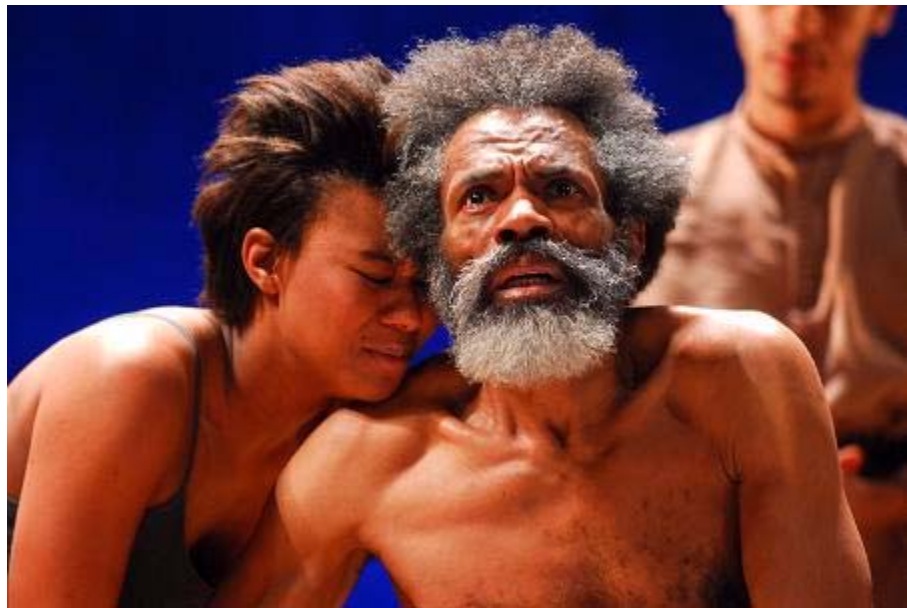




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Lear Gets Physical At the Folger

In the recent incarnation now playing at the Folger Theatre, the Classical Theatre of Harlem has managed to inject *King Lear* with a sort of Bacchanalian ferocity. This is a very physical production of the Shakespearean tragedy, and the intensity serves the work well.



It also means we have moments, like when Gloucester is blinded by the treacherous Cornwall, where we actually see the villain squeeze the man's eyeballs until they burst, squirting juices towards the audience. Oh, and as Lear descends into madness, he takes a moment to crawl across the laps of the entire fifth row of the audience, falling backwards on two patrons when he finishes.

Like we said, it gets physical. But it is a wonderful, absorbing kind of physical. This production takes many interesting turns -- choreographed movements by each of the King's daughters lend to a hell of an entrance by the glittering Lear (Andre De Shields, initially flamboyant yet commanding, and later deliciously, impossibly mad), a one-man band located on the second level of the set provides everything from melancholy melodies to rimshots. Lear's most trusted daughter fights off attackers like a sort of Cordelia: Warrior Princess.

Lear's kind of a high school staple, but for those who cut that day, the main plot revolves around the dividing of his land between his three daughters: Cordelia, Reagan and Goneril. Cordelia gets shafted for being honest during a masturbatory praise session, and when Lear's pride gets in the way, essentially disowning her, he falls victim to her more treacherous siblings, which literally

drives him crazy. There's also scheming afoot against the loyal Gloucester, whose illegitimate son Edmund turns him against his noble heir, Edgar.

Lear is most impressive for its comprehensive assault on your senses, but this wouldn't happen without its smart set and impeccable gathering of performances. Whether are we being seduced ourselves by the virile, self-satisfied Edmund (Ty Jones), creeped out but captivated by Ken Schatz's worldly and otherworldly Fool, or riveted at the sight of the wild-eyed, nearly-naked De Shields in the full-throttle of insanity, the impact is inarguable. Each actor handles the dialogue with either contemporary ease or an archaic fire, with an additional touch of bodily expressiveness. In an instant, the set becomes a storm or a clear night in the forest, and moving set pieces aided by actors provide additional dramatic effect. With every well-placed drum beat or lightning crash, the Classical Theatre of Harlem owns this *Lear*.

By [Missy Frederick](#)