

SALT
A Fairy Tale Opera in Three Acts

Original Libretto Inspired by Shakespeare's *King Lear*
and a folktale found in many different cultures
By Patricia Herzog

For Frankie and Sasha

Characters, in order of appearance

King Lear

Cordelia, the King's daughter

Miner One

Miner Two

Miner Three

Clarence, caretaker/sculptor and later Baron Clarence of
Fast-Frozen Foodⁱ

Emissary One, the King's ambassador and later Clarence's worker

Emissary Two, the King's ambassador and later Clarence's worker

Clarence's Assistant (nonspeaking)

Goneril, the King's daughter

Regan, the King's daughter

The King's Palace, the King's mine, a desolate landscape

ACT I Scene 1

The King's palace.

Lear (*grandly*)

Tell me my daughter ...
Why have you come?

Cordelia

Why father ...
It's you who summoned me.

Lear

So I did ...
And why?

Cordelia

Why father ...
I don't know!

Lear (*ignoring her*)

To what do I owe this visit?

Cordelia (*taken aback*)

Sir, my tongue is tied.

Lear (*warily*)

The Priestess said one day a queen would reign.

Cordelia

It vexes you, I see.

Lear

Say you love me, at least!

Cordelia

Why father ...
I do, of course!

Lear

How now?
Say it with force!
Go on ...
Tell me how you love.

Lear urges Cordelia to speak.

Go on now ...
Like this:
(imitating a woman's voice)
"The King is sun and moon and stars!"

Go on, I say ...
No tribute is too small.
No tribute is too great.

Cordelia (at a loss but with great tenderness)

Why father ...

Lear

Stubborn child!
Will you not say how you love?

Cordelia (forthrightly)

I ...
I love you like salt.

Lear (perplexed and disgusted)

Salt?
A very ordinary thing.
How dare you compare me to salt!
Am I not precious?

(furious, snickering)

Salt!
I'll show you what is salt.
Go on ...
Get out!
Not another word ...
Lest more false talk ...
Pour forth ...
From your foul mouth!

The King points to the exit and looks away. Cordelia leaves, utterly distraught.

End of Scene

ACT I Scene 2

The King's salt mine, lit with candles and a shaft of light from an unseen entrance high above. Near the bottom of the long steep steps is a well. Cordelia sits, idle and mute, sifting salt through her hands. The miners cluster together at a distance. Around them are pickaxes, rotors, shovels, and also three buckets. Two of the buckets are empty. In the third is a small rock of salt. Caretaker Clarence is off by himself, sweeping up loose bits of salt. In the cavernous mine, every sound reverberates.

Miner One

Every day we grind away ...
Still, the rock's too hard.
It will not yield.

Miner Two

There's no more salt ...
To keep the King's food ...
From rotting.

Miner Three

Soon we'll be rotting, too.

Miner Two

What are we to do?

They miners speak in low voices so the Princess cannot hear them.

Miner One

They say he's in decline.

Miner Three

They say he's lost his mind.
Why else would she be here?

Miner Two

Poor Princess!

Miner Three

She never says a word.

Miner One

They say that she's been cursed.

Miner Two

I heard it, too.

Miner Three

So little salt.
It's not our fault ...
Is it?

Miner Two

Less and less every day.

Miner Three

It's not our fault ...
Is it?

The miners start towards the steps, then turn to face Cordelia.

All Miners

Good night, Princess.

Cordelia looks up with a blank stare. The miners carefully ascend the narrow staircase. We hear the sound of the mine closing. The shaft of light disappears. Cordelia goes back to sifting. Clarence gathers up loose bits of salt and sweeps them into a burlap bag, ties it and places it at the head of a platform made of salt. On top of the platform are two tattered shawls arranged as blankets.

Clarence

Good night, Princess.

Cordelia smiles softly. Clarence retreats to a dark corner. Cordelia moves about the room, blowing out candles, keeping one lit to guide her way. In the

dimness we see her walk towards the mining equipment. She picks up an ax, adjusts the handle and strikes a nearby wall. She retreats to her bed and blows out the candle. The mine is completely dark. Pause. We hear a long loud cracking sound.

Occasional sounds of cracking punctuate a musical interlude signifying the passage of night. The shaft of light reappears and the miners, carrying lunch pails, slowly and carefully descend. Cordelia sits mute and idle as before. The miners are surprised and delighted to discover broken pieces of salt rock lying on the floor.

Miner Three

I knew it!
I knew it all along!

Miner One

We did it!

