

## KING LEAR (Shakespeare's Globe Theatre Company): In West Philadelphia, old and gray

September 25, 2014 - Christopher Munden



King Lear (Joseph Marcell) embraces daughter Cordelia (Bethan Cullinane) in KING LEAR (Photo by Ellie Kurttz).

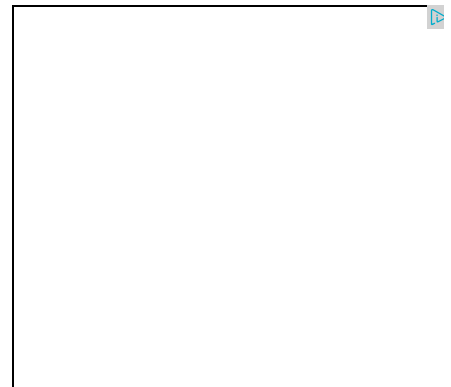
Seeing a show at the Elizabethan-era replica theater The Globe is a thrilling experience for any Shakespeare fan: the arrangement of (fairly uncomfortable) seats, natural light, and open London air enhance the generally good-quality stagings. Shakespeare's Globe Theatre Company's touring production of KING LEAR attempts to recapture some of this energy. The house lights of the Annenberg Theater stay on, energetic music introduces many scenes, the set is simple and confined. Our theater experience is altered by these changes—not always for the better. For what really drives the production is the energy and strength of the visiting performers.

The Globe's rotating cast of eight share multiple roles, sometimes demarcated only by small costume changes and a new British accent (some of which may be lost on American audiences). Though the story—an again man betrayed by his daughters—is fairly simple, LEAR is an incredible rich play, even by Shakespeare standards. Still, it seems to be a very difficult one to stage successfully. The king's descent into madness can be unconvincing, the complex web of minor characters confusing, some of the beauty of the language lost in the confusion.

But especially in the climactic second act, as we become used to the changes and familiar with each switch, the Globe's production reminds us of the varied joys of Shakespeare: his language and his psychological insight. Best known for his role as Geoffrey the butler in *The Fresh Prince of Bell-Air*, Joseph Marcell gives a playful, understated majesty to his Lear. A bit shouty in the first act, his unraveling in the second is convincing and touching. The universal turmoils of generational strife and the deteriorating mind ("not relatable"?) are laid bare.

But Lear is just one spoke in this rotating ensemble: director Bill Buckhurst gives space to each performer. Bethan Cullinane in particular seizes the opportunity. Her Cordelia, the king's underpowered yet loyal youngest daughter, speaks volumes with glances and from the heart with her voice. Her Fool is enjoyably quick-witted. Bill Nash plays a humble, noble Kent, adviser to the king.

The Globe's set (used elsewhere for outdoor performances) may seem small and clunky on the stage a theater, some of the actors speak in "outside voices" too much, and we are reminded of the benefits of lighting design when it is missing. But you can't help but fall for the energy of this LEAR. Even after the tragedies of the final scene, the cast erupts into an incongruously joyous dance. [Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, 3680 Walnut Street] **September 25-27, 2014; [annenbergcenter.org](http://annenbergcenter.org).**



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"In West Philadelphia, old and gray": Joseph Marcell was Geoffrey in *The Fresh Prince*. He's Lear the Globe's touring production. Photo by Ellie Kurttz.

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### About the author



Christopher Munden

Christopher Munden is an avid theatergoer and a longtime writer and editor. He is the editor/publisher of the [Philly Fiction](#) book series, collections of short stories written by local writers and set in Philadelphia. He is also marketing manager for the [Cadence Watch Company](#); a coach, referee, and board member of the [Kensington Soccer Club](#); and an erstwhile musician. He has written and edited for many respected Philadelphia cultural institutions and businesses, as well as for the [Chemical Heritage Foundation](#).

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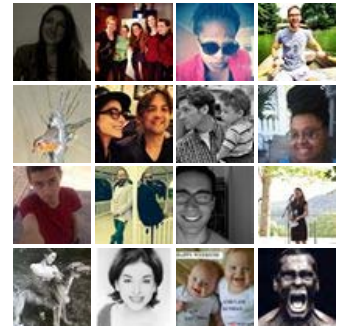
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5