

Nesta Jones

Looking at *Lear*: the Voice Work and Direction of Cicely Berry

Since her death on 15 October 2018 at the age of 92 many tributes have been paid to Cicely Berry, and no doubt more will follow. Her legacy is assured, however, through the many actors, directors, and young people she encouraged, inspired, and transformed during her long and illustrious career as Director of Voice (and subsequently Advisory Director) of the Royal Shakespeare Company, and other organizations where she shared her practice internationally, often with the assistance of translators in order to work in the language of the host communities. Moreover, her words and a myriad of examples of exercises on voice and text processes remain in print and on digital media for the benefit of future generations.¹ In this article, Nesta Jones focuses on one specific piece of work and moment in time. Cicely Berry had directed a touring production of *Hamlet* for the Education Department at the National Theatre in 1986, with Tim McInnerny in the title role; then, two years later, came the production appraised in detail here – *King Lear* for the RSC, first staged at The Other Place in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1988, and at the Almeida Theatre, London, in 1989. Nesta Jones recently retired as Professor and Director of Research at Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance, and was previously Reader in Theatre Arts at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Key terms: Royal Shakespeare Company, The Other Place, Almeida Theatre, educational theatre, Richard Haddon Haines.

I HAD KNOWN of Cicely Berry's work since she joined the RSC in 1969, and I saw Peter Brook's 1970 landmark production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* five times, including a riotous evening at the Aldwych Theatre that marked the company's return from a world tour in 1973. Berry was the voice coach throughout the life of the production and Brook wrote in the 'Foreword' to her first book, *The Voice and the Actor*:

Cicely Berry never departs from the fundamental recognition that speaking is part of a whole: an expression of inner life. She insists on poetry because good verse strikes echoes in the speaker that awaken portions of his deep experience which are seldom evoked in everyday speech. After a voice session with her I have known actors speak not of the voice but of a growth of human relationships. . . . Cicely Berry sees the voice teacher as involved in all theatre's work. She would never try to separate the sound of words from their living context. For her the two are inseparable.²

I used the exercises in this and her later books in my own teaching, and when possible attended workshops run by the RSC.

One, at the Almeida Theatre in 1989, was conducted by Cicely Berry concurrent with performances of her production of *King Lear*. Two decades later as Director of Research at Rose Bruford College (RBC) I invited her to become Patron of the newly established Rose Bruford Centre of Voice and Speech. Berry trained at the Central School of Speech and Drama, where she also taught for several years and had established her own studio before joining the RSC; but she was aware of Rose Bruford's reputation both as a fine speaker of verse and as founder of an institution where she developed her own curriculum for actors and teachers.³

Berry knew and worked at the RSC with many graduates and Fellows of RBC, including Andrew Wade, who was her assistant in the Voice Department at the RSC and succeeded her as Head of Voice; and the actors Stephen Boxer, Ron Cook, Ray Fearon, Greg Hicks, Joseph Millson, and Sheila Reid, all of whom she helped to find their 'authentic voice'. Further links were formed through Lyn Darnley, successor to Wade as Head of

Voice, Text, and Artist Development, who had previously been RBC's Head of Voice for twelve years, and Tess Dignan, RBC's Head of Voice until 2018, and a regular voice coach for the RSC on productions in the last decade.⁴

Cicely Berry, accepting my invitation, 'with great pleasure', wrote that 'I have great respect for the work of the College and the legacy which Rose Bruford left, and to which the College has always been faithful. . . . I think so often our work is not given its due respect.'⁵

To discuss the Centre further I went up to Stratford-upon-Avon on 29 September 2010, where she met me at the Parkway Station to take me to lunch in the town. On the rather 'white-knuckle' ride in – she was famous for her love of speed – I discovered that we had both attended the Eothen School for Girls, in Caterham, Surrey, though many years apart. Over lunch we also discussed the plays in the RSC's current season, all of which I had managed to see earlier in the year; and afterwards Cicely, which she asked me to call her, invited me back to her home for coffee.

The Old School House had a large hall and I saw immediately on the far wall the arresting framed poster of *King Lear* at the Almeida Theatre which she considered to be 'one of the most important things' she had ever attempted. She spoke of the workshops she was currently conducting, set up by the then Artistic Director Michael Boyd for young directors entering the company. This work chimed with the focus of her most recent book, *From Word to Play: a Handbook for Directors*, for which Boyd wrote the 'Foreword':

Her creative impulse, like Shakespeare's, is born out of paradox: the more familiar she has become with her material, the more prepared she is to hurl it into the anarchic air of her rehearsal room. The ruthless rigour of her approach to Shakespeare is matched only by her subversive disdain for received ideas.⁶

Cicely was known in the Company for provoking people into *wanting* to speak: 'Tell me something – speak to me'⁷ was often how she started a conversation with an actor. I found talking to her such an enriching experience

that I asked whether I could interview her about the *King Lear* production and her role as the director. She agreed immediately and it was arranged for early the following year after one of her regular trips to New York where she worked with the off-Broadway Theatre for a New Audience (TFANA).⁸ Anthony Hozier, a Brecht specialist and Emeritus Professor at RBC, who had been very interested in her approach to the play, accompanied me for the interview.

Background at the RSC

The all-male directors that Berry first worked with at the RSC from 1970 were in the main educated at Oxford and Cambridge. Lyn Darnley, familiar with Berry's work with the Company over many years, observed that:

Her approach to language differed from that of Poel-Rylands-Leavis-influenced directors,⁹ though she acknowledged that she learned much from the work of Terry Hands, Nunn, and especially John Barton.¹⁰ As a result of a need to find a complementary approach, she formulated a dissident and non-conformist methodology, often challenging the status quo by disrupting 'smooth speech' through exploring the soundscape, physicalizing language, and releasing the in-built rhythms of the text.¹¹

Trevor Nunn acknowledged her contribution on his watch in the 'Foreword' to *The Actor and The Text*, writing that she had 'an explorer's obsession, a radical fervour, and a philosopher's generosity; she is a voice teacher with a mission. Her uniqueness and authenticity have made her work a fundamental part of the RSC's achievement.'¹²

