

Document Citation

Title	King Lear
Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1988 Jan 26
Type	article
Language	English English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	King lear, Godard, Jean Luc, 1987

KING LEAR. Written and directed by Jean-Luc Godard, from the play by William Shakespeare. Produced by Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus. Released by Cannon Films. At the Quad, January 22.

FOR KEEPS. Directed by John Avildsen. Written by Tim Kazurinsky and Denise DeClue. Produced by Jerry Belson and Walter Coblenz. Released by Tri-Star.

STACKING. Produced and directed by Martin Rosen. Written by Victoria Jenkins. Released by Spectrafilm. At the Public Theater.

A \$1.4 million production that might find its most passionate local audience at the Kitchen or the Collective for Living Cinema, Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear* is deft, funny, and intermittently exhilarating—a handsomely produced magpie's nest that's as stylized a reading of Shakespeare as Kurosawa's *Ran*, if more subtly pictorial. This polished, cranky assemblage (opening Friday at the Quad), is Godard's first English-language feature; it's the latest in the series of madcap adaptations with which he's deranged the classics of Western Civilization and by far the least tortured.

Lear is the result of a deal cut at 1985 Cannes Film Festival where, according to legend, Godard signed a contract drawn up on a napkin over lunch with Israeli moguls Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus. The idea was a modern-day version of *Lear* to be written by Norman Mailer who—in the absence of Orson Welles and Joseph Losey—would also play the title role, his daughter Kate Miller appearing as Cordelia. It was inevitable that this package would come apart before the wrap; according to Richard Roud's report in *Sight & Sound*, Mailer quit when dirty Godard suggested that *Lear* exhibit “incestuous longings for his daughter.” The Mailers were then replaced by Burgess Meredith and Molly Ringwald (!); with BAM-boy Peter Sellars taking over as dramaturg while playing a representative of the Cannon Cultural Division named William Shakespeare Jr. the Fifth.

Typically self-reflexive, *Lear* opens with a taped phone call from Golan complaining about Godard's unrealized project: “We must make this film. Sooner or later, a clever journalist is going to ask, where is this film? We have talked about it, promoted it... so where is it? The film must be ready for the Cannes film festival.” It was, although the version that materialized might have prompted the producer to cry “how much sharper than a serpent's tooth...,” especially since the line is never used in the movie. Still, if some Godards have been more linear than others, anyone who, after all these years, expects him to cook up a corking good yarn deserves the confusion they get. (As if to reinforce the point, Godard not only narrates *Lear* out of one side of his mouth but appears as Professor Pluggy, wearing a foolscap of sound cables and patchcords.) Elements of *King Lear* are dispersed throughout the proceedings—along with close-ups of Fra Angelica cherubim, images of plastic dinosaurs, references to Virginia Woolf, a half dozen recurring titles (A PICTURE SHOT IN THE BACK; VIRTUE AND POWER; THREE JOURNEYS IN TO KING LEAR), and a crew of tawny young pixies.

Godard's *Lear* supposedly reflects a post-Chernobyl malaise—“a time in which movies and art no longer exist and must be reinvented”—and, although set on the pleasant shores of Lake Geneva, much of it is vintage whine. For openers, a self-satisfied Mailer puts the final touches on his script *Don Learo*, the transposition of *Lear* to gangsterland: “Daddy,” his daughter plaintively asks, “Why are you so interested in the Mafia?” As if this seems insufficiently patriarchal, Godard belabors the situation. Instead of *Lear* having three daughters, Kate has three fathers (Mailer the star, Mailer the father, and him, Jean-Luc): “Too much indeed for this young lady from Provincetown.” The Mailers depart—“he and his daughter, first class; the daughter's boyfriend, economy,” according to the director's nasty formulation—and Meredith winds up playing the Mafia king, ranting about his idols Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lansky with dutiful

Ringwald stiffly in tow. Meanwhile, Sellars is trying to find the title for his next opus: “As You Wish... As You Witch... As You Watch...”

But, however obscured, the play never entirely disappears: *Learo's* older daughters telex their declarations of filial love while Cordelia's transcendent “Nothing” reverberates throughout the movie as the title NO THING. Concluding that “Something [sic] was going on between this old man and this young girl,” the eavesdropping Shakespeare decides to forget the “To-Be-Or-Not-To-Be business” and spin a play out of the juxtaposition of old farts and fresh young things or, as the titles have it, POWER and VIRTUE. Thus, as *Hail, Mary* pondered motherhood, so *Lear* considers daughterhood—and also fatherhood—as a sort of spacial relationship. (It's less prurient than the last few Godards and more sepulchral, filled with references to dead film directors while featuring Godard's own progeny, Léos Carax, in the role of Edgar.)

“Words are one thing and reality is another thing and between them is nothing,” Pluggy maintains and, inasmuch as it's about No Thing, *Lear* virtually forces a formalist appreciation. The crisp use of natural light glorifies the chaste hotel rooms and unremarkable woods characteristic of Godard's Swiss films. (“Nature's above art in that respect.”) Although he does at one point use a Xerox machine as a homemade strobe, the movie's most extraordinary attribute is its densely layered, digitally recorded sound mix. This lush, impeccably precise cacophony of squawking gulls, amplified soup slurps, grunting pigs, beeping car horns, off-speed recorded music, and Godard's hilariously mush-mouthed voice-over could function on its own as musique concret. Heard under optimum conditions, the aural scrapheap is razor sharp and so bright it dazzles your ears—the most perverse thing about this movie is Cannon's decision to release to a theater unequipped for Dolby.

Like many a Godard flick, *Lear* remains insolent, inventive, and light on its feet for about the first hour and then sputters. Except for Woody Allen's prim cameo, the movie more or less ends about the time Shakespeare Jr. turns the action around by proclaiming that he's “reinvented the lines” and “reinvented the plot” and that “now it's up to the characters—or are they actors?” Even more than most Godard, *Lear* is a documentary of performers coping with the enig-

FILM

matic freedom of the master's mise-en-scène. The hapless hunched Sellars, gamely playing a bemused Jean-Pierre Léaud clone in white running shoes and an oversized peacoat, can almost be forgiven his vacuous *Nixon in China*. If Mailer's weirdly oscillating vocal inflections and Woody Allen's obedient line readings are little more than conspicuous consumption, Burgess Meredith seizes his opportunity to growl, mug, and slobber into his sleeve.

Still, the most spectacular (not to mention determined) presence is Molly Ringwald, her pallid complexion unsullied by pancake. Ringwald's quick, California recitations are complemented by her straight and narrow coltish poise. Mouth pulsing like a sea anemone, she runs through her repertoire of darting glances and demure eyebrow flutters. Her scenes offer as brilliant an exercise in superstar behaviorism as any since Edie Sedgwick stole *Vinyl*—it's a chance to fully savor the strangeness of the most natural presence in American movies.