



Bart DeLorenzo Directs Two Casts of King Lear for Antaeus

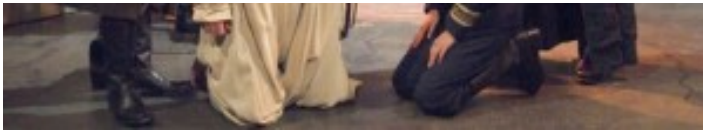
FEATURES by [Deborah Behrens](#) | June 23, 2010

King Lear, presented by Antaeus Company, opens June 26 at 8 pm and June 27 at 4 pm; plays Fri.-Sat., 8 pm; Sun. 2:30 and 7:30 pm; extra performance Thurs., July 1 at 8 pm in place of July 4; through Aug. 8. Tickets: \$30-\$34. [Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood](#); 818.506.1983 or [antaeus.org](#).

If it takes a village to raise a child, how many actors does it take to stage King Lear? If you are director Bart DeLorenzo helming a double-cast production at the Antaeus Company starring Dakin Matthews and Harry Groener as the demented monarch, the answer hovers around 40.

It's a daunting number when you consider the process involves rehearsing rotating pairs of actors cast in the same role who often have separate visions of their character but must eventually end up on the same page. A fan of Roland Barthe, the French semiotician and author of *The Fashion System*, as well as founding artistic director of the Evidence Room, DeLorenzo believes the process has an organic method of natural selection.





Jeremy Shouldis, Bruce Green (rear), Harry Groener, Rebecca Mozo and Gregory Itzin

“As an artistic director for so many years, you watch directors trying to solve problems,” he explains over lunch in Venice. “Sometimes they kill themselves trying to solve it because they won’t let go of some stupid idea they originally had that was good but is no longer good. And it’s just like, think of it differently. That’s what’s so exciting about working with these two casts. I don’t really have to come up with a new way to think about a scene because when one team steps down, the other team steps up and then we all just see it differently. It’s like, oh, here’s another way to skin this cat. And I’m very interested in that.”

Besides Matthews and Groener, the Antaeus teams are loaded with well-known stage, film and television actors such as J.D. Cullum, Seamus Dever, Morlan Higgins, Gregory Itzin, Robert Pine, Kirsten Potter and Norman Snow, a fact DeLorenzo says makes the process even more invigorating but not intimidating. The award-winning director has lots of experience tackling talented egos ranging from the world premieres of Joan Rivers: A Work in Progress by a Life in Progress at the Geffen Playhouse and Justin Tanner’s Voice Lessons with Laurie Metcalf and French Stewart, to old Evidence Room pal Megan Mullally in Adam Bock’s The Receptionist.

“It is really striking because there are so many stars in this show,” he admits. “I mean you could build a play around so many of these incredible actors. When we went into the process, we all just looked around the table and never talked about it. I think what has been amazing is the amount of respect around that table and knowing there were going to be a lot of good ideas once we got up on our feet. We needed to allow people the opportunity to express them while also providing room for their various explorations. Some actors want to pursue one take from the very beginning and others don’t want to start playing things until they feel they know it better. And so it’s an incredibly respectful process. I guess because they’ve done this before there has been way less clash of egos or personalities than I would have expected.”

It’s a new theatrical exercise for DeLorenzo whose LA reputation took flight with the Evidence Room, a theater company critically lauded for presenting contemporary cutting edge local and world premiere plays ranging from Charles Mee’s The Berlin Circle to Martin Crimp’s Attempts on Her Life, which lost its home in 2006. Since then he’s become a highly sought after hired gun for both Equity Waiver productions like Charles Mee’s bobrauschenbergamerica for TheSpyAnts at [Inside] the Ford and large scale venues such as South Coast Repertory (world premieres of Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa’s Doctor Cerberus and Donald

Margulies' Shipwrecked! An Entertainment later revived at the Geffen Playhouse, plus Sarah Ruhl's Dead Man's Cell Phone); Michael Sargent's The Projectionist at The Kirk Douglas, Racine's Britannicus at Cal State Long Beach and Around the World in 80 Days at the Cleveland Playhouse.

The Antaeus Company is filled with people who are both long-time colleagues and veterans of the double-cast process which began nearly two decades ago under the tutelage of founding artistic director Matthews.



Morlan Higgins, Ramon De Ocampo, Dakin Matthews and Rebecca Mozo

“You gain this incredible collaborative spirit because these people have not just worked together on this but they’ve worked on numerous other things. A lot of these actors have known each other for 20, 30, even a couple for 40 years. There’s something very special about that. Many of them have already done the play in different roles. That’s what I think is so striking about this play in Mr. Shakespeare’s work. This is not only an ensemble play but in some way, it’s a family play. So it really suits the company. And I think this production is going to celebrate that aspect of it.”