Colin Chambers, RSC Literary Manager from 1981 to 1997, noted Berry's work with Brook, Nunn, Hands, and Barton in the Royal Shakespeare and Swan Theatres; and when he came to assess the work of Buzz Goodbody and other young directors on Shakespeare and writers such as Edward Bond and David Rudkin at The Other Place,¹³ he also made clear Berry's central role 'in the development, education, and extra-mural work of the company'.¹⁴

Chambers was aware that Berry's voice work 'was not a matter of obtaining fuller

volume and better diction but of engaging with the language itself'; and that she had also to 'help actors respond to the methods of a particular director while keeping true to the actor's own way into the play.' Interestingly, Chambers commented also on the 'tension between the artistic and technical requirements, because meaning was seen as the director's province . . . and some baulk at allowing the voice department to play a greater role than "warming up" the actors and solving vocal problems when they arise.'¹⁵

Preparing the *King Lear* Project

But with the invitation in 1988 from Tony Hill, of the RSC's Education Department, to work on a Shakespeare play in The Other Place, accompanied by open workshops focusing on Shakespeare's language aimed at school, college, and university groups, Chambers recognized that Berry was provided with the opportunity to 'directly transfer . . . her voice work to the stage'.¹⁶

On reflection Berry confessed that she had agreed to the project 'a little nervously' and realized that *King Lear*, the play she had decided to explore,

was an ambitious choice. . . . But I felt it offered wonderful opportunities for the actors to make discoveries. The language of the play is so incredibly expressive and rich; it's the most imaginative piece of work Shakespeare wrote. I also think it's more accessible to young people than the much more complex *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.¹⁷

It meant also, as Chambers had foreseen, that she could 'put into practice all the ideas I have evolved about the speaking of text over the years that I have worked in the Company, about which I have written in *The Actor and his Text*, and I could take those ideas right through into performance'.¹⁸ The project was announced in a press release on 17 June 1988 in the *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, in which Berry explained:

Through rehearsal and public workshops we will focus our attention on the language of the play and the demands Shakespeare makes on the actor.

There is a formality of rhythm and music in the language and an extravagance of image, all of which must be honoured, but the actor must make it real to the modern ear; it must be appropriate to now.

Once Berry had decided upon *King Lear*, she phoned her great friend the playwright Edward Bond, 'and he said to me he always felt it was a play about people getting on trains and off trains with a lot of luggage'.¹⁹ This idea became Berry's central image which was explored fully in rehearsal.

She had only 'a handful of actors' available to her, and as it was not a contractual obligation, she was dependent on them working in a voluntary capacity. It is probable that all those who volunteered relished the opportunity to work more closely with Berry, given that she was also directing the play, but she considered herself 'extremely lucky . . . that this group of actors wanted to work, and to commit their time to the workshop sessions, and the casting fell out as it did'. And she felt particularly fortunate to have Richard Haddon Haines, 'a tremendous South African actor (who) seemed to me absolutely right for the part of Lear'.²⁰

As she was gathering the actors, Berry also approached the designer Chris Dyer with whom she had previously worked as director and designer on *Hamlet* at the NT, and as voice coach and designer since 1975 at the RSC. Dyer was available and keen to be involved in the project, happy to work 'very simply and on a small budget'.²¹ Berry's emphasis on simplicity came from wanting 'to root it in the early story of Leir'.²² I wanted very much to get a sense of the land, of the space between the castles . . . of the nameless inhabitants of the land. And . . . of the travelling to be done.²³ Before rehearsals they discussed projecting images and words on the walls of the theatre, but these ideas had to be scrapped for lack of time; so Berry 'made lists of the images in the play that grabbed me'²⁴ and sent them to Dyer.

Dyer was aware of the limitations and possibilities of The Other Place, where an audience can be 'on one, two, three, or four sides, in the middle, upstairs, downstairs, or even on a Stratford walkabout', but he

recognized that because this was ‘principally a voice project it was important that actors had access to all parts of the theatre’.

A Design for a Divided Nation

He decided on a central acting platform that raised up the actors to a halfway point between the two audience levels, thus giving them ‘more command over the whole space’. The stage platform became the map of the land that Lear divides into three at the start of the play, which would then split in the full force of the storm to represent a simultaneous rending of country and Lear’s mind.

Having found this central visual image Dyer attempted with the set and costumes ‘to get a period effect’ – essentially of the twelfth century – ‘with modern materials’. The platform was finished in concrete which ‘gives a sense of massiveness, it is cold and unforgiving, it is like stone. Broken concrete conjures up tragic images of Beirut, Mexico City, or our own city centre wastelands.’ The platform and the mechanism that facilitated its break-up were constructed in the RSC workshop and Dyer was at pains to explain that the technicians’ ‘particular skill lies in the fact that there is only the one chance, no time, and no money for prototype [which] means that it has to work as it is’.²⁵

Dyer was aware that an ‘important part of period costume design is to relate the period to today’s perception of dress’, particularly regarding the specificity of character. An experimental fitting confirmed that:

A modern warrior image is available with sports and leisure wear which is worn with great freedom and much customizing. . . . The basic kit consisted of tracksuit trousers and skirts from M&S, grey knitted jumpers from Burtons, hooded sweatshirts from Fentons, baseball boots, vests, gloves etc. from various markets, and warehouse coats from Denny’s.²⁶

The actors were able to wear the costumes as they were assembled and personalized during rehearsals which greatly enhanced their characterization, and the familiarity assisted freedom and physical articulation.

The production budget was £8,000, and in addition to the materials for set and costumes

The Cast

in alphabetical order

David Acton	Duke of Cornwall
Desmond Barrit	Earl of Gloucester
Maureen Beattie	Cordelia
Joan Blackham	Goneril
Stephen Gordon	Duke of Burgundy/ Old Man/Doctor
Paul Greenwood	Earl of Kent
Richard Haddon Haines	Lear
Peter Lennon	Duke of Albany
Patrick Miller	Fool
James Purefoy	Edgar
Edward Rawle-Hicks	France/Oswald
Ken Shorter	Gentleman/Captain
Patrick Robinson	Edmund
Amanda Root	Cordelia
Ken Shorter	Captain
David Solomon	Edmund
Jill Spurrier	Regan
Cicely Berry	Director
Katie Mitchell	Assistant Director
Chris Dyer	Designer
Tim Oliver	Sound
Lesley Hutchison	Fight Arranger

there were sound and lighting costs, fees for the movement coach, fight director, and sound operator, and ongoing rehearsal expenses. This was a full budget for *The Other Place*, but it was still a challenge to produce this huge play in a small space with such limited means.

