

KING LEAR

Raw, riveting 'Lear' invigorates tragedy
By Rob Kendt

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If "King Lear" towers like the Mount Everest of the classical canon, to be approached by actors and audiences only with the utmost reverence and awe, thankfully no one has bothered to inform the Classical Theatre of Harlem. Shock and awe is more like it. The company's gripping, stripped-down new production of the Bard's epic is less an arduous climb to the heights of tragedy than a clanging, relentless scramble from bleak comedy to pitched battle, and from blind anger to visionary madness, with few tender mercies indulged along the way.

The result may not be definitive, and purists may howl at director Alfred Preisser's eagerness to cut and coarsen the text at nearly every turn. But you'd be hard-pressed to find a Shakespeare production as raw, electrifying and refreshingly unstuffy outside the occasional import to the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

André DeShields, still a fearless, irrepressible dervish of an actor at 60, holds nothing back as Lear - not the piercing registers of his resonant voice, nor the bubbling gray hair that rings his expressive Greek mask of a face, nor the sinewy, athletic frame he seems all too happy to uncover for much of the storm scene.

Indeed, DeShields plays the aged monarch with such vigor that it nearly hides the rigor of his interpretation. His Lear is so spoiled by royal prerogative, and so attuned to the ringing cadence of his own voice, that he literally can't seem to hear others speak. When he's contradicted, whether with good or ill intentions, he interrupts with a growl or zones out and changes the subject. And when he can no longer ignore the signs that his grasping daughters Goneril (Robyne Landiss Walker) and Regan (Zainab Jah) have become his enemies, he retreats into a ferocious, purging dementia, and finally a humbled, crumbling resignation.

The whole show is like DeShields' performance: bold and broad but also finely shaded. The bitter bastard Edmund (Ty Jones) punctuates his opening monologue with a few backflips, but also renders this villain's sarcasm with palpable relish. His wronged brother, Edgar (John Douglas Thompson), seethes as a face-painted faux-madman, but still manages a richly moving reunion with his fumbling father, Gloucester (Ted Lange).

Jah and Walker are a sinuous pair of vipers as Lear's scheming daughters, while Christina Sajous brings bracing backbone to the role of true-hearted Cordelia. Ken Schatz's Fool renders his mordant taunts as disarmingly cross-eyed baby talk. Though the roles of loyalists Gloucester and Kent have suffered egregious cuts, Lange and Jerome Preston Bates, respectively, make every

moment count.

Troy Hourie's surprisingly modular set evokes the deck of a ship run aground, and it works overtime with Aaron Black's lighting to conjure the storm on the heath. Judging from Kimberly Glennon's sumptuous costumes and the (uncredited) music, the action might be set in North Africa or Indonesia, but by play's end it might as well be Illyria. This tornado of a "Lear" wraps us in its vivid, violent swirl, then plops us onto a desolate shore, almost before we know what hit us. That's a pretty good trick for an old warhorse.

KING LEAR. Written by William Shakespeare. Directed by Alfred Preisser. The Classical Theatre of Harlem in a co-production with the Folger Theatre at the Harlem School of the Arts, 647 St. Nicholas Ave. at 141st Street, Harlem. Through Nov. 5. Tickets \$35. Call 212-868-4444. Seen Friday.