Miner Two

Woohoo!
I told you!

They take up their instruments and begin picking at the surrounding rock. The rock won't yield. It isn't long before they're completely exhausted. They sit down on stumps of salt and open their lunch pails.

Miner One

My hands are raw.

Miner Two

My back is wrenched.

Miner Three

The sweeper hauls the salt.

The others nod in agreement.

Miner One (*imperiously*)

Clarence!

Clarence fills and carries the heavy buckets, one by one, up the narrow steps. The miners start to exit, single file.

Miner Three *(suddenly stopping)*

We forgot about the Princess!

Awkwardly they turn to face Cordelia.

All Miners

Good day, Princess!

With difficulty, they turn around again and exit the mine. Clarence follows them out and re-emerges with a basket of provisions. He goes to the salt stump which serves as Cordelia's table and quietly lays out her food. He goes to the well and brings back a pitcher, then retreats to his corner, which candlelight now permits us to see. He picks up a knife and with apparent difficulty starts cutting into the wall. Cordelia walks over to the ax, adjusts the handle and moves towards Clarence. He moves away with apprehension, as if she might possibly be coming for him. She takes a swing at the wall where he was cutting. Cracks appear and some pieces come off. Clarence looks at her with wonder. He picks up a small rock, then his knife. With great absorption, he starts carving. Cordelia goes back to her table and starts eating. She looks with satisfaction at Clarence working. He picks up another piece of rock and shapes it into a tool with which he hones the first rock. Clarence's deftness and assurance indicate that he knows just what he's doing.

Clarence whistles contentedly. The sound of salt chipped and scraped and the whistling combine to form a tune of sorts. Cordelia softly joins in with a hum that adds an undertone of sadness. They are 'singing' to and by themselves, not to one another, although their voices blend into the harmonious whole of a love duet.

The music is interrupted when the miners return. Clarence quickly puts down his work and steps forward to greet them.

Miner One

I smell salt!

Miner Two

Too good to be true!

They arrive at the place where they were hacking away. Nothing has changed.

Miner Three

Odd ...

Miner One

I still smell salt!

Miner Two

Me, too!

They sniff and move around. Their noses lead them to the place where Clarence was carving. They see the loose rock and are mystified.

Miner One *(pointing to the wall behind him)*

But we struck over there.

Miner Two

Are you sure?

Miner One

I swear!

Miner Three *(looks down and sees a small carved object)*

What's this?

He picks it up and tosses it to Miner Two.

Miner Two

Looks like a vase.

He tosses it into one of the buckets, then turns to Clarence.

Miner One

Is this your doing?

Clarence reluctantly nods.

(angrily)
Is salt not precious?

Clarence arranges the heavy salt chunks in the buckets. He begins the slow steep ascent, one bucket at a time. Miner One points to the loose rocks, then turns to the others.

I say ...
Enough for one day.

Miner Two

More than enough, I should say.

Miner Three

May the King be pleased!

Miners One and Two

May the King be pleased!

Clarence descends with an empty bucket.

Miner One *(to Clarence, sternly)*

Hands off our salt!

(to Cordelia, gaily)
So long, Princess!
See you tomorrow!

Cordelia looks at him blankly. The men leave. Clarence follows them out with another heavy bucket. He returns, empty bucket in one hand and a bunch of wild flowers in the other. He retrieves the vase from the empty bucket and sets it on Cordelia's table, places the flowers in it and fills the vase with water from the pitcher.

Fade out. Musical night interlude with sounds of ax strikes and very loud sounds of walls seaming and cracking and hard rocks crashing to the ground.

Next morning. The mine entrance opens admitting a bright shaft of light. The miners descend and see huge chunks of salt rock lying about.

Miner Three

How in the world ...?

Miner Two

A miracle!

Miner One spies Clarence standing in the shadows next to an object.

Miner One

What's this?

He picks up a beautifully carved amphora, moves it into the light and examines it closely.

How dare you trifle with our salt!

He drops it. The rock is hard and the vessel doesn't shatter, but one of the delicately turned handles breaks off. Clarence stifles his reaction. The other miners approach.

Miner Two (*mystified*)

How in the world ...?

Reluctantly, Clarence shows him the knife and the honing rock. The miner imperiously waves him away and gestures to the rocks.

No, this!

How in the world did you do it?

Clarence looks at him mutely.

Miner One (*portentously*)

The King is pleased, you see.

Miner Three

Exceedingly.

Miner Two

He would see it done.

Miner Three

He wants a demonstration.