Berry approached Tim Oliver from the RSC Sound Department to create a soundscape that would suggest Lear’s hundred knights and augment other elements in the play – although, she insisted, not through naturalistic sounds but through words that would reverberate and echo; and despite his heavy schedule on other productions he was intrigued and readily agreed to be involved. Katie Mitchell, then an Assistant Director at the RSC, fulfilled that role for Berry, making an immense contribution to the rehearsal process and its detailed documentation. The project was also supported by the RSC’s movement teacher

The Education Department compiled a folder comprising ‘a variety of materials’ which they hoped would be of interest to the

teachers and students who attended the performance and workshops. It contained details of the company, Berry's notes on direction, Katie Mitchell's account of the actors creating 'The Storm', Dyer on designing set and costumes, an extract from Darby's rehearsal log, and Oliver on the soundscape, together with a number of rehearsal photographs featuring actors and the workshop technicians building the set.²⁷

Keys in the Text

Gloucester's words here were for Berry the central lines of the play:

So distribution should undo excess,
And each man have enough. (IV, i)

Guided by these lines, she believed that *King Lear* was not only the greatest play ever written, but for her also

a great Marxist play, for I do not believe it is a play about Lear getting old and losing his wits – that makes it sentimental. I believe Lear goes on a journey from the first being ruler of a kingdom, then being rejected by his daughters, through madness on the heath, to finally realizing that he is but a man – like any other, and that he has not fulfilled his duty as a man.²⁸

In support of this view Berry cited four key speeches.

1. *Lear's opening speech:*

Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.
Give me the map there. Know that we have
divided

In three our kingdom; and 'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburdened crawl towards death. (I i)

2. *Lear's resolve after he has been disempowered by both Goneril and Regan:*

I will do such things –
What they are yet I know not; but they shall be
The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep.
No, I'll not weep.
I have full cause of weeping; but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
Or ere I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad! (II, iv)

3. *As he experiences the height of the storm Lear sends the Fool into the hovel, and his realization*

of what poverty really means is witnessed by Kent:

In, boy, go first. – You houseless poverty
Nay, get thee in. I'll pray and then I'll sleep.

Exit the Fool.

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend
you

From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heaven more just. (III, iv)

4. *Later, in the same scene, Lear on seeing Edgar in his disguise as Poor Tom, recognizes that he too has nothing. He sheds the last remnants of his kingly garments and embraces his nakedness:*

Is man no more than this? Consider him well.
Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide,
the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha!
Here's three on's are sophisticated. Thou art the
thing itself! Unaccommodated man is no more
but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art.
Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here.

He tears off his clothes.

Berry also specified two further lines 'which always remain with me': Lear's 'Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?' (III vi), and Edgar's 'The worst is not, / So long as we can say "This is the worst"' (IV, i).

The Approach to Rehearsals

In her notes on direction Berry described the 'normal course of rehearsal of a Shakespeare play in Stratford' where actors 'are given at the outset quite specific concepts of place, time, costume, and setting. So that when they start rehearsing much has been decided.' She continued that when she worked with actors on voice during rehearsals many decisions had been made already about character, motive, and meaning; and although this is understandable in the formal processes of productions for the RST and Swan Theatre, she asserted that options were narrowed 'so much by deciding what a text means before we have experienced the speaking of it'.²⁹

So on this occasion Berry wanted 'to approach the play by speaking it first, finding the movement and texture of the language, its rhetoric, listening to what it says to us, and coming to conclusions about character, place, and relationships afterwards'. She believed that it is not possible to fully understand Shakespeare intellectually; to do so it has to be spoken aloud, 'to allow for its ambivalence'.³⁰

Berry defined her objectives for the primary focus of the project and her approach to the text:

1) To explore the movement of the language as fully as possible, the movement of thought, the imagery and rhetoric, and relate this directly to the actor's process: i.e. the finding of motive, relationship, and character.

2) To try to find a way of making this process clear to an audience, not by teaching or demonstrating, but perhaps by putting them into a slightly different relationship with the action . . . by trying to get them to listen with a slightly different attention.³¹

Berry was concerned that the actors needed to make the audience not only understand what they are saying and feeling, 'but also to hear the means by which they are saying it'. She believed that 'in this particular political climate of fast food, fast selling, and its emphasis on facts', people are interested only in literal meaning and no longer hear the music of language: it is the poetry that 'takes us into a world beyond literal sense'.³²

As this was an educational project, Berry was released from commercial pressures, but constrained by other factors including the availability of the actors. For example, Lear and the Fool were understudying Prospero and Ariel and as the press night of *The Tempest* was delayed by two weeks the actors' rehearsal time on the *Lear* project was cut by the same amount. Moreover, the actor cast as Kent had to withdraw for family reasons and Paul Greenwood took over the role three weeks into rehearsal.

From the start Berry had recognized that she would have 'to walk quite a fine line' between fulfilling the requirements of an educational project that looked at text 'in a slightly different way', while also presenting it as a

realized production with all the attendant demands and expectations.³³

Rehearsals and Performance

There were only four clear weeks to rehearse, with certain aspects of the process inevitably slow: listening to the words; physicalizing images to determine the emotional root of character; discovering the interaction between language and authority; identifying the humour in the play; and finding how to use the space. But eventually two company exercises became pivotal in defining the relationship between language and movement, establishing the pattern of action, and determining the style of performance.

For the first two weeks of rehearsal Berry worked regularly with the whole cast on the 'Storm Scene' (III, ii). 'It is the language that takes us into the world of the play and therefore it's crucial that we come together and speak it together.'³⁴ In her documentation of the process Katie Mitchell described the way in which Haines would read Lear's first two speeches – 'Blow, winds . . .' and 'Rumble thy bellyful . . .' while Berry gave instructions to the other actors: 'Repeat out loud any words that catch your imagination; mime the images in the speeches; run around the space repeating the words that are violent.'

