontaneously, their collective hearts filled with emotion at the memory of this pathetic figure slumped in the centre of the stage, whose spirit had, in Wolfit's own words, ascended "to the empyrean to re-join Cordelia there after their earthly reconciliation" (1956: 6).

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5 Ronald Harwood's Wolfit biography describes this scene slightly differently, with Wolfit apparently tugging the rope round Cordelia's neck as he spoke the line "And my poor fool is hang'd?" This might have been true of his later performances, but there is no evidence in the prompt-book for Wolfit's having included this piece of stage-business (Harwood 1983: 164).

While Wolfit's production was traditional in the sense that it was inspired by great actors of the past, it nonetheless had a direct bearing on the wartime audience's daily struggles in its representation of a harsh, unforgiving world dominated by tyrants. Ernst Stern's set was a stark structure of slate gray columns placed at either side of the playing area. In the centre was a smaller box set of a throne flanked by curtains, and framed by smaller blocks with fluted designs. The front of the stage was left free, save for one or two blocks used as seats. While Stern's design functional rather than visually striking (and hence eminently suitable for Wolfit's gruelling tour schedule), it created a forbidding ambience for the dramatic action. This was evident during the scene when Lear learned of his two elder daughters' desire to deprive of him of all but one of his hundred knights (II. ii. 437). The lights stage dimmed; only the outlines of the columns on either side of the playing area could be seen. Lear moved stage centre and spoke the first four lines of his "reason not the need" speech (II. ii. 438-58) in a high-pitched voice reminiscent of a child. On "thou art a lady" he tried to flatter his daughters; when this strategy failed, he tried to portray himself as helpless, taking distinct pauses in the line "You see me" ... "here you gods," ... "a poor" ... "old man." Eventually his rage got the better of him, as he bellowed the line "this heart shall break into a hundred thousand flaws" at the top of his voice. Lear paused momentarily, clutched his chest, and looked around wildly before clutching at the Fool's arm for support ("O Fool, I shall go mad!" (II. iv. 459)). As he spoke, the sound of thunder could be heard off stage, while the lights came up slowly on the columns, emphasizing the brutality of this world, in which human feelings counted for naught: power and strength were the only qualities that mattered. The thunder offstage stressed the link between Lear's turbulent state of mind and the world he inhabited. The only character prepared to help him was the Fool, an insignificant figure dressed in white. As the two men left the stage, Goneril and Regan looked at them contemptuously: Goneril delivered the lines "'Tis his [Lear's] own blame;/ Hath put himself from rest, and must needs taste his folly" (II. iv. 462-3), with the emphasis placed on the word "folly." In her view Lear had no need to run out onto the heath; if he had willingly accepted his daughters' dictatorship, he could have found shelter for the night.

Yet perhaps Lear had made the right decision, as it soon became starkly clear that neither Goneril nor Regan would tolerate any dissenting voices. Gloucester was dragged onstage and placed in an armchair with his back to the audience, while the daughters and their spouses bent over him like prison interrogators. The old man made a futile bid to escape but was thrust back into his chair by two servants. Once again the thunder could be heard offstage as Cornwall plucked

Gloucester's eyes out, much to the daughters' delight. They tipped the old man out of his chair and kicked him around the floor as if he were a sack of potatoes rather than a human being. Wolfit omitted the lines "It was he ... Who is too good to pity thee" (III. vii. 85-8), where Regan reveals that Edmund had told her about Gloucester's alleged disloyalty. In this revival Regan stressed the word "hates" in the line ("Thou [Gloucester] call'st on him who hates thee" (III. vii. 86)), to emphasise her strength of feeling. The scene ended with Regan turning her back on Gloucester and flouncing offstage.

