

Robert Mandan
and Diane Venora

by Deborah Behrens
Photos by Chris Kane

KING LEAR

UNVARNISHED

When a vocal teacher tells you a student in her Shakespeare workshops could be one of the great King Lear's of our time, you chalk it up to bravado.

But if that teacher is Patsy Rodenburg, Head of Voice at London's Royal National Theatre and Guildhall School of Music & Drama, and the student in question is 2005 Ovation Award and *LA Weekly* Best Actor winner Robert Mandan, it is a line from Arthur Miller rather than the Bard that leaps to center stage.

Attention must be paid.

MANDAN IS THE REASON Rodenburg will make her international directing debut in late July with a new “unvarnished” production of *King Lear* at the 99-seat Electric Lodge in Venice. To support his turn as one of theatre’s most storied monarchs, she has assembled an equally storied cast featuring Diane Venora as the Fool, Jayne Brook as Goneril, Annabeth Gish as Regan, Mili Avital as Cordelia, Lawrence Pressman as Gloucester, Omar Metwally as Edgar and Pat Muldoon as Edmund.

Why him? Because the woman famous for coaching such British stage elite as Judi Dench, Ian McKellen, Ian Holm and Ralph Fiennes believes the veteran Broadway actor, best known for his comedic work on such classic sitcoms as *Soap* and *Three’s Company*, deserves “a go at it.”

“One doesn’t do a *Lear* unless one has found one of the greats to play the man,” says Rodenburg via phone from London. “Someone who is prepared to put himself on this massive journey and be savage. Very often *Lear* is played with a lot of drama. But there are a lot of jokes in the first half. I’ve always known this guy is a joker, a game player. He has young men around him who adore him and his vigor. But you very rarely see that.

“I’ve learned that Americans can do Shakespeare as good as anybody. I’ve had such joy working with people who don’t have all the pretentious habits of Shakespeare. There’s something in me that wants to say to America—don’t belittle yourself.” —Patsy Rodenburg

“That’s why I want a very attractive, entertaining man. These are very dangerous people. With all his experience Bob can excavate those things. He’s brilliant. If he had been in England, he would have done a *Lear* by now.”

She should know. Formerly nine years in residence at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Rodenburg is considered one of the world’s leading voice and acting coaches. She has worked with nearly every noted playwright and director and at many of the great world theatres. Approximately 80 shows a year on the West End and Broadway open under her guidance. Her four books are considered essential canons on voice. In December 2005, she was invested with the OBE (Order of the British Empire) at Buckingham Palace for her contributions.

When asked his reaction to being placed in such esteemed company, Mandan is understandably humble. “The first time she told me, I said come on, Patsy,” he explains. “And she said, no, I really meant that. It was more than flattering. It was deeply moving. Still is. That someone like her would say that.

“This play’s not funny but she keeps saying, ‘You bring so much humor to it.’ Most people who come to the dramas don’t expect any laughs at all. That’s why I always appreciated Olivier. He found a laugh in whatever he did. Some silly little thing. I thought it was very wise of him to do that.”

The Fool & Lear’s Daughters

DURING ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS for this article, the *Lear* cast was palpably excited by what they perceive to be a once-in-a-lifetime production under the guidance of a renowned master teacher.

Each earned entry into this unique ensemble by his or her participation in Rodenburg’s Shakespeare and voice workshops, which began two years ago in Los Angeles as the vision of acting coach and Larry Moss protégé Lisa Robertson.

Last summer’s workshop performance of *Lear* shocked everyone involved with its surprising humor, volcanic savagery and disturbing pathos. The reaction spurred Robertson and Rodenburg to mount this year’s full production under the banner of their newly formed Tier Four Company with support in part by Electric Lodge, who considered their staging breakthrough enough to fall under its new works mandate. Next year the two plan to tackle Euripides with a production of *The Trojan Women*.

Some of the actors, like Venora, who is famous for her various *Hamlet* incarnations at the New York Shakespeare Festival including the Danish prince himself, have extensive Shakespearean stage and film credits. Others like Gish and Avital are making their iambic pentameter premiere.

“Shakespeare didn’t write a woman in this role,” admits Venora (*Bird*, *Heat*, *The Insider*) who got the part because

Rodenburg wanted somebody who had enough “anarchy and wit” to diffuse the dangerous situations in *Lear* while embodying an “otherness” often felt by androgynous identified outsiders. “*Hamlet* was not a woman either. He didn’t make a mistake. So when I take on these kinds of roles I don’t think of myself as male or female. I think of myself as this person in that suit, in that environment with those risks, those circumstances and those challenges.

“Albert Finney once told me that to play a great part, you have to take the scenes as high as a mountain and as low as a valley will hold you. And just before you’re out on this limb and you start to saw it off but before you fall down, you pull back just a little bit. You need it for Shakespeare. You need it for Shaw. They write big things.”

“Patsy is a force who arrived in LA and restored life to actors whose souls had grown weary on a diet of too much TV and film,” says Jayne Brook (*Boston Legal*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Chicago Hope*) who got her career start on the London stage in such productions as *Much Ado About Nothing*. “We take her voice and breath work, focus on building a company of actors rather than the career of one and our world is recharged. Working in Shakespeare is a gift to actors on any day. Working with Patsy on Shakespeare is a blessing.