After the exercises this communal activity continued, the discussion focusing on shared understanding of the violence and physicality of Lear's language. Mitchell noted, however, that 'this method of working . . . also threw into relief the fact that the storm needed to be a concrete force with which Lear was in conflict'; and the decision was eventually made to 'make it somehow animate' through voice, language, and physicalization.³⁵

At the end of the second week Berry ran the whole play 'in order to clarify the story line and to work out the characters' journeys – literal and emotional'. She gave the actors three instructions:

1. No one was allowed to leave the space.
2. All the journeys that took place (in between, during scenes etc.) were to be presented in the space.

3. Any scenes that happened simultaneously in time were to be played simultaneously in the space.

Then 'Cicely went to individual actors and gave them additional tasks, e.g. the Fool had to tell at least two 1988 jokes at different points during the run.'

Although not all lines had been learned and some scenes not thoroughly rehearsed, the result was instructive for the company:

Lear was thrown off centre stage and scenes kept erupting all over the place, e.g. as Gloucester was led by the Old Man (IV, i) and their scene started, Cordelia, standing a couple of feet away, began 'Alack 'tis he . . .' (IV, iv), Kent and the Gentleman discussed Lear's plight (IV, iii), and Goneril and Regan squabbled (IV, ii) at the other end of the room, whilst the Fool hung himself.³⁶

Stage manager Rachael Whitteridge had already gathered suitcases and bags 'to accentuate the theme of travel through the play', but was now asked by Berry to collect 'lots of rags, cardboard boxes, weeds, twigs, greenery, and any other rubbish' that she could find and bring to the theatre.³⁷

Physicalizing the Storm

The need for these items became evident during the run, in particular the storm scene which Mitchell remembered 'took us all aback'. Initially, to make the sounds of the storm, the actors used the exercise of repeating words from Lear's speech, 'Blow winds . . .', but significant actions and additional words began to emerge:

Cordelia who (since she's left for France in Act I Scene i) had been sitting on the edge of the carpet writing letters to Kent, made Lear a crown of privet leaves, set it on his head . . . and then started to repeat her lines from Act I Scene i; Kent discovered a plant sprayer . . . and started to spray Lear with water; Oswald also sprinkled water over him from a discarded coffee cup; and the whole company . . . bombarded [him] with objects – plants, leaves, boxes, whatever came to hand; the Fool tried to protect Lear from these missiles whilst Albany circled him playing a penny whistle he had found. Whilst all this was happening Edgar crept under the carpet and erected the hovel using a walking stick, and Lear, white

with anger, kicked all the objects that landed near to him out of his path.³⁸

As often happens in rehearsal, the company had 'discovered the key to the storm, quite incidentally'; and over the following days they orchestrated the storm using the various outcomes of the exercise, adding and refining as the rehearsals progressed. 'Richard Haines suggested that he repeat "Blow winds . . ." twice . . . to allow the storm its full impact at the same time as keeping the scene itself clear and audible.' This was achieved by the actors toning down 'the cacophony' during the speech's second iteration. Later in the rehearsal period Maureen Beattie 'suggested that the actors repeat lines in character . . . to vocalize what was going on in Lear's head'. Mitchell gives the following three lines as examples:

CORDELIA: 'So young my lord and true.'

FOOL: 'Can you make use of nothing, Nuncle?'

GENTLEMAN: 'The Fool hath much pined away.'

This resulted in all other storm 'sounds' being cut in the second iteration and the actors 'singing' out their lines while assailing Lear with soft greenery. Mitchell concludes her account: 'Little by little we pieced the storm together. The final shape, which is never the same twice, remains true to the actors' inventiveness in the initial exercise and our continuing work with Cicely on the language.'³⁹

Dyer's vision and realization of the concrete stage platform and its spectacular transformation was integral to the staging and impact of this central scene. The opening location represented 'a kind of map war room that everyone could assemble round while Lear and his daughters trampled all over it'.⁴⁰ This configuration remained for the interior castle scenes that followed until the action moved to the heath and the onset of the storm. While the storm raged in nature and Lear's mind – created as described by the entire company – the pieces of the map broke and fell apart: an earth-shifting moment. Alycia Smith-Howard recalled this critical point:

Kent entered from upstage right and the Gentleman entered downstage left as the scene proceeded and the noises grew louder, Kent and the Gentleman climbed on to the platform to be nearer one another. Immediately they shook hands – *Kent*: ‘I will go seek the King.’ *Gentleman*: ‘Give me your hand.’ (III, i, 50–1) – and exited, there was a flash of lightning and a huge blast of thunder as the platform began to crash. The floor cracked into three huge sections immediately before the Fool and Lear entered the space.⁴¹

The resulting fragmentation which metaphorically represented a divided nation and Lear’s altered state of mind, also physically created different levels and planes on which the scenes located on the heath, roads, cliffs, and beaches, were subsequently played.

Tim Oliver’s work on the soundscape also came into focus here. Having rejected an initial idea of utilizing ‘abstract’ white noise as a background device, Oliver took his lead from Berry by exploring and using the words of the text in a variety of levels and registers, and then processed them through technical devices – another example of happenstance in rehearsal:

We even recorded the vocal warm-up beforehand and out of this came the opening sounds of the show. At one point, during a take, one of the actors sneezed; this became the noise which accompanies Gloucester’s blinding!

Apparently, once loaded into a digital sampler, ‘almost anything is possible’. The sound was slowed down or speeded up to alter pitch; played backwards as well as forwards; distorted and mixed; edited to shorten or looped to lengthen; modulated or phased; reverb and echo added – ‘all infinitely variable’.⁴²

Inhabiting the Whole Theatre

It was fitting that in this context the sound augmentation was all initiated by words and vocal expression. In a rehearsal of the storm scene Heather Neill realized: ‘Except for the soft resonance of an ornamental gong, the sources of it are all entirely human – blowing, light whistling, finger-tapping – from the entire cast crouched around the acting area.’⁴³

One striking feature of the process and performance was the rendition in German of Cordelia’s speech in IV, iv, 1–6 (‘Alack, ‘tis he’), in order to free the actor/character’s emotion from the constraints of the spoken word. Berry drew on her experience here of working with a group of actors in Hamburg on a German translation of this particular speech: ‘because of the didactic sound of the German language’, it was

difficult . . . for those . . . actors to free themselves from the functional meaning of the words in order to find the quality of the thought, and how the thought moves and changes through the speech. We sang out and danced through the list of weeds . . . to take those words beyond the functional list, and to make them relate to the tactile nature of the images themselves.⁴⁴

Berry adopted a similar approach here:

For Cordelia, her images of the healing properties of nature are totally to do with the way she looks on life: they are a compression of her spiritual state. The images are not a description of how [she] feels: they are an essential part of [her] expression. They are therefore not poetic elaboration, not there for an effect. They are necessary, and part of the vigour of the language.⁴⁵

The handwritten lines in English and their German translation were inserted into the prompt book at the appropriate point.

