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Somewhere Before

ACT V

*A comic tale in which the attributes of King Lear
and his Fool seem strangely switched*

by Steve Palmer

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Somewhere Before Act V

by Steve Palmer

CHARACTERS:

KING LEAR

THE FOOL

SETTING:

The Heath

PRODUCTION NOTE:

The play is intended to be performed on an empty stage except for a stack of boxes or low platform meant to indicate an outcropping of rock.

Period costuming is not required for this piece but hooded cloaks for both characters are suggested.

Somewhere Before Act V
by Steve Palmer

SETTING: *The Heath.*

AT RISE: *THE FOOL is reclining on a rock as if sleeping. KING LEAR is standing nearby, speculating on his circumstances. Shortly after lights up, THE FOOL stirs as if waking. This captures the attention of KING LEAR.*

LEAR

(Cheerfully)

I see you rouse, Fool. And what a lovely morning!

THE FOOL responds but without opening his eyes, more as if he expects to be dozing off again momentarily.

FOOL

(Yawning)

Forgive me, Sire, I'm curious, which morning could that be? Surely not the one presently dawned upon us, which is to say a morning that finds us fugitives on the Heath, probably lost, and, speaking for myself, tired for lack of even a wink of sleep last night, still wet from last night's tempest, hungry and so thirsty I'd actually settle for a drink of water which, in my opinion, being thirsty for water is the lowest possible human state?

LEAR

(Chuckles)

You again prove the most excellent of fools. Despite our privations, you greet the emerging day with cunning wit.

FOOL

My wit may be the only thing operational at present. Everything else hurts. But if your Majesty had intended your morning greetings to refer to April 2 of last year, the morning I awoke in a soft featherbed in the company of two wenches who had not yet had their fill of me, and with a bottle of wine not yet empty and within easy reach, then yes, I concur with his majesty, it was a truly lovely morning and if you will excuse me, I will continue to lie on this rock outcropping which is at least drier than the ground, and attempt to relive every detail I can possibly recall and maybe even some details that didn't actually happen.

LEAR

(Laughing)

Ever the dissembler. You pretend to be the bawdy reprobate for its comic effect, but I know you to be stoic in your indulgences and more discriminating than many ladies at court might

LEAR (*Cont'd*)

wish. Yet, I acknowledge your present complaints in all but one. Fugitives, yes, I grant you; alas, lost, likely; damp, hungry, thirsty, agreed; but I account your report of a sleepless night: exaggeration. Oft, as I paced the night, and turned to share some diatribe or some new revelation of betrayal with another mortal soul, I observed you slumped on your purchase, unmoving, and therefore deaf to my complaint.

FOOL

It never occurred to you I might be dead? Or wish I was dead? Or playing dead to avoid any such conversation?

LEAR

You swear on oath to me, your king...

FOOL

Not my king exactly. I believe you recently retired, which is why we're in the fix we are in.

LEAR

Then your former king but still current employer...

FOOL

I haven't been paid in weeks and the prospects of getting paid are looking – how shall I say? – grim.

LEAR

My, you do have a sharp tongue this morning. Very well, let me amend our relationship to something more acceptable...

FOOL

More reflective of the truth.

LEAR

... your fellow traveling companion. Do you swear to your fellow traveler that you slept not a wink last night?

Up to this point, THE FOOL has remained prone, perhaps shifting to a more comfortable position, rearranging the cloak around him, lifting his head occasionally, but essentially eyes closed, maintaining behavior that he expects to drop off to sleep momentarily. At this point however, groggy, he comes to a sitting position.

FOOL

Nor does it look like I'll get any sleep this morning. You seem surprised I might've found last night to be sleepless. First, there was the matter of the tempest, a torrential downpour driven by fanatic wind and we lacking shelter; there were, secondly, the cracks of lightning and deafening peals of thunder; but, thirdly, if you still insist on adding it up, there was the man formerly known as King Lear, my boss, but now become Mr. Lear and fellow traveler – though how long we will be traveling together remains to be seen – my current companion, let it be said, spent the entire night ranting at the heavens, cursing, lamenting in abrasive screams his losses, his miseries and in behavior more suitable to a madman, deplored the injustice of the universe; which, unjustly I'll admit, the universe ignored. I just wish I could have done the same.