In the letter to David Maitland already cited, Wolfit emphasised the importance of this scene, which was placed immediately before the revival's only interval, which forced audiences to reflect on the ways in which dictatorships resorted to extreme violence to maintain their authority ("David Maitland" nd.). In Lear's mad scene (IV. v), which took place ten minutes into the second half, Lear deliberately aped his daughters' mannerisms – although ostensibly mad, he knew what had happened to Gloucester, and who was responsible for it. In the line "To say 'ay,' and 'no' to everything that I said 'ay' and 'no' to was no good divinity" (IV. vi. 98-100), Wolfit spoke the first "ay" and "no" in high-pitched tones, stretching his hand out and expecting someone to kiss it as he did so – just as Goneril and Regan had done earlier on in the revival, once they had declared their love for him. The line "Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!" (IV. vi. 183) was spoken with mounting intensity, as he sank to his knees and beat the floor with his hands. He understood their method of government: put on a polite façade in public, while brutally exterminating their enemies.

Yet Wolfit suggested that alternative ways of living could be possible, so long as people made the effort to communicate. Cordelia re-entered, accompanied by Kent, to discover Lear asleep in the small box set where once his throne had stood. The doctor helped the old king to his feet, draping a cloak round his shoulders. Lear's and Cordelia's eyes met, and they knelt opposite one another, their hands clasped. In a tremulous voice, Lear admitted that he had been "a very foolish fond old man,/ Fourscore and upward,/ Not an hour much or less" (IV. vi. 53-5). In the background, the sound of drums could be heard, signalling the forthcoming conflict between Cordelia's and Edmund's forces. But no one took any heed: attention focused solely on Lear, who had at last acknowledged responsibility for the current political turmoil. The two of them rose to their feet and walked ceremonially to the front of the stage on the line "Will't please your highness walk?" (IV. vii.75). Once they had reconciled their differences, they could face up to anything that might happen to them in the future.



The strength of their relationship was soon put to the test as Cordelia's army suffered a humiliating defeat. Edmund tried to dominate the scene as he walked up to Lear and Cordelia, looked at them squarely in the eye and ordered: "Some officers take them away" (V, iii. 1). However the two of them no longer cared about their fate, as they stood together at the centre of the stage looking into each other's eyes. Lear's speech "Upon sacrifices, my Cordelia ... We'll see 'em starved first" (V. iii. 20-5) was delivered as a triumphant peroration, beginning quietly and ending with the final phrase being spoken slowly yet deliberately with the stress placed on the word "starved": "We'll ... see ... 'em ... starved ... first." This was an incredibly powerful moment, as Lear revealed his "voice, presence, majesty, and power," as a reviewer put it in 1945 ("Wolfit's Lear" 1945: 3). He understood that the best way to resist tyranny was to hold Cordelia's hand and vow to remain with her – even in death.

Wolfit's staging was inspired by A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), which placed particular stress on the play's "consciousness of greatness in pain, and of solemnity in the majesty we cannot fathom" (Bradley 1904: 273). He offered a way forward for wartime audiences confronted with the task of defeating dictatorships, both at home and abroad. Inspired by Lear's example, they could trust in one another; the better they understood this, the more effective their resistance. Stephen Williams of the London *Evening News* asked his readers to reflect on the production's contemporary significance: "[Wolfit's] Lear is so majestic in mien and so brimming with tender humanity that our hearts beat in sympathy with him throughout [...] will anyone in occupied Europe dare to say that Shakespeare's imagination was diseased?" (1944: 2). Many spectators at the Scala Theatre realised the significance of what they had just seen, and reacted accordingly: Beverley Baxter reported that on the first night the cheering was so vociferous that the atmosphere recalled "the ballet or a football match" (1944a: 2). *The Catholic Herald* drew attention to the heterogeneity of the audience, including "American soldiers in large numbers [...] other servicemen too – Poles, French, Czechs, Indians, [and] negroes." Wolfit proved beyond doubt that Shakespeare "speaks everybody's language" ("King Lear" 1944: 4).

