

# The New York Times



## **THEATER REVIEW; The Emperor's Life: These Boots Are Made for Talkin'**

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To paraphrase Mel Brooks: it's good to be the emperor. You get to be worshiped, wield power over life and death, have your whims instantly satisfied and, at the Classical Theater of Harlem, pontificate and prance about in a studded leather jock strap and see-through leopard-print robe.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Alfred Preisser and Randy Weiner's "Caligula" is that this confrontational, campy circumstance never seems embarrassing or even particularly parochial. Playing the famously vainglorious Roman ruler Caligula reinvented as a postmodern actor-cum-director, gasbag moralist and irreverent critic of biographies about himself, André De Shields is phenomenal. This particularly gifted and disciplined actor blasts the play onto an electrified plane where histrionic egomania and sweaty petulance seem like the only ways to fill a stage.

Directed by Mr. Preisser, a co-founder of the theater company, this "Caligula" is an original work, not an adaptation of Camus. Like the company's 2003 hit production of Genet's "Blacks," the show makes resonant use of a generalized, shabby circus setting and interactions with the audience that deliberately risk offense. The overreaching emperor -- who pettily asks to be called Magnagula ("big boots") rather than Caligula ("little boots") -- is surrounded by a chorus of scantily and anachronistically clad followers who applaud his pseudo-philosophical harangues on ultimate freedom and act out various "entertainments" designed both to provoke thought and to titillate.

The polymorphous sexuality of Bonobo chimps, for instance, ("our closest cousins" among animals) becomes an emblem of a "sexual Eden" where people follow their impulses. The virgin sacrifices of the Incas become lessons in how to overcome love's power. Buff gladiatrixes grapple with deputies of various upstart religions, though they shrink from fighting Jesus, whom Caligula dispatches himself in a pro wrestling match won with a whack from a folding chair stolen from an audience member. There are sprinkles of political topicality, spectators (myself included) pulled on stage (to savor Caligula's "cosmic pool"), a peanut vendor who doubles as a seer. Consistency of ideas isn't the show's strength.

What makes it all worthwhile, though, is the diminutive Mr. De Shields, who, with his outsize energy and charisma, towers over the 13 other actors, most far less experienced than he. His

physical exertions combined with his quicksilver shifts between loftiness and bitchiness, elation and despair, tenderness and viciousness, simply have to be seen.

"I'm here to save your soul and your body, not necessarily in that order," he says silkily, with a posed self-consciousness so fabulously insincere that it comes off as topsy-turvy sincerity. "I'm your inner freak, your *monstre sacré*."

"Caligula" continues through April 24 at the Classical Theater of Harlem, 645 St. Nicholas Avenue, at 141st Street; (212)868-444.