The actors benefited immensely from Lesley Hutchison’s input, which Berry considered to be ‘beyond value’ as she believed that ‘the connection between movement and voice work is vital’. And Malcolm Ransom’s expertise and experience was also invaluable in arranging the all-important fights, which proved to be exceptionally exciting, given the size of the space and the proximity of the audience. The configuration in the theatre was important to Berry, who wanted the actors to inhabit the whole theatre in order to provide the audience with an auditory and physical interactive experience. She particularly praised Mitchell’s contribution, which was ‘tremendous, both in practical terms, and in the amount of support she has given’.⁴⁶

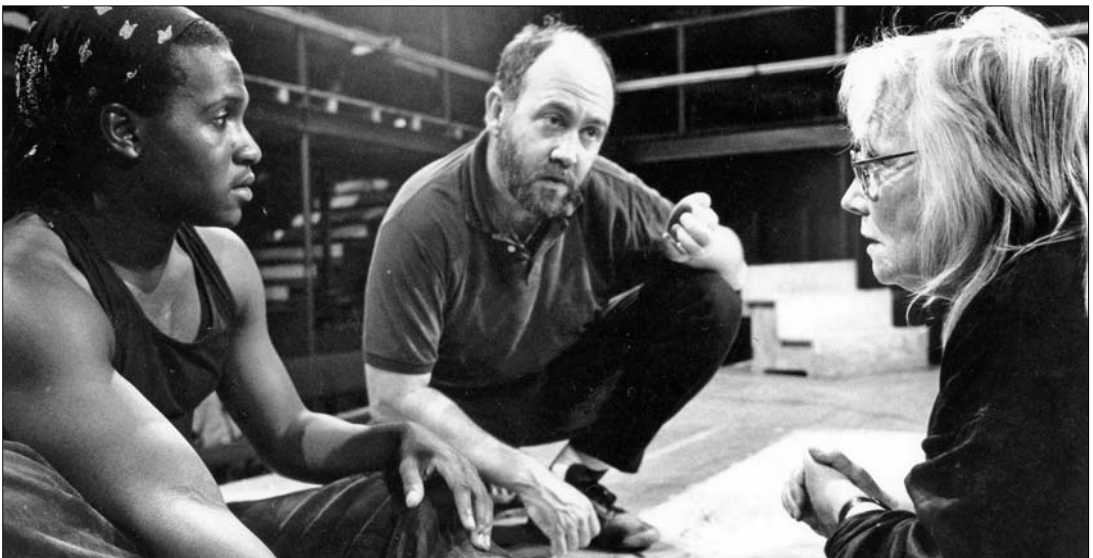
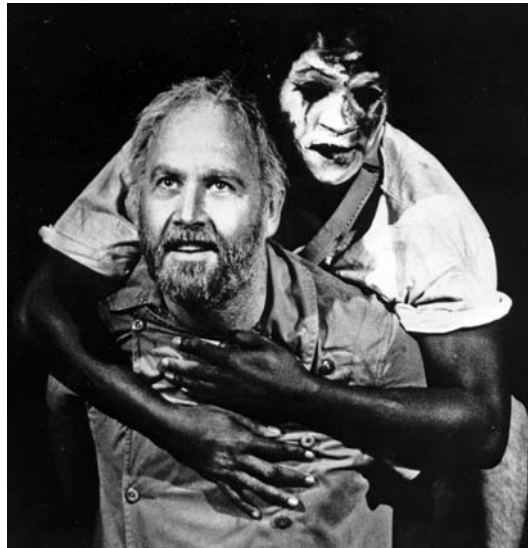
Although Berry admired and appreciated all her actors, she paid special tribute to Richard Haddon Haines:



Left: The Other Place (TOP), the RSC's studio theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon from 1974 to 1989. Photo: Joe Cocks Studio Collection © Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

Centre: Lear (Richard Haddon Haines) and the Fool (Patrick Miller). Photos © Rachel Morton.

Bottom: Cicely Berry (right) working with Patrick Miller (Fool) and Richard Haddon Haines (Lear). Photo © Rachel Morton.



He entered into the work in a most remarkable way. At the beginning he gave out a character with a great zest for life, who bonded strongly with his knights: it was indeed a very masculine world, something I think is very interesting in terms of his relationship with his daughters. His relationship with the Fool . . . was particularly real and tender. Throughout . . . we felt his inner strength: he was never made to feel comfortable . . . but he responded always in a very positive way. It was particularly good because we were never conscious of him playing an old man, rather someone who loved life, albeit not in the prime of his life: and when it came to the storm, even in his madness, he fought it. With his final reunion with Cordelia, it was never sentimental, but rather a very positive moment.⁴⁷

It is evident that the performance discovered, developed, and incorporated its several elements in an organic process; and throughout Berry remained true to her intention by enabling the actors, and eventually the audience, to 'hear where the language takes us'.

The Workshops for Schools

Edward Rawle-Hicks, who played both Oswald and the King of France, confirmed – 'I love going into the text in such detail' – and could not wait to take part in the workshops for schools, as it was apparent that all the cast were keen to do, 'not necessarily the case when a major subsidized company launches a production'.⁴⁸

Two of the workshops took the exploration of language further. 'Our Changing Language' examined the development of modern speech patterns by playing the Goneril/Regan/Lear exchange in II, iv, in three different time periods and acting styles – Elizabethan, 1950s, and 1980s, the latter as television sitcom rather than theatre – thereby illustrating the changes over the years in vocal communication. In 'Comedy in *King Lear*' Berry examined the Fool's dialogue, for which she had invited Maureen Beattie's father, the Scottish stand-up comedian Johnny Beattie, to join the workshop. The encounter proved revelatory for all the participants.