LEAR

(Sheepish but chuckling)

I'll admit to being a tad overwrought. Even this morning, my voice feels somewhat strained.

(Coughs; clears his throat)

But you know, it felt good to get it all out. This morning I feel completely relieved of stress and anxiety. Who knew such uncivil behavior could be so therapeutic. This is an epiphany. Perhaps I could go on a lecture circuit. And in truth, the Heath is just lovely this morning: bright, glistening with the patina of rain, a fresh, bracing smell.

(Looking around)

A lamentable lack of furniture however. Are you going to hog that rock all to yourself?

THE FOOL moves to one end of the rock, allowing space. LEAR sits, but rather than be side by side, LEAR sits with his back to THE FOOL so that he must speak over his shoulder.

FOOL

Go ahead, have a seat. Now that you're little more emotionally available, we have to give some serious consideration to our next step.

LEAR

Yes, as I paced the last of night into dawn, I ruminated on this very thing. I find I can no longer ignore the discomfort of my heavy garments, still damp from last night's rain. I'm sure you chafe equally as I. What say you, we strip these damp accoutrements from us, lay them out upon the brambles of gorse to dry, then scamper briefly in the sun as God made us.

FOOL

(Carefully dispassionate, as to a child)

Much as I would love to cavort in the nude with your Majesty, and though it would be fulfillment of a long-cherished dream, I think we should postpone that in the interest of more pressing matters.

LEAR

Oh?

FOOL

Our pursuers won't have braved the storm but now that it has passed, they'll be hot on the trail. If they catch us, it will be a coin toss which of us they hang first – or behead, or skewer, or draw and quarter, depending on their inclinations.

LEAR

Rather presumptuous don't you think? I mean, aren't you rather small potatoes compared to me, King in exile?

FOOL

Depends who you're asking. That last night at Goneril's place, I gave her a good roast right to her face as only my sharp tongue and rapier wit can do. You're merely her abusive Dad. I'm the upstart who called her a mare's ass in front of everyone.

LEAR

Pity I missed that.

FOOL

I may also have called her consort, the Duke of Albany, a great zit in need of popping.

LEAR

Did you now?

FOOL

I may have. I don't remember clearly. You know what I'm like when I'm on a roll.

LEAR

To my regret, I am familiar with your verbal excesses. So, you speculate that, in a fury of vengeance, the equine patootie and the over-ripe pustule are in hot pursuit?

FOOL

We shouldn't rule it out.

LEAR

(Shift of mood)

My poor Goneril, where did we go wrong? We doted on her so, the Queen and I. Well, she was the oldest and I admit our favorite. I remember how she once nursed a songbird with a broken wing back to health.

FOOL

She was 12 years old. She's put several people to death since then.

LEAR

So lovely at her wedding... We imagined we'd see a grandchild within the year. We had so hoped for a few grandchildren by this time. I should have given my kingdom to the first daughter to produce offspring. That's what I should've done. I might still have ended up a fugitive but at least I'd be a grandfather.

FOOL

Maybe next time...

LEAR

Then poor Cordelia, how I regret my treatment of that true and steadfast heart. As a child she rarely complained, never begged indulgence. She was quiet, entertained herself, was content to be alone and curled up with a book. Frankly, I sometimes forgot I had a 3rd daughter.

(Sighs)

Well, that young chap, the Prince of France, he loves her. Seems a nice enough fellow. Nose a little too large to be called handsome, but that's the French for you. I suppose I'll have to reconcile myself to grandchildren with noses over large.

(Beat)

You know, I'd look quite favorably on a cup of hot tea right about now.

FOOL

Key phrase – “looking at it” – which neither of us are.

LEAR

Surely there are a number of local herbs growing about that could be gathered to make an agreeable infusion. It may not be Earl Grey but would be satisfying nonetheless. Go out foraging, would you, and gather something.

FOOL

If I remember correctly, hot tea requires fire?

LEAR

Yes, and upon your return you'll manage that.

FOOL

How?

LEAR

It's well known how clever the peasants can be in these circumstances. Isn't there a method of knocking together a few rocks to get a spark?

FOOL

But then there's the matter of dry fuel.

LEAR

Well, yes. A search must be conducted. There must be something out there.