Clarence shakes his head.

Miner Two

The King's curse must be catching!

Miner One

Come! Come!
Don't play dumb!
The King would see it done!

The miners form an angry chorus.

Miners Two and Three

He wants a demonstration!

All Miners *(with escalating fury)*

Come! Come!
The King would see it done!
He wants a demonstration!

Miner One picks up the broken amphora and prepares to hurl it at Clarence. Cordelia gets up and moves decisively in their direction. The miners immediately back off.

Miner Two

Princess!

Miner Three

We mean no harm!

The terrified miners quickly get out of the way. Cordelia pays them no mind. She picks up a large ax, makes a slight adjustment in the handle, raises both arms and strikes a nearby wall. Immediately, cracks appear and large chunks of salt break off. The sound is thunderous. A white-out is created by loose salt crystals flying in every direction.

END OF ACT

ACT II Scene 1

The mine is now a salt palace (see the Wieliczka mine in Poland) furnished with elaborate carvings of every imaginable kind: chandeliers, furniture, floor tiles, statues, bas reliefs, etc. There is a separate space for Cordelia's bedroom with a magnificently carved doorway. Clarence is putting the finishing touches on a fountain fed by water from the well. Miners Two and Three laze about. Cordelia works a complicated system of pulleys for extracting and hauling salt, making an adjustment here and there. Miner One descends the steps, now equipped with an artfully carved handrail. Cordelia and Clarence continue their work. Miner One leads the others off to one side, pulls out a sack of gold coins and speaks in low tones.

Miner One

He's coming.

Miner Two

His Majesty?

Miner One

Who else?

Miner Three

When?

Miner One

Now.

Miner Two

Now?

Miner One

Now!

Miner Three (*horrified*)

The Princess!

Miner One

His mind is worse.

Miner Two

And don't forget the curse ...
She can't speak.

Miner Three (*in a panic*)

He can *see*, can't he?

(shudders)

What I wouldn't give --
-- All that gold --
Not to behold their reunion!

Miner One

Listen!

A faint rumbling from above.

The coach approaches!

Cordelia looks up. Clarence nervously starts sweeping. A loud jolly voice calls from above.

Lear

Halloo down there!

Miner One rushes up the steps. Slowly and carefully, he helps the King down. Lear is focused on not losing his footing and doesn't notice anything around him. Cordelia sees her father and is greatly distressed. She quickly retreats to her room. Miners Two and Three move apprehensively towards the steps. The King finally arrives at the bottom.

Miner Two (*bowing low*)

Your Majesty.

Miner Three (*bowing low*)

Your Majesty.

Lear (*looking around with wide-eyed delight*)

Never did I imagine ...

Clarence (*bowing, not quite as low*)

Your Majesty.

Miner One

Clarence ...
Sculptor and sweeper.

Lear (*making a sweeping gesture*)

You did all this?

Clarence modestly nods.

Hats off, gentlemen --
A genius!ⁱⁱ

Miner One (*nervously*)

To the pulleys, then ...

Lear (*ignores him and points*)

What's that fountain?
(*looking elsewhere*)
Let me see that *bas relief*.
(*pointing now to a royal-looking bust*)
Why look, it's me!

As the King continues to examine his likeness, Clarence disappears into Cordelia's room. They emerge together and Cordelia quietly slips into Clarence's dark corner. The King notices the elaborately carved threshold to her room.

Lear (*pointing with excitement*)

What's that?

Miner One

A room.

Lear

Fool!
Don't you think I see that?

Miner One (*pointing to a far wall*)

Over there ...
Is where you'll find the finest statuary.

Lear

If you please ...
One thing at a time!

With dread, Miner One slowly leads Lear towards the opening of Cordelia's room.

Miner Two (*under his breath to the Miner Three*)

Soon as he looks ...
Our goose is cooked.

Miner Three (*trembling*)

What I wouldn't give ...
Not to behold their reunion!

Lear and Miner One disappear into the bedroom. Clarence emerges from the darkness, surreptitiously disables a lever that controls the pulleys, then takes up his broom. Lear and the miners emerge from Cordelia's room.

Lear (*pleased and intrigued*)

Fit for a princess!
(*with a wink and a nod*)
I should have known ...
(*looks around*)
Where's the wench?

The miners are quick to distract him.

Miner One (*pointing to the pulleys*)

And now for our demonstration!

Lear (*amiably allowing himself to be led away*)

Ha! Ha!
You don't fool me!

Minor One (*with pride*)

Your Majesty's salt!

