

Dramatic Scene
Act 5 Scene 3

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What Makes This Scene So Dramatic?

- Only 330 lines long yet every word and action is significant
- Highly emotionally charged: hope, despair, sorrow, horror
- The resolution of the plot and the violent deaths of so many of the characters, both good and bad
- The callousness of the gods
- The powerful language and imagery



“The sudden reaping of a terrible sowing.”

-Henry Norman Hudson, American critic and essayist

Lear and Cordelia - A Shadow Hangs Over Their Joy

- 'We are not the first / Who with best meaning, have incurred the worst' - Cordelia is pragmatic. Her words remind us of martyred saints - she has sacrificed all for love.
- Audience is **moved** by love between Lear and Cordelia, yet **worried** for their safety.
- Edmund's presence adds to the **sense of threat**: we know he intends to kill them.



“As for the mercy
Which he intends to Lear and to Cordelia,
The battle done and they within our power,
Shall never see his pardon.”

-Edmund - Act 5 Scene 1

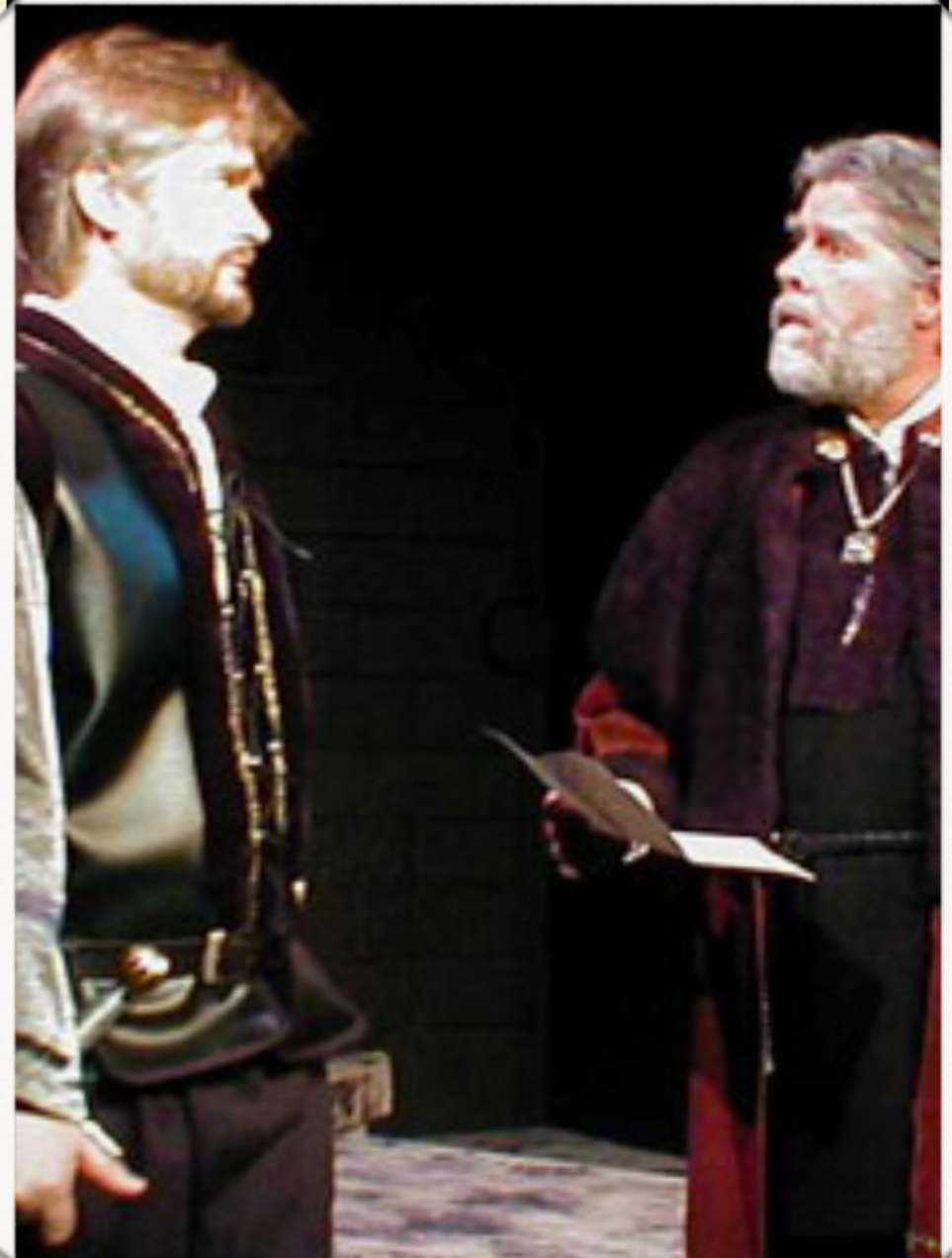
- Lear's joy at being reunited with Cordelia is **deeply moving**.
- He has at last realised her worth. He mocks the shallowness of court life and politics, but does not seem to realise it still has power over him.
- Edmund's order to the captain **dashes any hope** the audience might have. He promises the captain advancement: 'noble fortunes' which reminds us just how ignoble Edmund is. His villainy knows no bounds. Having seen how he treated his father, the audience has good reason to fear that he will be equally treacherous and cruel with Lear and Cordelia.