Several playgoers recorded their experiences in letters sent to Wolfit. Charles Morgan praised the actor's "great performance," (1944) which so moved his young son that the little boy could not stop talking about it. The critic Beverley Baxter congratulated Wolfit on his achievement on providing "such pleasure and inspiration to the boys of the RAF" (1944b). In February 1945 Wolfit returned to London for a two-week season at the Winter Garden Theatre, immediately prior to an Egyptian tour. Freda Wakeling told him that she had been to the theatre

every night (1945): the audience's reaction had been "Quite emphatically [...] 'Thumbs up!'" During the performance of *Lear* they had been "stunned into pin-still silence."

When *King Lear* went on tour later in 1944, the reaction was equally ecstatic. *The Edinburgh Evening Dispatch* applauded Wolfit for giving Shakespeare "the common touch [...] Mr. Wolfit knows the value of sincerity and a direct appeal to the emotions of the ordinary man, woman and child" ("The Art of Donald Wolfit" 1944: 3). At the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, "a fair sprinkling of American soldiers" evidently understood the production better "than did some of the more 'native' members" ("Theatre Royal" 1944: 2). At His Majesty's Theatre, Aberdeen, interest in the production reached such a peak of intensity that local booksellers sold out of all Shakespearean material, both plays and commentaries" ("Shakespearean Box Office" 1944: 2). This *Lear* appeared to signal the onset of a brave new world, in which people of different backgrounds and nationalities set aside the prejudices that dominated British society in the pre-war era and forged a community spirit instead. Like *Lear*, Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* was greeted enthusiastically on its first performance at London's Sadler's Wells Theatre in June 1945. "After each curtain call," a member of the audiences reported, "people turned to one another excitedly while continuing to applaud; it was as if they wanted not simply to express their enthusiasm but to share it with their neighbours." Britten wrote to a friend that "it looks as if the old spell on British opera may be broken at last!" (qtd. in Kynaston 2007: 62).

In subsequent years, Wolfit's production – and his central performance – altered slightly: John Mayes, a junior member of his company on the 1950 tour and the 1953 London season, described his "dazzling turn and twisting of body with business of cloak before 'No, you unnatural hags' [II. ii. 452]" which led to a "controlled, almost unbelieving, slow acceptance of his rejection" by his daughters on the line "No, I'll not weep, I have full cause of weeping" (II. ii. 457) (1969: 67). Ronald Harwood, another member of the 1953 troupe, described Wolfit turning his back on the audience, as Regan says "What need one?" When he delivered the line "O fool, I shall go mad!" (II. ii. 459), a thunderclap was heard offstage, "which seemed to arrest the King's anger, for it is the gentle frailty of [...] [this line] that finally takes him out onto the heath" (1983: 163).

Reactions to the production also changed: when Wolfit brought it back to the Savoy Theatre, London, in April 1947, Alan Dent opined that he would have rather seen it "at Wolverhampton or Dundee or Cork. Outside of London I would probably not so much resent this spacious and resounding interpretation's fundamental lack of kingly distinction and vocal beauty" (1947: 3). Nevertheless the production still

proved very popular with audiences up and down the country until the end of the 1940s: every performance during the 1949 season at the Bedford Theatre, Camden Town, was sold out. Arthur Harris saw *Lear* at the Theatre Royal, Birmingham, in September 1947, and wrote Wolfit thus: “[T]here is no one to play Lear as you do, with what we call (and you who have been his Kent will not resent it) ‘the Ayrton touch’” (1947). Two years later the widow of the actor/manager Matheson Lang declared herself “thrilled” by Wolfit’s performance: “You got the poetry, the savagery, and the humanity and the inherent dignity superbly [...] the production was so good, so primitive in colour and form” (Lang 1949). Madeline Whitehead also liked the production, but suggested politely “that in the Storm scene Lear should have a *drenched* hair look [...] and any gestures suggesting soaked clothes clinging to one will add to the horror and the reality of the storm” (1949).