He pulls a lever and nothing happens. He pulls again and still nothing. He turns on the other miners, accusingly.

What have you done?

Miner Two

I never touched it!

Miner Three

I didn't do a thing!

Miner One

What are you saying?
Fix this right away!

Miner Two (*to Miner Three*)

Go on ...
Fix it!

Miner Three (*to Miner Two*)

No, you ...
It's all your fault!

Lear

Come, come, gentlemen!

In a fury, the miners turn on Clarence. Miner One grabs an ax and starts at him. Suddenly and swiftly, Cordelia emerges from the darkness. She goes to the pulleys and makes a quick adjustment. They start working. The King is greatly amused and cries out with delight.

Ho! ho!
So that's how it's done!
A beauty, too.
Where do they hide you, my child?

Miner Three (*shaking violently*)

Child!
He said *child!*

Lear is taken with the young woman and doesn't notice them. He looks towards Cordelia's bedroom, then back at her.

The bed is occupied, I see.

He looks at the pulleys, then back again at her.

A clever wench no less.
Sovereign of the screw.
Ruler of pulleys and ropes.
Ha!
Ha! Ha!

He turns on the miners.

You dopes!

Miner One (*trying to appease*)

Your Majesty ...

Lear (*pointing to the exit*)

Go on ...
Get out

The miners stand there stunned.

Go on, I say ...
Get out!

Miner One grabs the pouch of cold coins. He scrambles up the steps and out of the mine. The others follow.

The King turns towards Cordelia.

Don't draw the latch, sweetie.
I'll be back!

(to Clarence)
Young man, give me your hand.

Cordelia is frozen in place. Clarence helps the King up the steps. We hear the mine entrance firmly shut and bolted. The shaft of light disappears. Slowly and grimly, Clarence walks back down. He looks painfully at Cordelia. Fade out.

End of Scene

ACT II Scene 2

Clarence is alone in the corner of the mine with chiseling tools, platforms and statuary in varying states of completion. He stands before a figure draped in cloth. He uncovers it, revealing a bust of Cordelia. He picks up a chisel, then stops.

Clarence (*ardently*)

Were I a prince and not a plain man ...
In a fairy tale, that is ...
I'd kiss you ...
Like this.

Clarence straightens himself up and plants a princely kiss on the statue's lips. Cordelia emerges from her room, looking about with great curiosity, as if something important has happened. Clarence quickly covers the statue. He looks at her shyly. She tenderly returns his look.

A loud rap at the entrance. Clarence climbs the steps. We hear him opening the latch. He walks back down, followed by two men elaborately dressed in courtly fashion. Grimly, he announces the visitors.

The King sends his emissaries.

The emissaries slowly descend the steps, taking in the scene with amazement.

Emissary One

Who knew?

Emissary Two

A palace hewn of salt!

Emissary Two (*excitedly pointing*)

A fountain!
(*looking around in amazement*)
Fit for a prince!

They see Cordelia standing at a distance, and are taken with her poise and beauty.

Emissary One (*spooked*)

Or a princess ...

(*pauses*)

Lovely maiden ...

The King requests your pleasure ...

(*stumbling over his words*)

I ...

I mean your presence.

The King would dine with you ... alone.

Cordelia looks at Emissary One, but neither moves nor speaks.

Emissary One (*thinking she has perhaps not understood*)

Lovely lady, the King wishes ...

Emissary Two (*nervously, to Miner One*)

Methinks I see a likeness.

Emissary One (*with dawning awareness*)

Methinks so, too.

Emissary Two (*spooked*)

Do you really think it's true?

Emissary One nods. He changes his tone completely.

Emissary One (*awkwardly*)

Why Princess ... it's you!

Still no response from Cordelia.

Emissary Two

Your sisters said you fled.

Emissary One

They said you wed an evil man.

Emissary One (*concerned*)

What brings you here?
I fear you're in some danger.

Cordelia looks at them without answering. The Emissaries search for the right words.

The King ...

Emissary Two

Will surely want to see ...

Emissary One

His fair and favorite daughter.

Emissary Two (*alarmed, under his breath to Emissary One*)

On second thought ...

Emissary One (*annoyed*)

What is it?

Emissary Two

Suppose he knows her not.
Suppose he woos her still.

Emissary One

Don't be silly!
Once she makes it clear ...
He won't go near her.

Emissary Two

She doesn't seem to speak.

Emissary One (*to Clarence, accusingly*)

What have you done to the Princess?
Why can't she speak?

