

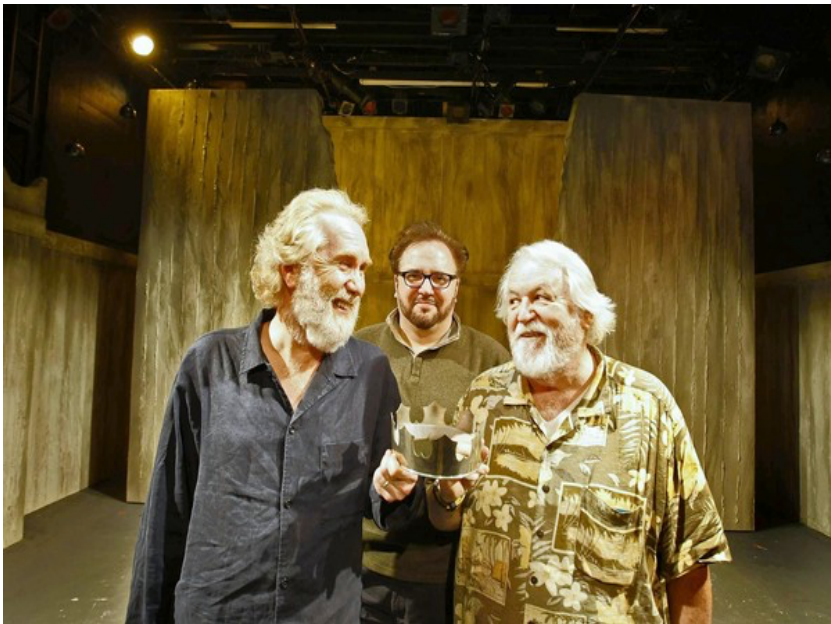
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by Mike Boehm

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Antaeus Company doubles up 'King Lear'

Dakin Matthews and Harry Groener share the role; indeed, every role has two actors. It helps when someone needs to step out for screen work.



Allen J. Schaben, Los Angeles Times

If "King Lear" has a moral, it's that if you're lucky enough to have a kingdom, it's probably not a good idea to divide it in two.

The Antaeus Company production that just opened in a 49-seat house in North Hollywood turns that wisdom upside down: Lucky enough to have a distinguished actor as Shakespeare's tragic king, it has divided the role in two.

Dakin Matthews, one of L.A.'s most accomplished stage actors — with particularly lofty credentials in Shakespeare — is splitting what's widely considered a career-crowning role with Harry Groener, whose three Tony nominations suggest he's no slouch himself.

The doubling extends throughout the cast. Gregory Itzin, the scheming U.S. President Charles Logan on the television show "24," plays the Earl of Kent, a steadfast and resourceful mensch — trading off nights with Morlan Higgins, known for his work at the Fountain Theatre in plays by Arthur Miller and Athol Fugard and as a mysterious thug in a Matrix Theatre production of Harold Pinter's "The Birthday Party" — a part he also split with Itzin.

The director, Bart DeLorenzo, ran the inventive L.A. company the Evidence Room before jumping to major regional stages at South Coast Repertory, the Geffen Playhouse and the Cleveland Play House. He's tasked with making a very large ensemble — 18 members, times two — fit on a small stage at the Deaf West Theatre.

Directing in this format could turn into a nightmare for a director given to control freakdom, says Matthews, who was Antaeus' artistic director for its first 13 years. But DeLorenzo, jumping into Shakespeare for the first time since his graduate school days at Harvard, says he's not the autocratic type, and the abundance of talent in this "Lear" (running through August 8) made it too juicy to pass up.

Groener was among the charter members who launched Antaeus in 1991 to provide a home for film and television actors who want to stay in touch with classic plays. It's named after a giant in Greek mythology who was unbeatable as long as he kept his feet on the ground — an apt metaphor for a company of actors convinced that, whatever else they might do in their professional lives, they need to stay rooted in rich dramatic soil.

Doubling each role has been Antaeus' policy from the start. It accommodates the realities of acting life in L.A. by taking guilt and anxiety out of the equation for stage performers who are in demand for well-paid screen roles and don't want to sacrifice those opportunities to be in plays that pay next to nothing. Absences and defections can become chronic for small L.A. companies as screen opportunities arise; Antaeus' innovation of having two first-string casts as insurance made so much sense that it was subsequently adopted by the Matrix Theatre Company in West Hollywood.

But it's not for everybody. Actors don't want to think of themselves as replaceable, says Jeanie Hackett, Antaeus' artistic director since 2004, "and as soon as you get a double, you're replaceable." A few company members dislike sharing a role, says Groener, but they put up with it to stay immersed in classic plays.

