

King Lear, starring Harry Groener



This is the second of two reviews of the double-cast production of KING LEAR by the Antaeus Theatre Company.

As explained in the previous evaluation, the Antaeus Company is justly renowned for the quality of the actors who work for them and those who direct them. Therefore, each version had its own opening night, so that all the actors could be reviewed fairly).

Harry Groener, best known as a Broadway song-and-dance-man, is – perhaps unjustly – an extraordinary surprise as Lear. Whereas Dakin Matthews, in the alternate cast, is more classically-trained and thus truer to the “Shakespearean” model, Mr. Groener made a stronger emotional pull in the devilishly-difficult role. Lear says he is 80+ years, and in truth neither actor looks that old, but both brought the diminished intellectual capability to life. This formerly robust military leader has clearly outlived his years, giving up his kingly power and position too late to do anybody any good in the tragedy – his petulant need to be lavishly loved creates misery and dead bodies all around him. And Groener better shows us the loss of virility and keen military mind all too clearly, for a stronger sense of pity for the old man.

In his production, the great J.D. Cullum shines as the wise and wise-cracking Fool. Allegra Fulton’s Goneril and Jen Dede’s Regan are as calculating and sexy as their alternates, while Gregory Itzin makes the Earl of Kent a sensible supporter of the maddened Lear. Robert Pine is a pathetic ruin as the Earl of Gloucester, while Gloucester’s legitimate son, Edgar, finds a strong proponent in John Sloan. Unhappily, Edmund, Gloucester’s bastard-son, was more superficially acted by Daniel Bess, who looks good and fights well, but isn’t seasoned yet.

Director Bart DeLorenzo does a bang-up job of keeping the pace taut and allowing the actors their head on some of the confrontations. And he also solves a particularly thorny problem of what happens to Lear’s Fool (the text is ambiguous) in a clever manner. And Cullum brings it all to sad life.

The small 49-seat Deaf West Theatre is intimate enough that there’s no excuse for actors to not be fully heard, but a couple of them falter in this regard. But this is a minor point in what is overwhelmingly positive. Go see either of the casts and appreciate LEAR all over again.

KING LEAR plays through August 8th at 5112 Lankershim Blvd, North Hollywood, CA 91601. 818.506.1983 or www.antaeus.org for tickets.