Still looking at Clarence, Emissary One gestures to Emissary Two to follow his lead. They both start towards him.

Come on!
We'll get it out of you!

Clarence is dumbfounded and frozen in place. The Princess, who has not moved since the emissaries arrived, starts walking towards them. Startled, they stop and turn to face her. She continues walking towards them while giving Clarence an annoyed sideways glance, as if to say "Rescue me for a change!" She goes up to Emissary Two and subtly but seductively plants a kiss on his cheek.

Emissary Two

Why Princess!

Clarence looks on helplessly. Cordelia moves towards Emissary One and plants a kiss on his cheek.

Emissary One

Why Princess!

Cordelia returns to where she was standing before. The Emissaries banter.

Emissary Two

I think she likes me.

Emissary One

She kissed me, too.
Besides, mine was longer.

Emissary Two

Mine was first.

Emissary One

Best is last.

Emissary Two

Says who?

Emissary One

I do!

Emissary Two

Not true!

Emissary Two

Is too!

Suddenly aware of the time, Emissary Two wrings his hands.

Oh dear, it's getting late.
What are we to do?

Emissary One *(turning to Cordelia, gently entreating)*

Princess, come away!
Surely you won't stay ...
(looking at Clarence with disgust)
Not down here with him!

Emissary Two *(gesturing to the him and Emissary One)*

We promise we won't make you choose ...
Between us.

Emissary Two *(winking)*

Not yet.

Cordelia looks at them blankly, then turns and disappears into her bedroom. Clarence moves towards the exit. The Emissaries follow. They climb the steps single file.

Emissary One *(darkly, to Emissary Two behind him)*

The King mistook the Princess for a mistress.

Emissary Two *(anxiously)*

What are we to do?

Emissary One

We'll say she wasn't there.

Emissary Two (*nodding in agreement*)

We'll say she disappeared.

The Emissaries exit. Clarence walks back down. Cordelia comes out of her room. They stand for a long time facing one another. Finally, she reaches her arms out. Nervously, he takes her hands and kisses them while bowing low in servitude. He lets go her hands and stands again facing her.

Cordelia (*tenderly but with growing impatience*)

Have you no words for me?

Clarence straightens himself, lets go the Princess's hands and looks at her shyly. After an awkward silence, he picks up his chisel. Cordelia speaks to him harshly.

Salt! Salt!
You and your precious salt!
Have you no words for me?
Am I not precious, too?

Clarence gestures at his carvings, as if to say "These are my words." Cordelia doesn't get the message. She furiously lashes out.

Cordelia

No words?
No words?
Still, no words?

She stops ranting and notices in wonder that she can speak.

How is it I can speak and you cannot?

Returning to her fury.

Fie!
(*gesticulating wildly towards the mine entrance*)
Get out!

Lock the latch and lose the key.

I would never see ...
Anyone ever again!

Clarence hesitates.

Go on!
Get out!

Cordelia walks over to the pulleys, picks up a large wrench and lets out a crazy laugh.

With this wrench ...
The wench will see to her father!

She lifts the wrench high and strains to unhook the pulley ropes. Clarence looks on in helpless silence as the ropes, together with the buckets suspended from them, fall to the ground. She turns again to Clarence in a fury.

Go on! Get out!

He still hesitates.

Go on! Get out!
Forget all about me!

She turns and walks away. Slowly, Clarence climbs the steps and disappears. The shaft of light disappears. We hear the heavy sound of the hatch being hammered down. The stage goes dark.

END OF ACT II

ACT III Scene 1

The King's palace. In the background is a conveyer belt controlled by a foot pedal adjacent to which is a bellows positioned behind a large block of ice. At the end of the belt is an ice box labeled "Clarence's Fresh-frozen Fish." Clarence stands at the belt, operating the bellows by hand and propelling the belt by foot. At regular intervals an assistant appears and deposits a live fish on the belt. Clarence blasts the fish with freezing cold air and sends it along to the ice box. The conveyer stops and the assistant brings in another fish, repeating the process.

Goneril and Regan are standing behind their father. Regan pretends to hold her nose.. Both sisters laugh. They step in front of Lear, fawning.

Goneril

The moon in June is not too bright ...

Regan

The harvest moon is not too mellow ...

Goneril

For a very special fellow ...

Goneril and Regan

A very special fellow such as thee!

They banter and amuse themselves in mildly competitive fashion.

Goneril

La di da.

Regan

La di li.

Goneril

La di da.

Regan

La di di.

Goneril and Regan

A very special fellow such as thee!