King Lear is the first full Shakespeare production in the Antaeus Company’s 19-year history and acts as the focal point for its fifth biennial ClassicsFest featuring actor-initiated workshops, readings and special events that kick off July 6. Artistic director Jeanie Hackett told DeLorenzo she thought Lear was like a Chekhov play. DeLorenzo believes it could also live in the canon of American drama.

“Of all Mr. Shakespeare’s work, I would say this is the most Chekhovian,” he explains. “We watch a big family fall apart, which is just what Chekhov is always interested in. I think also, in the great tradition of the American drama, the great American plays are all family plays. That’s sort of the central American metaphor for the world, the family. You would think, well of course that’s how it is for Shakespeare, too. But actually I don’t think it is in his plays. In this one however, it is. The way in which we treat each other in a moment of

crisis or change defines who we are as a family or who we are as a society. That's the connection the play makes."

Yale alumna DeLorenzo's connection to *Lear* dates back to a graduate school production at Harvard University's [American Repertory Theater's Institute for Advanced Theatre Training](#) where he was assistant director to Adrian Hall. The cast featured F. Murray Abraham as Lear, Christine Eubank and later Cherry Jones as Regan, plus Jonathan Fried, Candy Buckley and other resident actors. He has studied the play extensively and watched numerous filmed versions while also being very interested in Edward Bond's new conception simply entitled *Lear*. A particular challenge of this new production is working with not just two Lears but one who is a noted Shakespeare scholar and dramaturge who recently did the role in Pittsburgh (Matthews) and the other who is a three time Tony nominee for his work in Broadway musicals (*Cats*, *Oklahoma!* and *Crazy For You*) recently seen at the Geffen in the Shakespeare themed *Equivocation* (Groener).

"I'm used to crafting a show very specifically around particular people and a particular investigation," DeLorenzo admits. "I'm happy to be a kind of editor. But I really want to pursue what Dakin and Harry are interested in because I just think that makes the performances stronger. They don't lean on trying to please me because there are more things in heaven and earth Horatio than are in my philosophy. So I'm very interested in what they bring to it. And of course they have different things they want to explore. Dakin comes to this play with a long history and a great love. If I remember correctly I think he did a dissertation on it. He's done quite a lot of scholarship on the play and it was an incredible resource in rehearsal to have him as a resident dramaturge. Everyone in the cast will tell you that."

Because Matthews had played the role before, DeLorenzo says he offered Groener pointers on how to work through the demanding part while at the same time gaining new insight from Groener's interpretation.



Harry Groener and Robert Pine

“Harry is approaching it from a very different history you know, but with an enormous enthusiasm. He arrived in rehearsal already having learnt the role, it seemed to me. I think he’s exploring something very personal in the play as he moves through it. There is a real precision in how he is figuring out what he wants to do. Maybe that’s a reflection of his background, of that desire to perfect something. So they are very, very different. I think I would say this for all the pairings in the play. They’re very different and yet there’s something very much the same about them. There is a certain sympathy between them. I guess because we’re all ultimately serving this particular script.”

Deciding how to split the pairs up into two separate ensembles was harder than he imagined. “It was one of the most complicated things I’ve ever done. We made playing cards out of the actors and made two teams. Then I started switching them. It begins like everything you do, people sort of come together. I know I want these two together and I know I want these two but they can switch as a unit. Actually I want these four together, okay, well then they can switch. Jeanie told me one thing that was interesting. She said ‘You know, as soon as you divide them up, the two casts will begin to have personalities.’ And I was just like, that’s true. I haven’t seen it yet but I imagine maybe I will.”

DeLorenzo says people keep asking him what his “take” is on this piece. What’s his vision? He wants the play to speak for itself.

“I think of all the writers Mr. Shakespeare is in some ways the most open to interpretation. My job is to make the story really clear and hope everyone will be able to follow the play. But in terms of what you think about during the play and its resonance, that is an extremely personal thing. I don’t like it when directors get too pushy. Pay attention to this, not to that, you know? I think the range of his thoughts and the ideas expressed are supposed to impact us all differently.

To him, *Lear* is a play in the genre of *The Oresteia*. Where someone sees themselves in the family structure has a major impact on how they interpret the play. “This is a play about fathers but it’s also a play about children and many of us are both of these things. The ways in which our sympathies go back and forth are very personal. In my experience, a good Shakespeare production doesn’t just present one thing to you. It presents a feast of ideas of which you partake throughout the play then you go home with it. My hope is that instead of me building to one great scene, there’ll be different scenes that different people will respond to in different ways, so it looks like a Chekhov play.”