Antaeus has struggled economically since a mid-1990s bid to be adopted as the in-house classical wing of L.A.'s top producer, Center Theatre Group, didn't pan out. Until this year it had mounted just 13 productions in 18 years, although members stayed busy offstage, gathering to read and rehearse plays for as long as a year. This year marks the first time it has mounted a full season — three plays, plus Classicsfest 2010, a summer series of public workshops and readings of a dozen plays. The leap was made possible by Antaeus' first major fundraising push, which generated about \$200,000.

"We need to do well this season to have another season," Hackett says, and "doing our first Shakespeare is huge for us" — as if carrying the dead Cordelia in what may be the most heartbreaking scene ever written weren't enough weight already for Antaeus' two kings.

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Although it hasn't staged the Bard until now, Shakespeare has been a regular subject for Antaeus' in-house explorations. One benefit, Hackett says, has been unlearning rigid rules about Shakespearean acting that she absorbed as a student at New York University and London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and in subsequent professional productions. "Dakin teaches actors to make this language their own. I thought, 'Oh, my God, this is what I always thought in my heart it was supposed to be.'"

One orthodoxy that Matthews and Groener don't subscribe to is that playing Lear is an awe-inducing pinnacle, a mountain to be climbed in the footsteps of such eminences as Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, John Gielgud, Ian Holm and Ian McKellen.

"It's not helpful at all to think of it that way, and it's not true," Matthews says, seated recently beside Groener and DeLorenzo at a reading table in the Antaeus Company's library, across the hall from the Deaf West stage.

The part is rich but straightforward, Matthews says, and thus not as difficult as such "knotty" roles as Macbeth and Brutus in "Julius Caesar." One is inclined to take his word for it. Until two years ago, he was the in-house Shakespearean dramaturge and scholar of the Old Globe in San Diego, which produces Shakespeare every summer. Matthews' work included adapting the two parts of "Henry IV" as a single play; its Broadway staging by Jack O'Brien starred Kevin Kline, Ethan Hawke and Audra McDonald (with Matthews in two supporting roles) won 2004 Tony Awards for best revival and best direction of a play.

Groener says that singing, dancing and acting his way through "Crazy for You," a high-energy 1992 Broadway hit that recycled Gershwin tunes, "was much harder" than Lear, despite the Shakespearean role's status. "The tradition is there, and so many brilliant actors have played the part. But I can't think of it that way. I think of it as just

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another part I'm playing." In addition to his Tony-nominated turns in "Crazy for You," "Oklahoma!" and "Cats," Groener's Broadway credits include another legendary monarch, King Arthur, in the far different context of "Monty Python's Spamalot."

Matthews and Groener say that double-teaming Lear means they get to steal from each other. In a recent rehearsal, when Matthews' team, dubbed the Fools, played a scene, Groener watched from theater seats with his fellow Madmen. Then DeLorenzo would say "switch," and it was their turn.

Matthews, 69, played Lear in 2008 at the Pittsburgh Irish & Classical Theatre. But watching the 58-year-old Groener rehearse, he said, has suggested fresh possibilities.

When Groener's Lear started to curse one of his daughters, then seemed to forget what he wanted to say, Matthews made mental notes. His counterpart's approach had reminded him that, by that point in the play, the king is not only in a state of shock and outrage but famished and sleep-deprived as well. So playing him as drawing momentary blanks could be worth a try. Says Matthews: "There are things you forget while creating your own part, then somebody else comes on and you go, 'Oh, of course! Yeah! Why didn't I think of that?'"

Other Groener inventions that he's tried to borrow haven't suited him so well. After one such attempt, Matthews recalled, "I came over and apologized to Harry: 'Sorry what I did to your Lear there.'"

Although the two casts are meant to perform as separate units, Fools and Madmen are apt to intermingle during the show's run as the conflicting screen jobs come up. But the two leads don't expect to give up any of their half-share in Lear. Groener says he has asked his agent not to book any jobs on show nights, and Matthews says it's unlikely conflicts will arise with his recurring TV parts as a judge on "General Hospital" and a gynecologist to vampires on "True Blood."

Initially, Jonathan Lynn, a film director ("My Cousin Vinny") and Antaeus board member, was lined up to direct "King Lear," but Hackett says he had to step aside in February, when he learned that work on a film would make him unavailable. With the cast already set, she invited DeLorenzo to take over.

Matthews says that Antaeus actors develop a strong interpretive grip on their parts, given the extensive woodshedding they do. But they still need a director who can decide how to stage less clear-cut moments. For directors used to being auteurial and exerting strict control, he says, "it would be hell, a nightmare, and it would bring out the beast in them."

DeLorenzo says he was curious to experience double-casting and figured his low-key approach would work in a delicate setting where blunt criticism of one actor could be taken as favoritism toward another. "I'm a lot less willful than many directors are. I find you can do a lot with a soft nudge and a well-timed laugh."

It makes sense, the director says, to heed actors who have pored over "King Lear" together for a year. To come up with those ideas, he says, "it took some time and a special group of people."