Goneril

The owl is wise ...

Regan

The fox is sly ...

Goneril

But neither can compete ...

Regan

With a very special fellow ...

Goneril

La di da.

Regan

La di li.

Goneril

La di la.

Regan

Do re mi.

Goneril and Regan

A very special fellow such as thee!

Lear is indifferent to their foolery. He addresses them while gesturing towards Clarence.

Lear

Daughters, see you this man?

They look at Clarence and laugh quietly.

Goneril

What man?

Turns to her sister, as if to say he's a nobody.

I don't see a man ...
Do you?

Lear (*annoyed, pointing to Clarence*)

This man here!

Regan (*pretending to notice for the first time*)

Why, it's he!

Goneril

Can it be?

They laugh heartily.

Lear (*sternly rebuking*)

No cause for laughter.
This man here ...
Would save us from disaster.

With that contraption ...
He says ...
We'll have no more need of salt ...
To keep our food from rotting.

Goneril and Regan burst out laughing. Lear sternly rebukes them.

Mark my words!
Should he succeed ...
No longer a commoner he'll be.
By kingly writ I'm make him noble.

To wit: a baron!

Goneril (*bowing low in mock respect*)

Baron Clarence!

Regan (*bowing even lower*)

Baron Clarence!

Clarence politely ignores the princesses and continues freezing. The King grows anxious. He starts pacing and reckoning to himself.

Lear (*despondent*)

Salt!
How came I ...
To mistake it for an ordinary thing?

How was I to know ...
'Twas salt preserved my kingdom?

It's not my fault ...
Is it?

(turning again to his daughters)
I sent my emissaries ...
(with a hint of mischief)
-- Never you mind why --
(perplexed)
They said no one was there.
They said the mine was bare.

Clarence (*quietly, but with resolve*)

Pardon me, Your Highness ...
Cordelia was there.

Lear (*incredulous*)

Cordelia, my daughter?

Regan

Liar!

Goneril

Watch what you say!

Regan

Our sister stays away ...

Goneril

Our sister, the ingrate ...
Plots against you!

Clarence

Beg pardon, Your Highness ...
Cordelia was there.

Lear (*confused*)

You mean to say the maiden/maker of salt?

Clarence nods.

Lear grows angry and distrustful.

Then why is there no more?

(to Goneril and Regan)
Summon my men!
Bring them at once!
I will know the truth!

Goneril and Regan leave in a flurry. Lear addresses Clarence in a threatening tone.

If you lie ...

Enter Goneril and Regan with the Emissaries.

Emissary One (*bowing with great obsequiousness*)

Your Highness.

Emissary Two (*same*)

Your Highness.

Lear (*to the Emissaries, indicating Clarence*)

This man says my daughter ...

Emissary One

Your Highness ...

I swear no one was there!

Emissary Two

On my honor, Your Highness ...

I swear it, too!

Clarence

She bade me go and lock her in.

Lear

Whatever for?

Clarence

No words, she said.

No words.

She said I had no words.

Lear (*remembering, trembling with emotion*)

No words ...

No words ...

'Twas I who said the same to her!

(urgently, to Clarence, pointing to the exit)

Bring me my daughter!

Clarence quickly exits. Goneril, Regan and the Emissaries are frozen with terror.

End of Scene

ACT III Scene 2

The salt mine. Cordelia is alone, sweeping loose salt with Clarence's broom. The mine is aglow with candelabras. The sound of salt, swept and under foot, resounds in the cavernous space. Trying to amuse herself, Cordelia performs a salt dance with the broom as her partner (à la Mickey in Fantasia and Fred Astaire in Top Hat.) She stops and lets the broom drop. The mood shifts dramatically.

Every day the same.
Every minute, every hour.
Snuff the candles and it's night.
Light them ...
O how I dread each day!

(looking around)
Am I awake or do I dream?
(long pause)
Or am I already dead?

(raising her hands and looking up)
O mighty gods ...
I would breathe fresh air!
I would see the heavens again!

She waits and listens, as if for the gods to respond. Nothing happens. She sees Clarence's ax lying against the fountain, picks it up, then hacks away at the fountain. She hacks away at everything. The chandeliers come crashing to the floor. The sound is deafening. When all the moveable objects, save a candle which she holds in her hand, have been hacked, she starts attacking the walls. The ax blade gets stuck. She tries strenuously to dislodge it but cannot. She starts towards the dark corner with Clarence's things.

Chisels ...
A hammer
Anything will do!