Given the variety of eras and forms of dress *Lear* productions have been subject to over the decades, when asked what form his would take, DeLorenzo answered, “A children’s play.

“I wanted the look of the production to be like a classic story or fable,” he explains, handing the reins to Cousin Bette set designer Tom Buderwitz to execute his vision. “Once upon a time there was a king who had three daughters. I wanted a little bit of a children’s book in the play. I tried to stay away from setting it in a particular period. If I said to you, there was a king who had three daughters, there’s a picture already in your mind, right? And then a soldier comes in and then a madman, you know? And a fool. I want to get at those archetypal images that are in your head.”

When asked why he thought productions of Lear seemed to be dotting the landscape lately, he pointed to the seismic shifts the US is currently facing.

“One of the central issues of the play is generational change, which certainly is a subject this country is thinking about. So we do move forward in time in the play a little bit to sort of acknowledge that because I think Shakespeare is struggling with what happens when the world changes and a new generation takes over. Both the hope of that and the dangers of that. In this case I’m not sure how optimistic Mr. Shakespeare is about this kind of change. It’s a qualified optimism, if there is any.”

Life After the Evidence Room

DeLorenzo admits after the Evidence Room left its Beverly Boulevard home four years ago, life as a free-floating gun for hire has been laced with opportunities from unexpected sources.

“I really wanted to see if I could make a living working in the theater in Los Angeles, which is an incredibly challenging thing to do,” he says. “So when it first happened, I just started saying yes to everything because I wanted to experiment. And I was surprised that theatres I didn’t know had any interest in me were suddenly more interested. People started offering me what I thought were very strange things. Things that as an artistic director, I wouldn’t have hired myself to direct. I actually loved that period because I’d gotten involved with all sorts of projects like the Donald Margulies piece, Joan Rivers, the Unknown Theatre and that Racine play.”

Despite the many opportunities, DeLorenzo says he still finds it financially challenging to stay afloat in LA; something he feels has also caused the exodus of many of his fellow directors.





Bart DeLorenzo

“I had a very challenging year last year. It was one of these strange years where everyone came up to me and said ‘Oh my God, you’re doing everything. You’re doing so well.’ And of course I’m doing a lot of exciting artistic projects and having a really great time. But I had a pretty devastating year financially. It’s just sad that when we talk about what’s wrong with LA theater, it’s the same conversation I’ve been having ever since I came in town.

“I think the answer is very simple: LA does not help its theater artists make a living. You can make a living as a theater artist in Chicago, Minneapolis, New York and in Washington but very few can make a living here. And if you can, you are lucky that year. I just wish that was a priority because I think it would have enormous dividends for the future of LA theater if those people who do have the power to help, were to make that a focus. The collection of people here is amazing. So many of the people I think of as similar to me, who arrived in LA at a certain time and started doing a certain kind of work as directors, have left one after another. And I just think it’s sad. I don’t think it helps the city at all.”

When asked about the recession and shrinking audience attendance, DeLorenzo thinks a disconnect exists between some of the larger theaters and Los Angeles itself. “They don’t really feel like places where we celebrate the art of our city. I think you can do a great production in one of those spaces and people don’t come because these organizations don’t feel a part of LA. A theater is not a room where plays are performed. It is a participant in the life of the city. And I think that relationship has a personality: it talks and it listens and it talks back and it listens. I’ve heard all these stories and yet in the past year, a lot of the theaters I’ve worked in have been much smaller venues. And my God, every show I did sold out.”

One of those was Voice Lessons starring Laurie Metcalf and French Stewart at the Zephyr Theatre. “It was a very handmade production. I remember on closing night, Laurie was packing up to go to New York to do the Neil Simon plays. I was like, oh that will be really fun. And she was kind of wistful. She said, ‘Yeah, but not as fun as this.’ There’s something about driving a few miles and putting on this hilarious play in a simple room

with your friends for an hour. You have a drink and go home afterward. What could be more fun than that? Now if only you could make a living!”

Upcoming projects include a potential Evidence Room production this fall plus a return to the Cleveland Playhouse in spring 2011 to direct Karen Zacarias’ Legacy of Light about the French scientist Émilie du Châtelet and a female modern day equivalent. While DeLorenzo welcomes the out of town opportunity, his heart longs for home turf.

“My dream remains, and maybe I should give it up, to work in the theatre in Los Angeles. It’s a big city!” he laughs. “Why shouldn’t I be able to do that? That’s my love. And maybe I will at some point find another love like many of my contemporaries have. I think almost all of them have gone to New York. Then of course they’re invited back to direct shows.”

Feature image of Dakin Matthews and Morlan Higgins and production photos by Ed Krieger.

Article by Deborah Behrens.

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