Now Johnny Beattie had seen little Shakespeare, but as we worked through the scenes between

Lear and the Fool he was astonished, for as he listened to the lines in the text the Fool uses as he tries to get a laugh out of Lear, he recognized them as being in the same rhythms as those he uses now to get a laugh from the audience today – three and a half centuries later. I think this tells us something quite central to our reaction to language: that the rhythm of language affects us in a very deep way, and that we understand something through that rhythm which may be outside our full literal comprehension. . . . For me, this was a very important discovery, for I think it has a deeply profound message for us now as we bring Shakespeare into the twenty-first century. For it is more than just about speaking the text of a play, it tells us something about our innate reaction to the rhythm of language as we speak, and how that rhythm has a direct effect on us.⁴⁹

Once the project was up and running, Berry left her audience with these thoughts:

I still would like to go further with the work, to explore ways of presenting language, so that it is both personal and emotive, and objective at the same time. . . . There is much to be talked about with regards to speaking Shakespeare now: how rhetorical do you expect it to be; how do we relate the language to the time we live in; and, with so much film and television acting in our consciousness, what is appropriate to now. I think these are things that we should talk about.⁵⁰

The London Transfer

The *King Lear* Project at The Other Place was outstandingly successful and for Berry and the company an 'exceptionally creative experience collectively'.⁵¹ Lyn Darnley observed that 'educational audiences allow greater freedom to focus on social and political themes and Berry's *King Lear* undoubtedly embraced aspects of family dynamics, responsibility, justice, and the need for a significant audience'.⁵²

However, although the emphasis had been on the educational aspects of the venture Gregory Doran, then a young director with the company, appreciated the innovative approach and quality of the 'startlingly fresh production, viscerally connected to the power of words, which honoured the violence and physicality of the text'⁵³ and led to a deserved transfer the following year for a run at the Almeida Theatre in London, a venue which



Left: Gloucester (Desmond Barrit) and Edgar as Poor Tom (James Purefoy).

Below: Edgar, Gloucester, and Lear.

Photos © Rachel Morton.



had been occasionally used by the RSC for experimental and new work.

Inevitably there were some cast changes owing to other professional commitments – for example, Amanda Root replaced Maureen Beattie as Cordelia, and Patrick Robinson replaced David Solomon as Edmund – but the core group remained for the restaging in an equally welcoming and appropriate environment. It is instructive, however, that Sheonagh Darby noted that the blocking in the prompt book was ‘rehearsal blocking’ which ‘changed quite a lot’; indeed, she had difficulty in keeping up with the fluidity of the staging from rehearsal to rehearsal.

She gives examples of sentences called out by actors in III, ii, and then ones that were ‘used’ with the proviso in capital letters ‘THESE CAN CHANGE!’ She notes also, ‘During the scene most of the company start making storm noises. A few of them run round at the very beginning. I’m very sorry but I never got it blocked.’ Darby’s prompt book was exemplary in its detail but her illuminating comments confirmed Mitchell’s assertion that the final shape of the storm scene ‘was never the same twice’. Moreover, Darby warned her successor that the actors would probably change their blocking ‘from performance to performance’⁵⁴ evidencing their ability to remain inventive and spontaneous throughout the London run.

The Critical Reception

The RSC’s main house productions were then in residence at the Barbican Theatre and the Almeida hosted what amounted to six weeks of one-off fringe events, of which *King Lear* was the centrepiece. In anticipation of the production Betty Caplan wrote a short piece for the *Guardian* which credited Berry’s contribution as being largely responsible for ‘the company’s lucid approach to language, something which has made Shakespeare accessible to a far wider community than many would have thought possible’. Caplan noted Berry’s work in schools and prisons and the powerful role that Shakespeare plays at a time when language is ‘losing its sensibility’.

In response to a question about the women in the play Berry responded:

They want power because they have nothing without it. Some people in the play have compassion and some don’t. . . . Cordelia has it and grows infinitely richer as a result. The play works on three levels, the mythological, the political, and the human, and it’s a director’s task to see that all three operate.⁵⁵

Heather Neill introduced the project in the *Times Educational Supplement*, citing Berry as a ‘powerhouse of encouragement’, her non-authoritarian style, welcoming ideas from the cast, and ‘allowing time for some experiments to fail’. In interview with Neill, Berry elaborates on this last point: ‘Don’t think we haven’t had difficulties. It’s a method that can lead to people getting cross.’ But actors are still drawn to work with her, and Berry affirmed that ‘Theatre should be a collaborative, creative process, people coming together and interacting.’⁵⁶

Many of the critics from the national press who reviewed Berry’s production were impressed, commenting on the attention to the play’s language and the effective simplicity of the staging. In the *Daily Telegraph* (19.9.89) Charles Osborne’s ‘major point’ was that ‘this production brings a great play alive with such immediacy that one feels nothing intervening between oneself and Shakespeare’; and John Peter in the *Sunday Times* (24.9.89) focused on the language: ‘The clarity of the whole production ensures that the words, simply spoken, explode like words in a combustion chamber.’

Martin Hoyle (*Financial Times*, 18.9.89) exemplified the most significant aspects of the production:

The words have a terrible resonance. Never has Kent’s departing couplet, ‘I have a journey, sir, shortly to go; / My Master calls me, I must not say no’, set off such almost religious echoes and reverberations with its simplicity. Whole scenes make more sense than normal. The passage where the disguised Edgar pretends to lead his blinded father to the edge of a cliff can seem both pointless and interminable. For once Edgar’s almost throw-away explanation (‘Why do I trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it’) utterly convinces. The episode falls perfectly into place. . . .

Chris Dyer's set is backed by a catwalk, steps on either side, centred on a low platform that falls with a crash to provide the rocky unevenness of savage nature. The exterior of Mad Tom's hovel is that familiar architectural item of recent years, an edifice of cardboard boxes and blankets. . . . James Purefoy's Edgar [is] unexaggerated in feigned madness [and] unpretentiously heroic.

According to Irving Wardle (*The Times*, 18.9.1989),

Richard Haddon Haines plays Lear as a vigorously genial aristocrat who responds to his early grievances by erupting into paroxysms of ineffectual wrath. The last of these outbursts coincides with the storm, after which he reverts to down-to-earth speech, as though the storm had been only a fantasy. Throughout the show, abrupt descents from sustained tone to conversational expression set the words on fire. And when Haines and Amanda Root's Cordelia link arms and set off for prison swapping cheerful matter-of-fact talk, the spectator supplies the tears.