“Why *Lear* today? Any Shakespeare production that stems from a deep heart, and isn’t an awful, superficial rendering of a classic, speaks to the human condition in any age. He writes about the most human of things; in the case of *Lear*, about families torn apart in darkness. Ultimately there is redemp-

tion, something every person yearns for. Not redemption for every character, certainly not for Goneril, but redemption nonetheless. What people will get out of this production is a tangible, brilliant experience of Shakespeare. And they will recognize every bit of human behavior on stage, no matter that they are not used to the language.”

For Annabeth Gish, who is making her professional stage debut, *Lear* is part of a necessary career evolution that began when she attended

don't know if I could have done this new role on Showtime [*Brotherhood*] if I hadn't done her work. Once you connect with that powerful voice and then practice with the range and coloring, you can't go back. Now some of the scripts I read, I can't physically do them.”

“Patsy's voice and breath work is profoundly life changing,” admits Robertson who is both producer and associate director of *King Lear*. She was aware of Rodenburg's reputation growing up as a young dancer in her native Australia decades before meeting her at a workshop intensive in New York.

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– Jayne Brook

“Patsy's been one of the most powerful voices in world theatre for 35 years,” she says. “She knows every syllable of Shakespeare intimately. I wanted to create a core community of actors who had learned the great classical texts the way Patsy teaches them—totally unvarnished. To let the words organically explode from their mouths without embellishment or heavy concept as a true ensemble.”

Rodenburg concurs. “I don't think we need to do anything with these plays. It's all there in the text. I've worked with some of the greatest directors in the world and sometimes a concept will absolutely release the heart of a scene. But often concepts hide the play. You can have the most fantastic storm effect but miss what he's saying. We've got to hear the storm inside. I want people to hear these plays very clearly without all that presentational crap.”

“With Shakespeare what happens is as you speak you experience as we do when we're in a heightened situation. As soon as you become heightened you don't think, think, think and then speak. You speak and feel simultaneously.”

“I really get it when she talks about language being very physical and not mental,” says Mili



Jayne Brook and Annabeth Gish

Rodenburg's workshops two years ago.

“It's a vulnerable position to primarily be a film and TV actress to take the risk but there's no alternative for me personally,” says Gish best known for roles in *West Wing*, *X-Files*, *Double Jeopardy* and *Mystic Pizza*. “To have the opportunity to bite into the cruel villainy of Regan? Patsy sees the ache and the yearning in people like me out here who are known primarily for certain things. I

Patsy Rodenburg
on Shakespeare & American Actors

CLIVE TOTMAN



I'M GOING TO GET INTO TROUBLE but I'm going to say it. I've learned that Americans can do Shakespeare as good as anybody. I've had such joy working with people who don't have all the pretentious habits of Shakespeare. There's something in me that wants to say to America--don't belittle yourself. Take away this idea that it's done in this company or that company in Britain better than you can do it.

I hate the elitism. I love working with these LA actors who just abandon themselves. Fantastic actors with so many skills that are unappreciated. And they're yearning, you know? There's something gorgeous about actors who desperately want to do great plays. Because they don't often get the chance.

The actors I work with in England normally do one great play after another. So they get a bit jaded! There's sort of an enormous oxygen that I get from them. So you go, oh my god! This is not difficult. This is fantastic!

Shakespeare is not frightening. I would go as far as to say that if you just approach him in the right way, because he's so actor friendly, he's the easiest text. As long as you take all the barriers away--you've got to speak in this way, I've got to stand in this way; we've got to wear tights. This is just a man telling amazing stories but also probing the deepest part of our psyche with tremendous understanding.

Avital (*Stargate, Deadman*), a star in her native Israel before coming to New York 12 years ago to specifically study Shakespeare in English. "I had to train muscles in my mouth in order not to sound foreign. It was always my dream of dreams to play Shakespeare. I feel like I have such an advantage over Americans in a way because I appreciate every syllable so much. It took me years of sweat to master the text and work with people at the level that I'm after. To do a production of *Lear* as Cordelia and with Patsy is really my dream come true."

"American actors are so used to going for feeling first," agrees Mandan. "Patsy's drive is to let the words take you there if indeed it's even necessary. This is not *A Hatful of Rain* where you sit and watch people having a huge emotional life and maybe you will respond. Hopefully the clarity with which you speak, and the emotional life on which you speak, will convey something to your audience and they will have an experience themselves. To me, that is far more rewarding than to watch an actor emotionally masturbate, for lack of a better word."

A Lear for Our Savage Times

SO EVEN IF ROBERT MANDAN is an Olivier heir, what can a 400-year-old play offer contemporary audiences? According to Rodenburg, the issues *Lear* raises are as timely as they have ever been.

"Because at this moment, it is critical that we look again at how we use power," she stresses. "In societies, we feel we are enlightened. In a way, what Shakespeare told us again and again, particularly in *King Lear*, is that we think we're civilized but if you push on the very thin piece of glass that separates us from savagery, you get there very quickly.

"It's the so-called civilized people who just push themselves to the edge because of greed. Complicity is a great message in Shakespeare. We are complicit to the acts done in our name by our leaders. We are bystanders. But if the people in the highest level of power behave badly, why should any of us behave well?"

Rodenburg hopes the show will also encourage men to deeply examine their behavior as the family patriarch. "If you succeed at all with *Lear*, as people leave the theatre, fathers should look to their daughters and to their sons and just question how they behave towards them. You can't bully people and expect them to love you. If you happen to be a very powerful family and you do that, the consequences don't just land on your family, they land on the whole of your nation." ■

KING LEAR

Opens July 28;
plays Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm;
Sun., 2 & 7 pm;
ends Aug. 27
Previews Wed.-Thurs.
July 26 & 27
Tickets: \$27

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