Lear is here with two casts, and, in this sizzling production by the Antaeus Company directed by Bart DeLorenzo, it's a winner. I saw Dakin Matthews' Lear (the other cast is headed by Harry Groener) and Matthews and DeLorenzo brought out some new qualities in Lear.

This Lear, though as turbulent and tempestuous as he is written, has a roistering sense of fun. He and the Fool (Stephen Caffrey) romp mischievously. He even lets the Fool precede him on the stage with garish make-up and crown. It's a shock to the audience.

Though not above a towering rage on the perceived defection of his dearest daughter Cordelia (Tessa Thompison), he's warm and funny. Even when all is lost in the mad scenes, he's a presence to be reckoned with. "Ay, every inch a king!" he roars. And so he enters the stormy night, raging at the elements, heedless of what he wears, ranging from manic to gallows humor.

The subplot follows half-brothers Edgar (Ramon De Ocampo) and his bastard brother Edmund (Seamus Dever), sons of the Earl of Gloucester. Edmund is one of Shakespeare's died in the wool villains and has some thrilling monologues. Edgar, a straightforward youth, disguises himself as Poor Tom by swathing his near naked form with mud and fences with Lear, metaphorically. When his father, whom Edmund has tricked into disowning him, is blinded by sadistic Regan (Francia DiMase) and her husband, the equally sadistic Duke of Cornwall (Adrian La Tourelle), he leads Gloucester through the storm in an enigmatic and dramatic father-and-son denouement.

Shakespeare's characters are rarely as developed as they are in Lear. The women are a disappointment. The elder sisters are viciously one-dimensional and Cordelia, in her brief scene, makes a statement but disappears until the last scene. Norman Snow is a powerful Gloucester and Stephen Caffrey as the Fool cavorts and clowns non-stop.

DeLorenzo is a creative director and Lear lends itself to many touches. The Fool, who was hanged in Ian McKellen's version at UCLA, is strangled by the Duke of Cornwall here.

The sound design by John Zalewski is impeccable, especially in the storm scenes. The thunder is a counterpoint to Lear's speeches and the lightening comes in on beat.

Antaeus is performing at the Deaf West Theatre and it's amazing what they can do in a small space. Think back to the original Globe Theater in London which hadn't much more room and you'll see what Shakespeare had to work with, and what Antaeus sustains — passion and imagination!
King Lear
Playwright: William Shakespeare
Director: Bart DeLorenzo
Cast: Dakin Matthews (Lear), Kirsten Potter (Goneril), John DeMita (Duke of Albany), Francia DiMase (Regan), Adrian LaTourelle (Duke of Cornwall), Tessa Thompson (Cordelia), Brett Colbeth (King of France), Jason Henning (Duke of Burgundy), Morlan Higgins (Earl of Kent), Norman Snow (Earl of Gloucester), Ramon De Ocampo (Edgar), Seamus Dever (Edmund), Stephen Caffrey (Fool), Drew Doyle (Oswald), Adam Meyer (Knight), Paige Wilson (Gloucester's Servant), Jeff Doba (Doctor).
Scenic Design: Tom Buderwitz
Lighting Design: Lap Chi Chu
Fight Choreographer: TJ Marchbank
Props Designer: Jan Prince
Costume Design: A. Jeffrey Schoenberg
Sound Design: John Zalewski
Production Stage Manager: Deirdre Murphy
Producer: Young J
Running Time: Three hours, one intermission
Running Dates: June 26-August 15, 2010
Reviewed by Laura Hitchcock on July 29.