Michael Billington offered two views in separate newspapers. In the *Guardian* (19.9.89):

Patrick Miller's Fool, with clownish white make-up superimposed on his black features, brings out not only the character's astringency but also his overwhelming pity. It is a stirring evening that proves several things: that great plays currently work best in small spaces, that truth to Shakespeare involves capturing precisely his antithetical mixture of harshness and hope, and that understanding what you are saying is the key that unlocks Shakespearean word-music. 'Was this well spoken?' enquires Lear.' Indeed it was.

And in the *Herald Tribune* (20.9.89):

At a time when standards of Shakespearean verse-speaking are under attack, it is reassuring to report that this production . . . is a model of clarity and comprehension. Music, sound effects, and settings are kept to a bare minimum so that Shakespeare's language works its engrossing magic. . . . Above all [Berry] reminds us that goodness constantly reasserts itself over bestial evil. No sooner have we seen the appalling blinding of Gloucester . . . than Cornwall's anonymous serving-man is 'thrilled with remorse'. And later, when Goneril's husband tells her 'You are not worth the dust which the rude wind blows in your face,' the words are spoken with quiet, steely emphasis that betoken genuine moral revulsion.

Ultimately this is an optimistic *Lear*. It is also an ensemble one rather than an old-fashioned dis-

play of star power. Richard Haddon Haines is a tetchy, ironic, palpably foolish king who movingly learns, at last, what love means. But there are equally good performances from Amanda Root as a fiery, businesslike Cordelia, from James Purefoy as a watchful, grieving Edgar, and from Peter Lennon as an Albany who embodies instinctive compassion. But carefully husbanding its resources and by roping its climbers together, this marvellous production places a triumphant flag on the Everest that is *King Lear*.

Cicely Berry felt that the production's success proved the value of her approach: 'It made people realize this was a proper way of working on language. After that it was taken seriously as part of the RSC's rehearsal process.'⁵⁷ She was nominated for the *Evening Standard* Award for Best Director, along with Declan Donnellan, William Gaskell, Peter Hall, Garry Hynes, Nicholas Hytner, Adrian Noble, and Trevor Nunn. She observed: 'In the end it was Nick Hytner who was preferred. But at least there was a nomination.'⁵⁸

Afterword

The interview with Cicely Berry, on 25 February 2011 in the Old School House, confirmed and echoed many of the points about interpretation and methodology already made above. She stressed that 'So distribution should undo excess / And each man have enough' was not only to her 'the centre line of the play' but also 'the bottom line . . . That's why to me it's a Marxist play'; and when Lear says in the storm 'Here I stand your slave, / A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man' (III,ii), without pomp, ceremony, and the trappings of kingship, 'he comes to his own conclusion that that's all he is.

It is one person, you yourself, who is important in the whole state [and] we should organize our . . . nationhood and country to bring us down to brass tacks as it were so that everybody was equal.

Cicely described some of the exercises she had done to connect thought with the shape of the language, using as example Edmund's soliloquy, 'Thou nature art my goddess' (I, ii), to trace the character's thought process through the structure of the speech. 'So there

was a great sense of form and the same with Edgar'; and the relationship between Lear and his three daughters was explored

round a table with about ten chairs, the three sisters and Lear sitting so there were spaces in between and as he asked them how much they did love him they could move to one chair at a time towards or away from the person speaking as they felt and it brought home to them how much they wanted to make an impression on him.

Physicalizing the text in this way helped the actor to experience that 'thinking becomes an action . . . part of the whole body'. Now, as 'we're cool in the way we speak it's quite difficult for actors to find that physicality of language.'

And she picked up on some of the points about training young directors that she and I had discussed the previous year: 'I think that directors now don't really sit in the language enough or get actors to really sit in that language and make it for themselves and find a common language there which brings them all together.' She is concerned that directors do not 'find time in themselves to feel what the language does to them as they speak it – how it acts inside them as it were.' When asked if she thought a parallel process could take place also in the audience, she agreed and said she believed Shakespeare's actors would have read their lines but reading was not central to their understanding of them.

It was the sound of them that caught their imaginations so much [and] they were very sensitive to the actual making of the word and the sounding of the word . . . and that sensitivity must also have been present in the audience.

When asked if the world at the end of the play, in which there is healing, gives grounds for optimism, as some reviewers picked up – does the play allow the world to heal itself and that is true of our world? – Cicely agreed, 'Oh yes I think so. There is hope. It's really to do with Cordelia and also Edgar.'

Finally, when asked whether the production had been a radical way of working, Cicely responded, 'I think it was. . . . I think it still is.' When pressed to affirm that it was a landmark production she replied modestly,

'I believe that actually, I don't like saying it but I do believe that.' When I said I hoped the interview would be published in some form, she replied: 'That means a lot to me actually.'⁵⁹

I felt hugely privileged to be invited into Cicely's home and honoured that she gave the interview to me and Anthony. This article then is my tribute to Cicely Berry, a person of rare vision and courage, an inspirational figure, and a unique theatre practitioner.

Notes and References

1. *Voice and the Actor* (London: Harrap, 1973); *Your Voice and How to Use it Successfully* (London: Virgin Books, 1975); *The Actor and His Text* (London: Harrap, 1987); *Text in Action* (London: Virgin Books, 2001); *From Word to Play* (London: Oberon, 2008); Cicely Berry with Andrew Wade, *The Working Shakespeare Library*, 5 DVDs and workbooks, hosted by Jeremy Irons with American and British actors (Working Arts Library and Applause, 2004); *Where Words Prevail: an In-Depth Look at the Work of Cicely Berry, Voice Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company*, DVD (Sojourner Media, 2005), according to Michael Attenborough 'a brilliantly constructed documentary about Cicely Berry, a visionary, a complete original in her field'.

2. Peter Brook, 'Foreword', to Berry, *Voice and the Actor*, op. cit., p. 3.

3. Bruford was associated particularly with the poetry of W. B. Yeats, for whom she also learned the harp to accompany the speaking of the poems; and John Masefield, the Poet Laureate, who became a Friend of the College after running a successful theatre and teacher training course at the Royal Academy of Music. She founded the Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama in the academic year 1950–51.