The candle illuminates the space. She rifles through everything. She uncovers the bust Clarence made of her and drops to her knees, crying out in anguish.

Ah!
He loved!

Long, musically dramatic pause.

No words!

No words!
What does it matter?

Ah!
Now I see!
T'was my father said those very words to me!

She hears a thunderous crash, much louder than anything before, and rushes out with her candle. The walls are seamed and cracked. An immense block of salt has crashed on the floor.

O thunderous gods!
What have I done?

The walls continue to break apart. Big chunks come crashing down. Loose salt begins to fill up the empty space. Cordelia scrambles over to the steps and struggles to make her way to the top. She slips and the candle holder drops. Total darkness: we see nothing as we continue to hear ripping seams, crumbling walls and crashing rocks.

Out! Out!
I must get out!

The mine grows strangely quiet. We hear only the eerily soft sound of loose salt piling up. The ominous sound continues for some time. Then we hear a muffled pounding. Cordelia's voice is muffled now, too.

I can't breathe!

In the stillness, we hear the hatch opening. A narrow shaft of light pierces from above. The shaft widens and we see two steps at the very top. Cordelia's head is barely visible. Clarence reaches down, lifts her arms up out of the salt and secures them around his neck. With great difficulty, he pulls her out of the rubble.

End of Scene

ACT III Scene 3

Clarence, supporting the weakened Cordelia, slowly walks across a desolate landscape. She drags her feet beside him, her arms still clinging to his neck.

Clarence (*musings to himself*)

Some men's meant for sweet talk.
I'm not.

I'm no dandy.
Just handy with my tools.

Some men woo with a bow and quiver.
The likes of them makes me shiver.

I'm a whittlin' man ...
Hand me a hammer and a chisel.
I'll show my love in forms concrete.

O but a princess and a plain man ...
Not even in a fairy tale ...
Would it be meet.

"A suitor, lowly born ...
With hopeless passion torn ...
And poor beyond denying ...
Has dared for her to pine
At whose exalted shrine
A world of wealth is sighing."ⁱⁱⁱ

But wait ...
I'm not plain anymore!

By dint of writ ...
The King made me a baron.
Though I am a noble of lowest rank ...
Still, they call me Lord.
All I want is a Lady.

He looks softly at Cordelia. She smiles at him weakly.

End of Scene

ACT III Scene 4

The King's palace, festooned for a wedding, with the frozen food operation towards the back as before, now bearing the sign "Baron Clarence's Fast-frozen Food." Clarence, dressed in a simple suit, oversees two workers, the demoted emissaries now dressed as fish handlers, their heavy white aprons smeared with fish guts and stained with blood. The King faces the doorway expectantly. Goneril and Regan dance around him, desperate for attention. He indulges them absentmindedly.

Goneril (*smoothing the folds of her dress*)

The silk ...
A blushing pink ...
All the way from China!

Lear

Very nice.

Regan

Mine's ecru!

Lear

Very nice.

Goneril (*dangling her bracelets*)

The finest gold from India!

Regan (*brandishing her rings*)

Pure Australian opal!

Lear is distracted with anticipation and doesn't respond.

Worker One (*to Clarence*)

The rig is ready.
Nice and steady.

Goneril and Regan escalate their efforts to get their father's attention.

Goneril

How do you like my curls?

Regan (*twirling around in an enormous hooped skirt*)

Look!
I can twirl!

Worker Two (*to Clarence*)

Finally, it works.

Goneril (*pointing to her earrings*)

Genuine South Sea pearls!

Regan

Whee!

*She tries to do a cartwheel in her enormous hooped skirt and fails miserably.
No one seems to notice.*

Worker One

It works!

Workers One and Two

Finally, it works!

Goneril

See my pretty bows?

Worker One (*to Clarence*)

Here, let me show you ...

Regan struggles to her feet and tries to cartwheel again.

Regan

If at first ...

Lear

Enough!

The door opens. Cordelia enters and everything stops. She is dressed simply and elegantly for a ceremonial occasion.

Goneril

You call that a dress?

No one pays attention. All eyes are on Cordelia. She approaches her father, beaming. He smiles broadly and extends his arms.

Lear (*knowingly*)

Daughter ...
I have no words ...

They embrace for a long time. Lear lets go. Cordelia steps back and sees he has been crying. Gently, she wipes his tears with her sleeve. Clarence smiles lovingly as he takes his place beside his bride. They face the King, who has recovered himself and addresses them in kingly fashion.