“We too alone will sing like birds i’ the cage.”

-Lear to Cordelia

Note of Hope

- Albany seems to have risen in stature
- He sees through Edmund (he has read the letter Goneril sent to him)
- He orders Edmund to hand over Lear and Cordelia
- Perhaps they will be saved?



“I hold you but as a subject of this war
Not as a brother.”

-Albany to Edmund

- Unfortunately, Albany is indecisive and does not insist that Edmund obey him.
- He allows himself to be distracted by a fight between Goneril and Regan
- There is great tension here: the fight between the sisters is at last coming into the open

The clock is ticking...

- There is some **black humour** in the way Albany treats his wife's claim that she will marry Edmund
- He acts as a broker, telling Regan that Edmund cannot marry her as he is promised to Goneril, his - Albany's - wife and thus he ironically forbids the banns
- Through all of this, **the audience is keenly aware of the fact that Lear and Cordelia are in grave danger and every second counts**



Horror - Goneril's inhumanity

- The depths of depravity to which she has sunk are clear here
- She gloats as her sister suffers, knowing that Regan has been poisoned
- Asks Regan, 'Mean you to enjoy [marry] him?' knowing that her sister is dying
- As Regan leaves, crying out that she is sick, Goneril remarks that if Regan is not sick she - Goneril - will 'ne'er trust medicine' and it is now that the audience realises the full horror of her actions.



Edmund is Challenged

Trial by Combat

- Albany turns on Edmund, alluding to his bastardy: 'half-blooded fellow'
- The alliance is ended - all the parties are now at war with one another
- He arrests Edmund and Goneril
- There is mounting excitement and anticipation as the trumpet sounds repeatedly, calling for a champion



- The formal challenge and the lengthy exchanges drag out the action and reduce the prospect of Lear and Cordelia being saved in time, something of which the audience would have been keenly aware.
- The fight between the brothers is a fight between good and evil.

Divine Justice? Is Order Restored?

- Justice and order appear to be served when Edgar defeats Edmund
- Edgar says, 'The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us'.
- Even Edmund, who scorned the idea of fate in Act 1, now says that 'The wheel is come full circle'



- Goneril's treachery has been exposed and she leaves, clearly suicidal
- There is relief that the evildoers have been exposed, but what of Lear and Cordelia?
- Edgar's long-winded speeches at this stage both serve to tie up the loose ends (he tells us about Gloucester's death and Kent's revelation that he has served Lear all along) and increase the audience's anxiety: what about Lear and Cordelia?

Horror and Relief

- The entrance of a man crying holding a bloody knife is horrifying. Who is dead?
- He stops before telling us the name of the person: 'It came even from the heart of - O! she's dead!'
- Audience is appalled: can it be Cordelia has been murdered by Edmund's man?
- Relief comes, along with a sense that justice has been served, when the man reveals that it is Goneril who is dead, having taken her own life.
- Albany sees her death as fitting and we agree.



“This judgment of the heavens, that makes us
tremble

Touches us not with pity.”

-Albany, on hearing of Goneril and Regan's death

Horror and Despair

- Albany finally remembers the 'Great thing of us forgot!' and asks Edmund to tell him where Lear and Cordelia are.
- Edmund's repentance is too late.
- He admits that Cordelia's death has been planned
- Albany calls for the gods to defend Cordelia, but we immediately learn that this has not happened.



- ❖ Lear suffers greatly and is brought as low as he could possibly be.
- ❖ His anguish is clear and his repetition of 'Howl, howl, howl, howl!' reminds us of his words of rage and grief when he wandered through the storm.
- ❖ There is no hope that Cordelia might be alive: Lear calls for a mirror to see if she is breathing. His heartbreak is such that he tries to convince himself the feather at her lips is stirred by her breath

- Lear's despair and subsequent death make the restoration of order seem **irrelevant and cheerless**
- Kent tells Edgar not to try to revive Lear as the world is too painful for him. Images of torture are used when Kent talks about 'the rack', reminding us of the extent of Lear's suffering.