



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Cerris Morgan-Moyer as Cordelia and Copernicus as King Lear in a Gorilla Repertory production in Washington Square Park.

THEATER REVIEW

Not Just Any Crazy Old Man: A King

By BEN BRANTLEY

The old man with the biblical beard and the gold lamé outfit was obviously upset, to put it mildly. He was railing against his family, himself and the universe in a voice that thundered over the moan of traffic around Washington Square.

So it made sense when another man, with glazed eyes and a shirt that looked like a television test pattern, asked the old fellow a comradely question: "Hey, chief, how you doing tonight?" King Lear didn't answer him, but by that time, Lear had reached the point where he wasn't answering anything except the voices in his own head.

The questioner seemed to be carrying his own grudge against the world. He had already yelled, with frightening spleen, at a woman who had asked him to sit down, and another deranged-looking type (Lear's Fool, as it happened) had tried to pacify him. But finally, he wandered off into the night in a swarm of personal demons. In the meantime, the Gorilla Rep's open-air, stageless production of Shakespeare's cosmic tragedy hadn't missed a beat.

KING LEAR

By William Shakespeare; directed by Christopher Sanderson. Presented by the Gorilla Repertory Theater Company. At the Southwest Corner of Washington Square Park, Greenwich Village.

WITH: Copernicus (King Lear), Tim McDonnell (the Earl of Kent), Paul Barry (the Earl of Gloucester), Scott Wood (Edgar), Courtney Casaves (Edmund), Amo Gulimello (King Lear's Fool), Christina Cabot (Goneril), Carrie Murphy (Regan) and Cerris Morgan-Moyer (Cordelia).

What could be a more natural setting for 'Lear' than outdoors in the Village, among the lonely ranters?

This unscripted encounter was a reminder that New York is full of King Lears, roving the streets and mumbling invective of unsettling eloquence. And the Gorilla Rep's interpretation of the tragedy — which runs through Sept. 15, on Thursday nights through Sunday nights, in Washington Square — often meshes with its environment in a way that "Hamlet" or "Othello" never could.

They may not always perform on cue, but there are dogs barking and voices of unknown origin wailing as Lear rants, and you have only to look into the margins of the audience to find new conscripts for the legion of the dispossessed who follow the mad king across the heath. This "Lear" may be short on interpretive nuance. (It's hard, after all, for actors to be subtle when every line has to be yelled.) But it forges immediate connections with those watching it in ways Shakespearean performances seldom do.

Staged by the young director Christopher Sanderson, whose "Midsummer Night's Dream" has become a summertime tradition in the Square, the production has been

set on and around the asphalt hills scuffed by Rollerblades and skateboards during the day. In introducing the play, Mr. Sanderson encourages the audience to move with the actors, the better to follow the "story," a word he repeats several times.

Simply getting the story across, with as much vigor and clarity as possible, appears to be the first objective. Though Mr. Sanderson has trimmed the text, he has retained all the subplots and, as the play pursues the double-dealing alliances of its civil war, those unfamiliar with it may get muddled.

But it is remarkable how many of the jokes, scrupulously annotated with physical gestures, go over and even go over big. Meditative soliloquies and discursive dialogue tend to get lost; angry tirades and insults — and "Lear" has them to burn — definitely do not.

The king himself has the choicest of these, of course, and the performance artist Copernicus, who has a whip-crack voice and an Elijah-like presence, seems born to fulminate. It's a one-note performance, but it's a loud, rumbling note that suits "Lear" as melodrama. And one can imagine Copernicus mesmerizing American frontier audiences being introduced to Shakespeare in the 19th century.

Playing for character rather than outside type isn't necessarily an advantage here, but Paul Barry as Gloucester, Christina Cabot as Goneril and Scott Wood as Edgar all manage to project some emotional shading. Everyone else at least manages to project, which is the main thing. Washington Square doesn't upstage them. But they are also smart enough not to upstage it either, and the square delivers its own, unnervingly vivid performance as Lear's blasted heath.