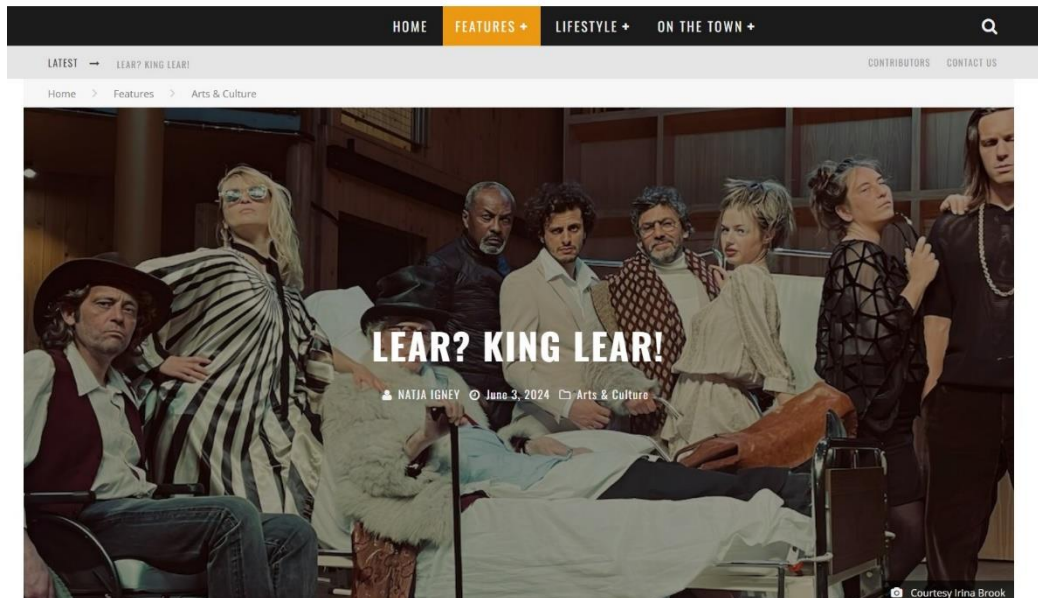


## IGNEY Natja, *Lear ? King Lear !*, 3 juin 2024, in Riviera Buzz

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### RIVIERABUZZ



## **Irina Brook did it again – sprinkling her magic over Shakespeare’s mythic tragedy in an unexpected and contemporary exploration through the prism of imagination and metatheatre.**

Had William Shakespeare and Irina Brook lived at the same time, he would have hired her to mount his plays at the Globe Theatre. With the exception of her late father Peter Brook, no one understands the medieval Bard quite like the former TNN director. No one can coax the humorous side out of a Shakespearean tragedy quite like her. No one can make a comedy more profound. And no one is more capable of framing the timeless stories in an utterly contemporary context. Five years after her departure, Niçois theatre goers are still nostalgic over La Brook’s raging successes of *Songe* (A Midsummer Night’s Dream), *Roméo et Juliette*, and *Tempest!* – and what an accomplishment to convert those fierce Molièreans!

But while Irina Brook has since frequently pursued countless other creative projects, including opera, photography, and video creation, the planks that mean the world just magically keep pulling her back, at least in a directing role. And there is one place in France that she is drawn to more than any other: the très British Chateau d’Hardelot, situated in the tiny town of Condette in the Northern French department of Pas de Calais. Why? Let’s find out.

If you have trouble pinpointing Condette, pop. 2,500, on a map, you are not alone. From Calais, traveling south along the French Opal Coast for about 50 km (33m) will put you there. History buffs, however, will perk up at the name of Condette's main attraction, the [Chateau d'Hardelot](#) which looks back on over 900 years of existence. First a wooden fortification, then a Boulonnais fortress, it became a French royal fortress in the Renaissance and modern periods, before being privately owned by four Englishmen in the 19th century – all of which resulted in a delightful hodge-podge of architectural styles from Gothic to Tudor and Victorian. Over all those years the castle has always played a crucial role in Franco-British relations. And since 2009 it has been serving as the Franco-Britannic Cultural Centre, symbolizing the evolution from conflict to cultural exchange between the two nations and promoting shared heritage through cultural events.



As you amble across the lush grounds, your eyes will be drawn to the jewel that is the Théâtre Elisabethain. Conceptualized less than a decade ago as a round wooden structure in the tradition of the 16th century Globe theatre, its thoroughly contemporary interior and its intricate bamboo lattice exterior effortlessly bridges time.

Who says Elizabethan theatre, says Shakespeare in the same breath. Who mentions the Bard, invariably has Irina Brook's name on their lips. And this is where we come full circle.