While Whitehead intended her criticisms to be constructive, they reveal how public attitudes towards *Lear* had changed since the end of the War. Simon Winder claims that during this period the belief in a brave new world of common values had evaporated; ordinary people felt a sense of “bitterness and loss of identity,” as they wondered whether the sacrifices they had made during wartime had been truly worthwhile. At home Britain experienced severe food shortages, while abroad it was forced to sacrifice its major colonies: “Burma [and India] became independent; it [this event] generated in many British people a sense of shame and disgrace” (Winder 2006: 62). On July 26, 1947 the homemaker Nella Last listened to a radio production of the First World War drama *Journey’s End*; but could not bear to hear the finish: “With startling clarity I seemed to recall my girlhood friends who died in the 1914-18 war and the memory of this last war seemed to rush back in a flood of sadness to choke me. The utter futility and senselessness of mankind, the cruelty to each other, the utter waste of it all, and not one lesson learned” (Last 2008: 165-6). She looked back nostalgically to the darkest days of the War in 1943 and 1944, when Winston Churchill’s speeches gave her “a surge of strength coming over the air, flooding not only the quiet room, but my tired body” (Last 2008: 176). Those who could afford to go to the theatre – in a brief respite from suffering – found little to inspire them in Wolfit’s *Lear*. Consequently they criticised the *form* rather than focusing on the production’s *content*.

Wolfit experienced similar reactions when he took *Lear* to Broadway for a short season in early 1947. New York audiences had remained largely unaffected by the experience of the War; as a result, they found the production ramshackle, old-fashioned and boring. John Drummond of the London *Daily Graphic* reported that on the first performance at the Century Theatre, “Men and women clattered

loudly left, right and centre. The last dozen trampled to their seats as the fourth scene of Act I began. After the interval actors and actresses had to shout for a quarter of an hour to make themselves heard. 'Good audience behaviour,' indeed!' (1947: 1).

Wolfit continued to tour *Lear* until 1953: even if audiences and reviewers did not respond with the same spontaneity as they had done in 1944, they still recognised his achievement in bringing Shakespeare's tragedy to towns and cities which might not otherwise have had the opportunity to see it. Murray Carmack saw it in Vancouver, and congratulated Wolfit on his "wonderful achievement [that] can spring only from the depths of a noble mind and a profound and beautiful soul" (Carmack 1948). Over sixty years later, Gordon Pearson recalled the sense of excitement that the production generated in Edmonton, Canada, which at that time (1948) had very little professional theatre (2011). Following Wolfit's final performances in the role at the King's Theatre, Hammersmith, the critic W. J. Igoe wrote to the actor and congratulated him on stimulating the imagination of generations of playgoers, who "owe that education [about *Lear*] to you, and you alone" (1954).

In assessing Wolfit's *Lear* and its impact on 1940s playgoers, it is important to dispel some of the critical canards that continue to affect his reputation in British wartime theatre history. To many of his contemporaries he was considered a 'ham' – especially when compared to Gielgud or Olivier. The comedienne Hermione Gingold summed up the prevailing opinion amongst London's theatrical community in a throwaway line from her revue *Sweet and Lower*, which played the Ambassador's Theatre in early 1944: "John Gielgud was curious, Donald Wolfit was furious. It's a thing that must not be repeated." Wolfit's acting was certainly full-blooded, inspired by actor/managers of the past such as Irving, but in the final years of the Second World War audiences welcomed his kind of approach – especially in *Lear*. Peter Noble wrote in 1946 that Wolfit's performance was "probably the greatest rendering of the Bard's portrait of crumbling majesty to be seen in London for many years [...] [it] alone is enough to justify his position among the great ones of the contemporary English theatre" (1946: 99-102).

