

A stripped-down 'Lear' stresses the language

By David Patrick Stearns
INQUIRER ARTS CRITIC

Minimal scenery. No lighting design. Eight actors to fill 16 roles. Is *King Lear* — Shakespeare's searing epic about the decline and fall of a nation and the monsters lurking within all of us — possible under such circumstances?

Theater Review

Roughly 70 percent of the time, Shakespeare's Globe on Tour, which opened Thursday for a six-performance run at the Annenberg Center, delivered a *King Lear* that needed no excuses or apologies, including its *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* TV star Joseph Marcell in the title role.

Priorities were aligned to accommodate what mattered most — the language — and did so on a level that not all British (and even fewer American) companies can reach consistently. Naturalness was a castwide virtue: You imagined that offstage, the actors would have spoken much the same.

Next to nothing stood between the play and its beholders. The set was a humble, skeletal, all-purpose structure. Costumes were of ambiguous period (pre-World War I?), telling you that this story came from another (but not distant) world. To approximate the daylight circumstances of Shakespeare's open-air theaters, house lights were left on, removing the us-and-them dynamic between actors and audience. The performance and its

mechanics were one and the same. We were all in it together, showing that theatrical epics lie within the actors and not in the scope of the presentation.

But what a burden it placed on the cast (which brought in the play in a too-swift three hours). Some changed characters by switching hats onstage, then appeared alongside the set playing songs and incidental music on a folksy accordion, Fairport Convention style, with lyrics that spoke, appropriately, of wind and rain.

Everybody was good at everything, but, understandably, not equally good. Doubling as daughter Cordelia and Lear's Fool, Bethan Cullinane was capable as the former and magnetically irreverent as the latter. Gwendolen Chatfield was a surprisingly reticent Goneril, but most actors would be next to Shanaya Rafaat's Regan, who started with a wifely warmth, evolved into gestures that spoke of her sense of self-importance, and ultimately unleashed unfiltered cruelty toward everything.

Another great performance was Alex Mugnaioni's Edgar/Mad Tom, part bookish aristocrat, part Caliban, and so emotionally present, no matter how much the ground shifted, that you eagerly anticipated every line reading.

And Marcell? His short-of-stature Lear was a scrappy fighter rather than an imperious ruler, wonderful in the first half, but less confident with Lear's physical and mental decline. Marcell became three different Lears, all val-

id, but lacking cumulative impact.

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King Lear

By Shakespeare's Globe Theatre on Tour. Directed by Bill Buckhurst. With Joseph Marcell, Gwendolen Chatfield, Bethan Cullinane, Shanaya Rafaat, and Alex Mugnaioni.
[Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts](#), Zellerbach Theatre, 3680 Walnut St. Performances at 2 and 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday.
Tickets: \$20-\$55.
Information: 215-898-3900,
www.annenbergcenter.org.



In "*King Lear*," Joseph Marcell (of "*Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*" TV fame) plays the title role as a scrappy fighter who falls into decline.

