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Kim Sullivan (on floor) and André De Shields in Derek Walcott's "Dream on Monkey Mountain," by Classical Theater of Harlem.

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THEATER REVIEW | 'DREAM ON MONKEY MOUNTAIN'

An Old Man Fights for His Kingly Tribal Dream

By BRUCE WEBER

"**D**ream on Monkey Mountain," the lyrical epic by the Trinidadian Nobel laureate Derek Walcott, is an eclectic work, a layered narrative laden with historical, folkloric and literary allusions that, as the title suggests, maintains the tenuous logic and adventurous imagination of dreams.

Written in 1967 as a commission by the Royal Shakespeare Company but first performed that year in Trinidad and then in Los Angeles in 1970, it is at times poetic, at others glib, at times thunderously portentous, at others blithely offhand. The story focuses on an old man known as Makak, who is in jail in a British West Indian colony and who undertakes a trip — either in his mind or on the magic carpet of literature — back to Africa, where he may once have been a tribal king.

The play, which is being presented at the Harlem School of the Arts through Oct. 26, is episodic in nature. Like it brings its unbalanced hero through both dangerous and comic encounters with those who believe in his quest, those who must be convinced (when Makak holds burning coals in his hands and cures a mortally ill young husband, that does the trick for a whole village) and those who threaten it. And Mr. Walcott has employed both mythic and hallucinatory elements in positing Makak as visionary and lunatic, messiah and pathetic old man. Over all, it is difficult to parse, for audiences as well as directors and performers, a likely reason it is rarely produced even while being considered by some to be Mr. Walcott's masterpiece.

All of which makes "Dream on Monkey Mountain" natural fare for that giant-killer of a company, the Classical Theater of Harlem. Led by an artistic director, Alfred Preisser, who directed "Monkey Mountain" and who seems to operate on the principle of "Why shouldn't we?," this is a troupe that makes a habit of locating the most challenging works in the canon and knocking them off as if with a slingshot. (Next up: "Mother Courage.")

If the company has a signature in performance, it is an electricity that pulses through each and every production, the kind of palpable sizzle that comes from glee and gall. With occasional exceptions in starring roles — in this case André De Shields as Makak and Kim Sullivan as his Sancho-like sidekick, Moustique — the actors the company employs are generally at the beginning of their careers, but the lack of experience is never stifling. And in "Dream on Monkey Mountain," each and every member of the ensemble, which is full of athletic, stirringly attractive men and women, is equipped with nerve and energy.

Further, Mr. Preisser and his choreographer, Bruce Heath, have employed the propulsive rhythms of Africa and the Caribbean, accompanied by two live percussionists, not just in the ensemble dances but in moving the actors around the stage. A handsome set evokes an outlying bamboo forest and an eerie, dominating moon. And striking costumes — from Makak's tatters to the colorful shawls and skirts of village women to the thorough swathing in white of the mysterious woman who inspires Makak to make his pilgrimage — add to the production's equatorial sensuousness, which reaches its apex in the second act when actors lying on their backs with their bare legs waving sinuously and slowly in the air are used to depict the ponderous lazy sway of jungle flora.

Mr. De Shields, best known to audiences from Broadway musicals (most recently), gives a performance fraught with tenseness and distress; his Makak is on high sensory alert, as though each cell of his skin were on fire and his eyes and ears were receiving signals they'd never received before. It's exhausting to watch him, but it's also tough to turn away; you find yourself looking for him even as he wanders off when others take center stage. And Mr. Sullivan is a fine complement to him, edgy and raffish, an entertaining mortal escort for his divinely inspired friend. But the ensemble is the real attraction here, and their collective performance is sexy, jazzy and bristling.

The effect is that the play seems to exploit the company's innate qualities, not so much the other way around. So although "Dream on Monkey Mountain" is hardly written to be an easy evening in the theater, with the Classical Theater of Harlem draped all over it, it's as entertaining as it is ambitiously literary.

DREAM ON MONKEY MOUNTAIN

By Derek Walcott; directed by Alfred Preisser; sets by Troy Hourie; costumes by Kimberly Glennon; lighting by Aaron Black; sound by Matt Kraus; choreography by Bruce Heath; musical director, William (Spaceman) Patterson; stage manager, Daniel Isaacson; dialect coach, Chantal Jean-Pierre. Presented by the Classical Theater of Harlem, Christopher McElroen, co-founder and executive director; Mr. Preisser, co-founder and artistic director. At the Harlem School of the Arts, 645 St. Nicholas Avenue, near 141st Street, Hamilton Heights.

WITH: André De Shields (Makak), Kim Sullivan (Moustique), Benton Greene (Tigre/Ensemble), Jerry Clicquot (Souris/Ensemble), Michael Early (Corporal Lestrade), Arthur James Solomon (Basil/Ensemble), Neil Dawson (Conteur/Pamphilion), Délé (Apparition) and Celli Pitt (Market Wife/Ensemble).