Wolfit was also considered a 'provincial' actor, who staged occasional London seasons but refused to play the West End for any length of time. The young Kenneth Tynan described him as suffering from "a provincial inferiority complex to the extent of being unable or unwilling to work for anyone but himself. If he can overcome that, the West End will acquire an actor of greater technical power than it currently possesses, but there is not much time left" (1950: 40-1). Wolfit's dedication to touring ensured that audiences all over Britain – and beyond – could see *Lear* in performance. This proved an effective means of forging a

sense of community during a period of strife: playgoers in Scotland, or the north of England, had the security of knowing that they were seeing precisely the same production that played at the St. James's, Scala or Savoy Theatres. Wolfit became a big star, devoted to the cause of familiarizing audiences of all classes, regions and nationalities with the inspired poetry of *King Lear*. Moreover, it is simply false to claim that Wolfit avoided the West End; his Scala Theatre season played to packed houses until Wolfit was forced to move out, as the theatre was commandeered by the US Army. The impresario C. B. Cochran believed that this season confirmed Wolfit's reputation as a one-person National Theatre: "State aid for the theatre is in the air. Why not make a start by giving Wolfit his own theatre?" (1946: 157).<sup>6</sup>

Wolfit's productions were often pejoratively described as 'traditional,' consisting of a strong central performance with little or no attention paid to the supporting cast. The young Penelope Houston saw *Lear* at the New Theatre, Oxford in 1947 and wrote in the student journal *Isis* that "Wolfit falls very flat [...] of his company it is, as always, kinder to say little. The strutting, shouting lords bellow and stamp as usual, distinguishable only by the colour of their hair; as too often, Goneril and Regan suggest only nice girls playing the ugly sisters in a charity pantomime" (1947: 8). However Wolfit set great store by tradition, particularly during wartime, when he believed in the importance of reminding playgoers about Britain's past achievements, to help them make sense of the present and determine their future. Hence his *Lear* incorporated direct echoes of performances by Irving and Randle Ayrton. In a speech given one afternoon at Leeds in 1945 during Thanksgiving Week, Wolfit set forth his beliefs. While it was imperative to praise "those who conquered and died," to ensure the country's security, it was also important to acknowledge the achievements of everyone – actors included – who had contributed to Britain's illustrious past: "Let us keep their memory evergreen in our breasts as we go forward to the future" (qtd. in Porter 1949: 259).

Wolfit's *Lear* proved beyond question that directors of Shakespeare in wartime – both past and present – do not need to update the plays in order to affect their audiences. In a recent book, Caroline Silverstone looks at how recent productions, including Gregory Doran's *Titus* (Market Theatre, Johannesburg, 1995), and Nicholas Hytner's *Henry V* (Royal National Theatre, 2003) have memorialised violent events and histories taking place in their respective countries'

6 Wolfit never received much state subsidy for his productions, much to his chagrin. Although most of his tours were self-funded, there were times when he struggled financially. On November 11, 1943, he admitted to Lord Bute that his position was "desperate," and that his activities as an actor/manager were liable to be curtailed. Lord Bute offered some financial assistance, which enabled him to continue touring *Lear*.

past (2011). By contrast Wolfit memorialised a more stable past, a time of peace when Irving and Ayrton performed *Lear* to packed houses in London, Stratford and elsewhere. At the same time Wolfit's production focused on present conflicts – particularly in his portrayal of a world dominated by tyrants, and how Lear and Cordelia managed to overcome its exigencies by finding strength in one another. It was at this moment during Act V that playgoers in London and elsewhere identified most with what took place on stage, and thereby demonstrated how wartime Shakespeare depends for its effect on a sense of shared endeavour. Both performers and audience participated in a collective ritual, proving that the British way of life – as expressed through *Lear* – would survive, despite the Luftwaffe's best attempts to disrupt it. Caryl Brahms likened the experience of the production to "magic [...] which made this woman, surveying the bare scene, whisper again: 'It's beautiful!'" (1949: 4). Beautiful, certainly; but also inspiring for actors and spectators alike, which helps to explain why memories of the production linger on in the minds of those fortunate enough either to see it or be involved in it, even though it is nearly seventy years since its premiere.

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