

VARIETY

Caligula



(Harlem School of the Arts Theater, New York; 99 Seats; \$25 top)

A Classical Theater of Harlem presentation of a play with music in one act by Alfred Preisser and Randy Weiner. Directed by Preisser. Musical director, Kelvyn Bell. Choreographer, Angela Lewis.

Serenous - Jeanine T. Abraham
Nandi Nzingah - Cecilia Aderonke
Gaul - Tory Andrus
Caesonia - Carmen Barika
Nubian Slave - Donisha Brown
Incitatus, Jesus - Noshir Dalal
Caligula - Andre De Shields
The Celt - George Gallagher
Drusilla - Zainab Jah
Callistuc, Judea - Adam C. Kern
Jerash - Angela Lewis
Germanicus - Galway McCulough
Hellicon - Paul J. Medford
The Peanut Vendor - John Andrew Morrison
Sappho, Sebratha - Channie Waites

By MARK BLANKENSHIP

In its world premiere at the Classical Theater of Harlem, "Caligula" pounces like a tiger on the stage. Savage and beautiful, the play tears through conventions -- of the theater, of morality, of history -- to unleash a vicious new view of the world. Though this is CTH's first new play, artistic director Alfred Preisser has clearly absorbed the classics he's revived. As co-writer and director of "Caligula," he's helped create something audacious.

Initially, the show seems like a simple morality tale. Disgusted by the "flavor-of-the-month monotheistic boys" seducing his pagan followers with new religions, Caligula (Andre De Shields) wants to woo his people with an evening of "entertainments." The play's audience

becomes his audience as he commands us to enjoy a circuslike display of dancing and songs that honor rampant lust. Everything is performed by an orgy of slaves, writhing with desire.

The "entertainments" are not X-rated, but they're certainly raunchy: Slinking across the set of broken pillars and gauzy curtains, a half-naked man with a horse's tail extols bestiality; later some scantily clad women dance in honor of incest. Meanwhile, everyone's kissing everyone else.

Implicating the crowd, performers romp in the aisles or pull patrons onstage for a dance, suggesting that we're inescapably part of this bawdy universe. "I am your inner freak," Caligula screams. "You would like to be a creature like myself yourself!"

Aware that many will reject a "creature" costumed in jeweled wristbands and matching codpiece, Preisser and co-author Randy Weiner provide a rebuttal to Caligula's depravity. The Peanut Vendor (John Andrew Morrison), a character who sells snacks before the show, keeps interrupting the circus to declare that "this night is (the) last" because "a carpenter" is coming to stop the emperor's reign.

This, the play suggests, will be the moral. The Peanut Vendor appears as a prophet. His bold claims literally stop the music and are delivered in a lowered light. As the slaves anticipate the final showdown -- a wrestling match between the emperor and Jesus (Noshir Dalal) -- the outcome feels foregone. The lascivious life will surely fall before a faith that's still thriving today.

Yet this is the moment "Caligula" explodes. A shocking conclusion to the wrestling match starts a chain of events that transforms the play from a series of sexual come-ons into a sharp critique of how a culture dumps its own self-loathing on the sacrificial back of a scapegoat. The play makes political arguments that feel dangerous, and it giddily thwarts expectations of how characters will behave. By its final moments -- involving the emperor and his murdered sister-lover (Zainab Jah) -- "Caligula" heaves with visceral force.

Of course, the script's heft needs a stellar production. And Preisser nimbly guides his cast so that every moment has the wild energy of a carnival. At its center is Caligula, a remarkable turn by De Shields. This role was specifically written for the musical theater vet, who commands the stage, equal parts tyrant and showman. His eyes have a sinister gleam that suggests the emperor knows we're judging him, but is daring us to stop his fun.

De Shields also should be lauded for giving the most athletic perf in an acrobatic show. Displaying most of the flesh on his impressively toned body -- thesp is almost 60 -- he wrestles, dances and carries several actors on his back without losing his breath or control. This vitality gives the skilled ensemble an unparalleled leader.

Bolstering the energy are drummer Don Eaton, whose rhythms keep lust in the air, and musical director Kelvyn Bell, whose tight arrangements give hand-clapping life to the pagan hymns. The provocative power of "Caligula" must be experienced soon, given that the play runs less than a month. Here's hoping it becomes a repertory staple.

Sets, Troy Hourie; costumes, Emilio Sosa; lighting, Ben Stanton; production stage manager, Joan Cappello. Opened April 1, 2005. Reviewed April 3. Running time: 1 HOUR, 30 MIN.