Her first passage here dates back to the opening year, 2016, when she presented her spirited *Tempest!* adaptation. And she fell in love with the venue – so much so that she came back in 2021 with "*Dream!*", her poetic interpretation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. At the time she stated:

*For me, the notion of creating a project with the Château d'Hardelot and its theatre is absolutely evident. I have always been torn between my two countries, England and France, between their languages, cultures, landscapes, architecture, cuisine, and relationships. I grew up backstage at the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford and at my father's rehearsals in Paris. My childhood schools were in the Yvelines, and my teenage boarding school was in Hampshire. In France, I feel very British, but in England, I know I will always be European, and I miss France. What could be better, then, than having the chance to envision a project of 'cultural entente cordiale' between my two beloved countries?"*

— Irina Brook, November 2021

The local audience returned the love, and 2023 saw the start of a three-year-collaboration between the Cultural Centre and Irina, supported by her company Dream New World. Her first project: to present a staged reading of "King Lear", a Shakespeare play that she never thought she would direct. The challenge was to make it as lively, accessible, and clear as possible... in just four days.

*"Naturally, I bitterly regretted choosing King Lear after spending the first three days with my small group of actors, battling headaches and fascination, trying to understand and clarify the most difficult work in Shakespeare's repertoire!",* Irina remembers. *"My goal with this mad experiment of staging "King Lear" in under a week was to focus on the emotional aspects of the play, particularly the central plot concerning family relationships."* The audience was moved, entertained, and touched by this first performance, even though the work was still in its raw state.



In May 2024 she presented her first major creation, a full-fledged adaptation titled *Lear?* to a full house, thunderously applauded by a public from all walks of life – young and old, rich and poor, culturally educated or not.... exactly the kind of audience that Shakespeare wrote his pieces for, and that is so dear to Irina's heart. "Theatre for all" has always been her credo.

In her current company Dream New World, we also find many of our favourite actors whom Irina has introduced us over the past ten years – from her trusted collaborators of decades, Geoffrey Carey, Augustin Ruhabura (unforgettable in his role as Peer Gynt’s Troll King at the TNN in 2014), and Emmanuel Guillaume, as well as young talent she started grooming during her time in Nice – Irène Reva, Kévin Ferdjani, and Marjory Gesbert, all experienced Shakespearians by now. They play alongside Maximilien Seweryn who made a name for himself under Peter Brook’s direction. And last but decidedly not least – there is the rising star of the third generation of Brook theater family – Irina’s daughter Maia Jemmett who in 2019 blew the audience away in her first major role as Juliette at only 16 years old.



### What is Shakespeare’s play “King Lear” about?

**Irina Brook:** King Lear is one of Shakespeare’s greatest and most renowned tragedies—a saga of war, politics, and family. The story revolves around Lear, the aging King of Britain, and his three daughters: Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. The play begins with Lear gathering his court to announce his abdication. He asks each of his daughters to describe her love for him, promising the largest share of his kingdom to the one who loves him most. The two eldest, greedy and insincere, offer flattering responses, while Cordelia, the only one who truly loves him, struggles to express that no words can convey a deep and genuine love. “*Nothing!*” This word drives Lear into a rage, and he banishes her, despite her being his favourite.

Parallel to this, we follow the subplot of Gloucester, Lear’s advisor and best friend, and his two rival sons: the legitimate Edgar and the unloved “*bastard*” Edmund. This second storyline, equally tragic, again highlights the fragility of human nature, blinded by jealousy and ambition, leading to the collapse of the natural order. Through these family dramas, Shakespeare offers a timeless vision of humanity, reflecting the perpetual state of the world with its endless wars and conflicts.

## Whimsical adaptations are your hallmark. How did you treat 'Lear??'

*Lear?* is an imaginative and expressionistic journey through the world of theatre, with Shakespeare as the starting point. The setting is a hospice for actors, but we are not in a precise reality, as everything stems from the disoriented mind of the character Jeff King, the actor who imagines playing Lear. Starting from improvisations, we traverse the play very freely, without temporal or logical constraints. Along the way, fragments, dreams, memories of great classics — the plays I have directed at different times with these actors: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, *Romeo and Juliet*. And the common thread that always brings us back to *King Lear*: the unanswered questions about human fragility, mortality, the existential questions of our lives as artists, and thus, of all our lives.

## What is the significance of the question mark after 'Lear? ?'

In my version of *Lear?*, the question mark is central to our exploration. Why 'Lear' today? Why theatre? Why Shakespeare?" For me, this play becomes the starting point for an exploration of what it means to be an actor, and of my intimate experience of a life in theatre — a life surrounded by actors and Shakespeare's words since childhood. In 1963, my mother played Cordelia with Orson Welles for British television. Today, in 2024, my daughter Maia takes on the role.



## How does *Lear?* connect to your personal life?

I have spent my life, with love and pain, observing the daily life of actors — their search for work, their hopes, their disappointments. I have myself felt the emptiness, the endless wait for a call from the agent, and at thirty, I stopped. I have closely witnessed the joy and obsessive passion of actors, throwing themselves body and soul into rehearsals, the camaraderie, the touring life, followed by that 'nothing' — the nothingness of an actor without a role. I have seen the sadness that comes with advancing age, and the disappearance of engagements. Then the fading memory, the difficulty in learning lines, the terror of forgetting. I have a friend whose mother is in a retirement home for performers near London. She told me about a resident, a great actor, a former star of the Royal Shakespeare Company, who sits every day at the reception with his little bag. When asked what he's doing, he replies: *'I'm waiting for my agent.'* For me, this image is as tragic as that of a king without a kingdom.

Thank you, Irina!

*Lear?* is expected to go on tour later in 2024.