FOOL

And water to boil?

LEAR

A-plenty I would think after last night's deluge. Any local rills or brooks must be running full.

FOOL

But, how to transport the water or for that matter, what to boil it in? Have you given thought to that?

LEAR

Well, I don't know, I'm sure. As King, my expertise is in other matters.

FOOL

And that resumé qualifies you to order tea despite a lack of tea, water, fire or a pot?

LEAR

I can recognize very well where your litany of pesky grievances is getting us. I take it there will be no tea.

FOOL

Why are the lower classes always expected to be cheerful, resourceful and generous.

LEAR

What else do they have to do? The upper classes are distracted by the obligations of power. They can't be expected to come up with their own tea.

FOOL

Poor people wouldn't mind taking some of those distractions off your hands, like determining the tax rate and who should be invaded next. Plus, we'd still probably be able to make our own tea.

LEAR

Ho, Fool, now I think you rise to parody. The common folk would only become cranky if they were asked to rule the world. You'd, what, seat a baker at the table? The stable man? Oh wait, perhaps you propose a council of Fools to manage governance. I'd find great jest at such an arrangement, them having to take their own advice, for once, instead of ladling it out to beleaguered kings.

FOOL

Seems like it would be worth a try.

LEAR

And what a dull utopia you would contrive! Think of the impoverishment of literature, for example, should it confine itself to the lower classes. Say you have a tale of two men, commoners, perhaps they're on guard duty somewhere, some castle maybe, and they're on the graveyard shift – what discourse could possibly unfold from such a pair except as might pertain to unfaithful wives or how being high school dropouts disqualify them for better jobs? A tale of dismissible interest. One might liven the proceedings with a ghost, and let's say it's a royal ghost, a deceased king; no, even better, ghost of a murdered king who wants justice. Now we have a best seller! But you would entertain us with the ghost of – what – an accountant? Anyway, my advice before you rush off and assign yourself potentate, is to stop and consider the rather poor performance of duties you have already been assigned.

FOOL

You mean as Court Jester and Fool?

LEAR

You must accept some of the blame for our current circumstance.

FOOL

You'll have to elaborate and do it quickly before I pick up a healthy branch and hit you with it which, my Lord, my Liege, as you know would be treason.

LEAR

Oh, your skills with the lute are passable, and you do a wonderful version of "Fine Knacks for Ladies", but what we chiefly prize in a Fool is his satirical commentary on current events, possibly slipping in some stinging critique disguised by pun, wordplay and slapstick; The Truth, in other words, sugar coated so as to make the medicine go down. In short, you could have warned me I was out of control.

FOOL

I did everything I could, including stand on my head, to alert your Majesty against his foolhardy, insane and senile plan to award portions of his kingdom to the biggest braggart, retire as King and then continue to live as a king, just without the office hours.

LEAR

It seemed like a good idea at the time.

FOOL

And here we are.

LEAR

I find you quite frank this morning, Fool.

FOOL

And you are quite the Sunny Jim, all of a sudden.

LEAR

But you were so cryptic in your warnings. I'm a busy King, I don't always have time to puzzle over your random riddles. And I must say, your timing is dreadful. You'll trot out some wry witticism during a feast, pretending to be drunk and, oh, aren't you the life of the party! Naturally, I will have had a little to drink myself, so forgive me if I just laugh at the accompanying dumb show instead of figuring it out. A perfect example..."Granted fore-knowledge of the feast, the wise capon will hide at sight of the hatchet and even kings should mind their noses, as roosters their throats, when they are too willful." I couldn't make heads or tails of it at the time, but this morning, of a sudden, it hit me. Gave me quite a chuckle. I wanted to praise your cleverness, but you were still sleeping.

FOOL

At the risk of repeating myself, let me repeat myself: I slept not a wink last night.

LEAR

I heard you snoring.

FOOL

That wasn't snoring. That was a personal nasal condition brought on by being lost, cold, wet, hungry, thirsty and short of sleep.

LEAR

Heaven forbid a king should speak contrary to his fool. But let's not stray from the subject which is: you were too little, too late.

FOOL

You mean I should have said something more along the lines of, "You narcissistic idiot, you'll get us all killed"?

LEAR

(Slightly offended; hurt)

Maybe something a little more politic.

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