By a covenant of salt ...
Did our ancestors of old ...
Pass the mantle of the Kingship.

Trying to be discreet, Worker One sneaks up behind Clarence and tugs at the hem of his jacket.

Worker One (*in an audible whisper*)

Pardon, my Lord ...
I hate to interrupt ... but ...
The belt is stuck.

Clarence looks apologetically at Cordelia and the King. He takes a step back. Cordelia stops him. Her look says it all. She silently bids Worker One to follow as she moves back towards the belt.

Lear (*to Clarence, emitting a hearty laugh*)

Well, well, my good fellow ...
Thy wife would take the reins!

Clarence glances at Cordelia working the belt and smiles with pleasure. The belt starts moving again. Cordelia returns and assumes her position. Lear assumes his kingly manner.

Now ... where was I?
Ah yes ...
By a covenant of salt ...
Did our ancestors of old ...
Pass the mantle of the Kingship.

(dramatically)
And so ... growing old ...
In my cups and dotage ...
'Tis my fast intent ...
To shake all cares and woes ...
Conferring my kingdom on younger strengths ...
While I unburdened crawl towards death.^{iv}

(pleased with his recitation)
Not half bad!

(regally, looking directly at Clarence)
Baron Clarence ...
To thee I give my Kingdom!

Cordelia

Pardon, my Lord ...
Did not the Priestess say ...
One day a queen would reign?

Lear *(looking quizzically at Cordelia)*

She did.

Cordelia

And is not a queen a woman?

Lear *(growing testy)*

She is.

Cordelia

A woman ...

Anticipating Lear's annoyance, Clarence looks down.

Lear (*angry*)

What is the meaning of this?

The sisters rejoice to see Cordelia and their father contending.

Goneril (*silently clapping her hands*)

Oh goody!

Regan

They're at it again!

Goneril

This time he'll have her head!

Cordelia

I mean ...

Why not give your Kingdom to me?

Clarence, still looking down, smiles. The sisters regard her proposal as preposterous and are certain the King does, too.

Regan

Of all the nerve!

Goneril

Who does she think she's kidding?

The King pauses a long time, then looks at Cordelia.

Lear (*emphatically, to the workers*)

Salt!

The workers exit. They quickly re-enter, holding a chalice which they set before the King. He frowns.

So little salt.

Then looks at Clarence and brightens.

No matter ...
We've frozen food aplenty.

With difficulty, the King bends over the chalice. Clarence and Cordelia anxiously move towards him. He waves them away, scoops up a handful of salt, slowly straightens himself and ceremonially sprinkles the bride and groom.

With this salt I consecrate your marriage.

He pauses a long time, looking straight at Cordelia. He starts again to bend over the chalice. Clarence quickly scoops up a handful and gives it to him.

To my daughter, Cordelia ...
Faithful and most able ...
My kingdom I bequeath.
May you rule ...
In wisdom and in peace.

Lear anoints Cordelia with salt. Silently, as if on cue, the sisters collapse in the workers' arms. No one notices.

Queen Cordelia!

Clarence prostrates himself in acknowledgement.

May the gods grant you favor ...
(slight pause)
And salt to give life savor.

Lear turns to the audience. From this point on, all parts are spoken.

I am very old.

Lear collapses. His fall is broken by the still-kneeling Clarence. Cordelia drops to her knees and cradles him in her arms.

Cordelia (looking at Clarence)

He faints!v

Clarence (examining Lear)

He is gone, indeed.^{vi}

Cordelia

'Twas a noble song he sang ...
Though not so much in waning days ...
When age robbed him of reason.

The sisters, who have revived, silently approach. The workers follow. There is a long pause. Goneril breaks the silence.

Goneril (*grief-stricken*)

Father!

She is about to throw herself on Lear's body. Without looking up, Cordelia motions her away.

Cordelia

Vex not his ghost.
O let him pass!
She hates him much ...
That would upon the rack of this tough world ...
Stretch him out longer.^{vii}

END OF OPERA

ⁱ In addition to being a venerable English name, “Clarence” pays tribute to Clarence Birdseye, the American inventor whose method of freezing food greatly reduced the use of salt as a preservative.

ⁱⁱ As Schumann’s fictional Eusebius famously said of Chopin.

ⁱⁱⁱ From Gilbert and Sullivan’s *H.M.S. Pinafore*

^{iv} *King Lear* Act I Scene 1, spoken by Lear.

^v Act V Scene 3, spoken by Edgar.

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} Act V Scene 3, adapted from words spoken by Kent.