

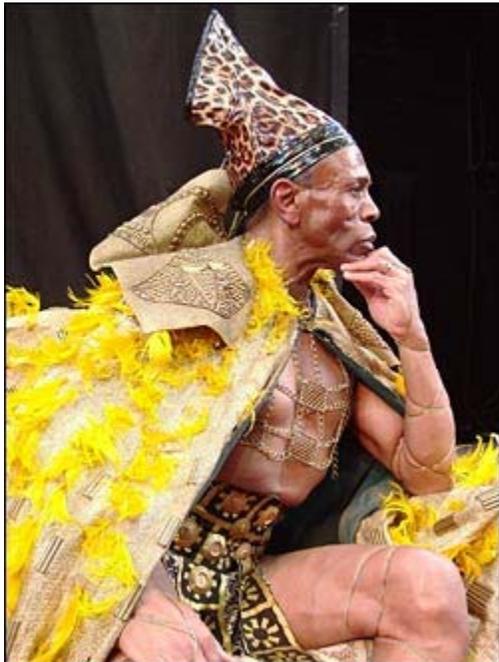


When in Rome . . .

De Shields, donning gold lamé, discovers his inner freak

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The emperor strikes back.

photo: Mike Messer

Caligula

By Alfred Preisser and Randy Weiner

HSA Theatre

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Anyone needing relief from the spectacles of death and religiosity that have dominated the mass media in the past few weeks should head up to the Classical Theatre of Harlem and partake of the delightfully scandalous sacraments on offer there. Presided over by the extraordinary André De Shields, the pagan cabaret that is Alfred Preisser and Randy Weiner's new play about the notorious Roman emperor Caligula is a marvel of wit, energy, and embodied philosophy.

The campy fun and faux-risqué flash that made Weiner's *The Donkey Show* such a long-running hit is leavened here by Preisser's intellectual ambition. (As co-founder and artistic director of the CTH, he has given ample evidence of his vision of a genuine contemporary engagement with the classics of world drama). The combination of flamboyant style and serious substance makes for a surprisingly lucid exploration of the play's subject, a figure who has attracted much dramatic attention over the years, most famously from Albert Camus and Bob Guccione. Murdered by his own guards at the age of 28, after less than four years of a reign marked by madness, incest, and arrogance, Caligula has long been a cautionary figure of excess as well as a flashpoint for fantasies of absolute power and unlimited perversion.

In De Shields's powerhouse performance, Caligula emerges not only as the infamous creature of appetite and transgression, but also as a man of enormous wit and alarming insight. Strutting his stuff in a gold lamé outfit and leopard-skin helmet, he proclaims his right to lead, to judge, to enjoy, and above all to envision a new way of life, even a new faith. Eschewing the false values of modesty and decency, he demands a new name, and claims a new identity: I am, he cheerfully

declares, "your inner freak!" Various hot-button topics are instantly transformed from this perspective: Slavery is "hot," incest is freedom ("I use the word *sister* in both biological and racial solidarity"), and caution is cowardice (" 'keep it real'—I hate that loathsome expression!").

Appropriately tacky costumes and set make a complicated comment on Caligula's program of self-deification and his absurd resistance to encroaching monotheisms. He challenges "the purveyor of loaves and fishes" to a wrestling match, and offers the hyper-sexual bonobo apes as a model for citizenship in the Caligulan universe: "They can't fight a war when they're having an orgasm."

Finally, De Shields's explosive energy, cheerfully supported by a chorus of Vegas-style Roman gladiators and showgirls, consumes all the philosophical ideas, historical anecdotes, and aesthetic ruminations he churns up in his cyclonic progress through the evening. This is "extreme performance," a feat of sweat and blood, a concert of sinew and muscle. So excessive and yet so precise, so multi-faceted and so chiseled, De Shields's performance is ultimately the play's most satisfying statement: The wisdom of the ages is just no match for the living body that embraces its own fabulousness.