4. Dignan was voice coach for *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Love's Labour's Won* (*Much Ado About Nothing*) in the 2014–15 season at the RST, and when the productions transferred to the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, London, in 2015. She is now Head of Voice at Shakespeare's Globe, London.

5. Letter to the author, 30 July 2010.

6. Michael Boyd, 'Foreword', to Berry, *From Word to Play*, op. cit., p. vii.

7. The author in conversation with Michael Corbidge, RSC Senior Voice Practitioner, who worked closely with Cicely Berry from 2011.

8. The Theatre for a New Audience is a non-profit-making theatre in New York City dedicated to language and ideas of writers; to a dialogue between Shakespeare and a range of classical and contemporary playwrights. TFANA was the first American theatre company to perform at the RST.

9. William Poel, actor, manager, and dramatist, who redefined the presentation of Shakespeare's plays in the 1880s; George 'Dadie' Rylands, scholar, actor, and director with the Marlowe Society at the University of Cambridge, where he was a Fellow from 1927, and Chairman of the Cambridge Arts Theatre 1946–82; F. R. Leavis, literary critic from the early to mid-twentieth

century who taught at Downing College, University of Cambridge.

10. All directors at the RSC. Nunn and Hands were also Artistic Directors of the Company: Nunn 1968–78, when he became joint Artistic Director with Hands until 1986, after which Hands became sole executive.

11. Lyn Darnley, 'Cicely Berry and RSC Voice Pedagogy', in 'Artist Development and Training in the Royal Shakespeare Company: a Vision for Change in British Theatre Culture', PhD thesis, Department of Drama, Theatre, and Dance, Royal Holloway, University of London (Open Access online), p. 75.

12. Trevor Nunn, 'Foreword', to Berry, *The Actor and the Text*, op.cit., reprint of 1992, p. 2.

13. The Other Place, basically a tin hut, opened in 1974, the brainchild of the RSC's youngest and only female director. The venue became the site of the Company's most experimental and adventurous work until its closure and demolition in 1989. Not to be confused with the current The Other Place, a thriving venue on the site of the Courtyard Theatre which was built to house the RSC's main-stage work while the RST was undergoing major renovation. True to its heritage, the present TOP is a research centre running workshops connected to all the disciplines employed in the RSC.

14. Colin Chambers, *Inside the Royal Shakespeare Company* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 159.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

17. Jonathan Croall, 'Richard Haddon Haines', in *Performing King Lear* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015), p. 152.

18. Cicely Berry, 'Direction', *The King Lear Project* (Royal Shakespeare Company Education Department), in the Shakespeare Centre Library and Archive, Stratford-upon-Avon, p. 5. Hereafter referred to as 'Folder'.

19. Berry, 'Appendix: King Lear in Retrospect', *From Word to Play*, op. cit., p. 173.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 172–3.

21. Berry, Cicely, 'Direction', Folder, p. 7.

22. Leir was a legendary King of the Britons who would have reigned around the eighth century BC. Shakespeare re-envisioned his story in *King Lear*. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leir_of_Britain>.

23. Berry, 'King Lear and the Commitment to Education: . . . directed by Cicely Berry (1988)', Folder, p. 7–9.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

25. Dyer, Chris, 'Design', Folder, p. 17.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 1–28.

28. Berry, 'Appendix: King Lear in Retrospect', op. cit., p. 173.

29. Berry, 'Direction', Folder, p. 5.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 5. Darnley noted: 'Had [Berry] been educated at Oxford or Cambridge like so many of the directors she worked with, she may not have had the practical understanding of an actor's need to enter the

language physically and vocally as well as to understand it on a cerebral level. It is a combination of her practical training, her personal passion for verse, the individuals and circumstances she encountered in the theatre, which prepared the way for her to evolve a system whereby actors arrive at an understanding of text by physical and vocal engagement of breath and vibration, muscularity, sound, and gesture' (p. 73).

31. Berry, 'Direction', Folder, p. 5–7.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

34. Katie Mitchell, 'The Storm', Folder, p. 12.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. Rachael Whitteridge, 'Stage Managing *King Lear*', Folder, p. 26.

38. Mitchell, 'The Storm', Folder, p. 13.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

40. Dyer, 'Design', Folder, p. 19.

41. Alycia Smith-Howard, 'King Lear, directed by Cicely Berry (1988): King Lear and the Commitment to Education', in *Studio Shakespeare: the Royal Shakespeare Company at The Other Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 45.

42. Tim Oliver, 'Sound', Folder, p. 27.

43. Heather Neill 'Stormy Words', *Times Educational Supplement*, 8 September 1989.

44. Berry, 'Sound and Meaning', *The Actor and His Text*, op. cit., p. 30.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

46. Berry, 'Direction', Folder, p. 10.

47. Berry, 'Appendix: King Lear in Retrospect', *From Word to Play*, op. cit., p. 177–8.

48. Neill, 'Stormy Words', op. cit.

49. Berry, 'Introduction', *From Word to Play*, op. cit., p. 4.

50. Berry, 'Direction', Folder, p. 10.

51. Berry, 'Appendix: King Lear in Retrospect', *From Word to Play*, op. cit., p. 178.

52. Lyn Darnley, 'Cicely Berry and RSC Voice Pedagogy', in 'Artist Development and Training', op. cit.

53. Gregory Doran is the current Artistic Director of the RSC, here quoted in 'Obituary: Cicely Berry', *The Stage*, online at <www.thestage.co.uk/features/obituaries/2018/obituary-cicely-berry-pioneering-vocal-coach-who-transformed-theatre-practice>.

54. The prompt book is in the Shakespeare Centre Library and Archive.

55. Betty Caplan, *Guardian*, 2 September 1989.

56. Neill, 'Stormy Words', op. cit.

57. Berry, 'Appendix: King Lear in Retrospect', *From Word to Play*, op. cit., p. 178.

58. Croall, 'Richard Haddon Haines', in *Performing King Lear*, op. cit., p. 15.

59. Cicely Berry, interviewed by the author and Anthony Hozier at the Old School House, Stratford-upon-Avon, 25 February 2011.