

Family Matters

Trust and tragedy in a compelling 'King Lear'

STAGE | A father and three daughters, or a king and a lot of land to carve up, or an outcast and a fool — "King Lear" is a sort of prism of shifting allegiances, the nature of love and the brokering of power, all related in some of William Shakespeare's most intense and lyrical language. In a co-production with the Folger Theatre, the Classical Theatre of Harlem brings the tragedy roaring to life with vibrance and physicality, using the towering presence of actor Andre de Shields, 61, as the play's emotional and narrative centerpiece. Classical Theatre co-founder Alfred Preisser, who spoke with *Express* about his production, sets the play in the ancient Middle East to point up its timeliness and sensuality.

You have a number of factors at work. How do you fuse these elements?

Well, I think that when you do one of these plays, you have to recognize that they're always happening in the theater. They're not happening in some archaeological representation of ancient

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ALFRED PREISSER, CLASSICAL THEATRE OF HARLEM

Britain or Mesopotamia. So in an ongoing conversation with the cast ... it was important to us to make the text visible ... telling the story through the actors' bodies and their physical relation to each other.

You have to stage fights.

That's a feature of all tragedies — they're melodramatic, they're violent. I think Shakespeare was giving his audience something they enjoyed. His plays were as close to popular entertainment in a world where that included bear-baiting and dog fights and caging the cat and things like that.

In what way is "Lear" a political play?

To me, a figure like Fidel Castro is King Lear. King Lear has been around for a long time; he's unquestionably great. When Castro dies, there will be all these people who have no place in the world. They will become obsolete. So if "Lear"



DADDY ISSUES: Andre de Shields brings fearless physicality to the role of Shakespeare's most insecure king.

has a grand political idea, it's being played out in places like Cuba. It's being played out in places like Iraq, where [Saddam] Hussein was a Lear-like figure. ... And he had his own storm, when he was in that spider hole, he had everything stripped away — the golden toilet, the concubines, the political power, and he was just a man in the hole in the ground.

How do you see the role of the fool?

The fool could have hidden in Gloucester's home, but he doesn't — he follows Lear out into the storm. But mainly he's attached to Lear. Obvi-

ously, in the play and in the idea of the play, the fool, the jester, is the inversion of a king as well. He's the comic photonegative of the king.

It's really as much the daughters' story as Lear's. It's like a fairy tale: Once upon a time, there was a great king and he had three daughters ... and that's kind of a jumping-off point for a great story — a Grimm's fairy tale about the nature of devotion within a family. ARION BERGER (*EXPRESS*)

→ Folger Shakespeare Theatre, 201 East Capitol St. SE; through Feb. 18, \$25-\$50; 202-544-7077.