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### Theater review: 'King Lear' times 3

June 28, 2010 | 6:22 pm



“King Lear” tests the limits of how much human suffering can be encompassed in a drama. The eminent scholar A.C. Bradley called the play “the most terrible picture that Shakespeare painted of the world.” Dr. Johnson was so shattered by Cordelia’s death at the end that he said he was unable to reread the work until he later undertook to revise Shakespeare’s works as editor.

I’ve just seen the play three times in as many nights with three different casts. The first two encounters were by the [Antaeus Company](#) at Deaf West Theatre in North Hollywood with Dakin Matthews and Harry Groener alternating in the title role. The third was at San Diego’s [Old Globe](#) with Robert Foxworth getting his turn to rail and wail as the tragic king.

One would think after so much pity and fear that I’d be writing this review from a sanitarium, my mind a World Cup stadium of horrific vuvuzela buzzing. Fortunately, I survived my marathon with my wits intact. (Where’s my T-shirt?) I can’t recommend the experience to a civilian, but allow me to make a suggestion: Choose one “Lear,” preferably one of the two directed by Bart DeLorenzo for Antaeus. DeLorenzo’s staging isn’t one for the ages, but you’re not likely to see such high-caliber thespians perform this prodigious masterpiece in a pocket space that provides a harrowing close-up of the devastation.

Matthews’ Lear is the most colorful of the three, a prismatic portrait of royal entitlement and elderly exasperation broken by cruelty into humility. His anger, as revealed in the opening act after Cordelia



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(Rebecca Mozo) refuses to flatter him for her inheritance, is self-fueling: The more he roars, the more incentive he has to roar louder. How dare anyone provoke this dragon's wrath? Matthews understands just how thoroughly Lear has confused his position as a monarch with his identity as a man. Distinguishing these two facets of his being will be obstreperously agonizing.

Groener takes a softer, slower and more painstaking approach, his reactions more internal, his fury less rash though no less titanic once it's released. If his Lear is ultimately more affecting than Matthews', his performance has the advantage of a more cohesive ensemble. (One has a sense that both casts will get stronger deeper into the run.) Yet Groener wears his character's grief like a familiar patchy garment, and as his sorrow grows more acute, the mission of John Sloan's sure-footed Edgar to revenge the evil that has overtaken the kingdom becomes more urgent.

This is the first full production of a Shakespeare play in Antaeus' 19-year history, and one has the sense that the classical theater ensemble's practice of providing two sets of actors for each play (devised to accommodate committed stage actors with unpredictable Hollywood schedules) probably isn't an ideal fit for a behemoth such as "Lear." The directorial task is formidable enough without compounding it with logistical complexities, and the performers would have benefited from more concentrated rehearsal time. Much as it's a pleasure to see such distinguished veterans as Matthews and Groener assume the Lear challenge, it's overreaching to try to cultivate separate Shakespeare acting companies when even the very best American theaters have difficulty coming up with one.

As for the performance style, a compromise is struck between the contemporary and the classical. (There's no attempt to neutralize those qualities of the actors that may not seem traditional.) A unique theatrical universe is created without concern for historical period. The design is minimal and a bit monotonous, the result no doubt of a shoestring budget and a primary focus on the actor.

DeLorenzo's job is first and foremost to support the ensemble. This isn't an occasion for auteurial strutting, although he does take directorial liberties in his handling of the Fool (a role upon which both JD Cullum and Stephen Caffrey put their own inventive stamp), and his staging bravely doesn't flinch from the horror of the escalating violence and warfare. (Jacobean drama, it turns out, has quite a lot in common with horror movies.)

The Matthews team, featuring Morlan Higgins' stalwart Kent, Kirsten Potter's villainous Goneril, Francia DiMase's vindictive Regan and Drew Doyle's sly Oswald, ultimately had a larger intellectual impact on me — the play administering a lesson on the dangers of dividing language from truth. The Groener crew, with Allegra Fulton's sinister Goneril and Jen Dede's hateful Regan balanced by Gregory Itzin's noble Kent and Robert Pine's sorry Gloucester — allowed me to see (and feel) the instinct of goodness at work in a malignant universe. Dark as "Lear" undeniably is, there is light — and poetry — in the basic human need for justice to triumph over our baser selves.

After back-to-back nights of the small-scaled Antaeus versions, I looked forward to a more monumental "Lear." The Old Globe production, directed by Adrian Noble, the former Royal Shakespeare Company leader who is now heading the San Diego theater's Shakespeare Festival, is certainly an elaborate (and often eye-catching) spectacle. And just as oversized is Foxworth's robust Lear.

Could it be a tad too robust? One of the problems I have with Foxworth's rendition is that he seems too hale and hearty for a king "four score and upward." Although Lear calls himself "a very foolish fond old man" as the play nears its climax, Foxworth has the foppish air of an ex hippie who has retired in sumptuous California style. In his scene with the blinded Gloucester, the mad royal has an expensive haircut and a bohemian outfit that would fetch a steep price on Abbot Kinney Boulevard.

It's an otherwise solid and intelligent (if a touch too declamatory) portrayal. In short, the interpretation is of a piece with a production that, in keeping with the tradition of alfresco Shakespeare, would rather be vivid than subtle. (The assumption seems to be that outdoor theater is largely a groundling phenomenon.)

Everything, in other words, is writ large. Poor Cordelia (Catherine Gowl) not only gets disinherited but one of her nasty sisters pulls her hair as she weepingly departs. The storm that buffets Lear as he curses Goneril (Emily Swallow) and Regan (Aubrey Saverino) for their ingratitude suggests a wintry impressionistic wonderland. The dead leaves covering Ralph Funicello's set are not just a handy symbol but a great hideaway



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for Bruce Turk's capering Fool.

The acting company strains (passion inevitably means volume) but manages to convey the tale with a good deal of clarity and vigor. Yet the play manifestly exceeds the depiction. This will always be the case, but better productions tempt us to uncover more of the hidden layers of this inexhaustible parable.

-- Charles McNulty  
[twitter.com/charlesmcnulty](https://twitter.com/charlesmcnulty)

"King Lear," the Antaeus Company at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. Contact theater for schedule. Ends Aug. 8. \$30 and \$34. (818) 506-1983 or [www.Antaeus.org](http://www.Antaeus.org). Running time: 3 hours.

"King Lear," Old Globe's Lowell Davies Festival Theatre, Balboa Park, San Diego. Contact theater for schedule. \$29 to \$78. (619) 234-5623. Running time: 3 hours

Photos: Top: Harry Groener and Robert Pine in an Antaeus production of "King Lear." Credit: Ed Krieger. Bottom: Robert Foxworth in the Old Globe production. Credit: Craig Schwartz.

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