

A PLAY'S THE THING

A spring visit to Ashland is just what the dramaturge ordered, but watch out for a turkey or two

by Christopher Kamera

Just what is going on in Ashland with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival? That's the question of the moment for many theater fans. A fired director last summer, a new director this winter, a blood-bath firing of supportive staff this spring—what does it all mean?

For the general public, the behind-the-scenes hiring and firing will mean little at all. The new artistic director, Libby Appel, arrived this spring

Theater

and quickly announced that four major associate positions would not be renewed for next season. Three people were dismissed and one was assigned to a new role.

While the drastic artistic staff changes came as a surprise to many, others feel that her swift, decisive actions in administrative matters should be cheered. Appel (pronounced "apple") clearly has her own schedule for OSF. And, as a visiting director of four plays over the past decade, she has a knowledge of the company and the staff, and, obviously, some strong feelings of what and who will fit into her plans.

As to the on-stage action: The winter/spring season has two certified hits, two out-and-out disappointments, and two recently opened unknowns. When the outdoor Elizabethan Theatre adds three Shakespeare shows to the schedule in mid-June, OSF will be in full swing.

Tom Stoppard's award-winning *Arcadia* is the unquestioned highlight of the spring season. *Arcadia* is just the kind of contemporary play that Ashland has built its reputation on. It's a sharp witty satire, an engaging academic puzzler, an intellectual challenge—it's everything OSF audiences traditionally want.

Stoppard's script is the strength of the staging, and director Stephen Hollis and his talented cast bring Stoppard's vision clearly and directly to life.

Stoppard sets his play in two time periods: 1809-12 and the present. These time periods share the same set—a room at the Croom Estate at Sidley Park, a stately home of ye olde England. Events taking place in 1809 are important to the present-day descendants; actions in modern-day Derbyshire have parallels to events in the 1800s. Scientific theories, mathematical equations, sexual games and personal intrigues are all intertwined in Stoppard's incredibly satisfying script.

Christine Williams is the young Thomasina, the 13 year-old daughter of the family. She starts the play by asking her tutor to define "carnal knowledge." It seems that Lady Croom was seen "receiving a perpendicular poke in the gazebo" that morning and the innocent Thomasina is confused by the gossip floating around the downstairs tea table. Williams is a wonderful Thomasina, an incredibly intelligent young woman who is the center of the play, and Andrew Borba is perfect as the sharp-tongued tutor—and the mysterious gentlemen observed in the gazebo with Lady Croom. While the entire cast is close to perfection, Linda Alper's stylish turn as Lady

Croom and Dan Donohue as her bumbling poet-husband deserve special mention.

Arcadia is one of Ashland's it-will-be-remembered-in-10-years productions. The cast, the direction, the set, the costumes, the lighting, the music, all come together to make it the must-see of the spring season. It plays through July 7, retires for the summer (an irritating scheduling choice for summer Ashland visitors) and returns Sept. 24 to finish out the season.

The other hit of the spring is Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Theatrical magic dominates the stylized production smoothly directed by Fontaine Syer. *The Winter's Tale*, as all serious Shakespeare buffs know, is one of the bard's "problem plays." A late work, the script is a curious mix of *Othello*'s tragedy and the lighter traditions from numerous comedies. Syer ably ties the two elements together with an ingenious production design.

Molière Plays Paris is a curious new work, "contrived and translated" by Nagle Jackson, the Northwest-based playwright whose *This Day and Age* delighted OSF audiences last season. Jackson and now-departed OSF artistic leaders decided to present three minor Molière comedies in new, up-to-date translations. Jackson wove the three comedies into a backstage/onstage framework showing the real Molière's behind-the-scenes personal and artistic turmoil, contrasted with his skill as the on-stage comic that delighted the royal court and much of France. While the concept is solid, if over-used, the resulting production is a lumbering, pandering attempt to rescue minor Molière and make it

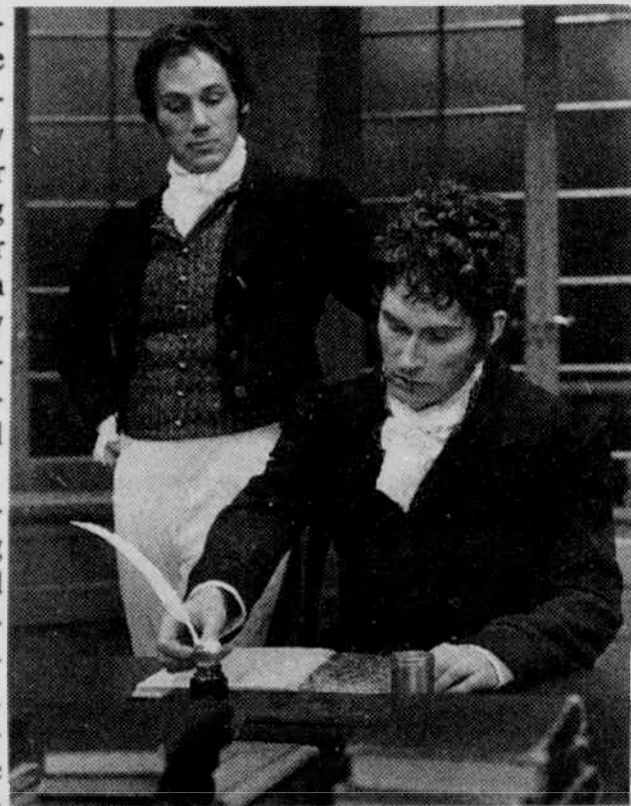
playable for modern audiences. Ray Porter, plainly miscast as Molière, does what he can to salvage the production, but Jackson's vulgar, low-comedy translations of the original text and the trite (if historically true) backstage lovers' tragedy simply fall flat.

Even the most loyal OSF fans will have problems praising *Strindberg in Hollywood*, Drury Pifer's time-travel farce that puts the ultra-reserved August Strindberg in modern-day Tinseltown. The production—a combination of a weak script, seeming nondirection by Pat Patton, and poor acting by all four characters—is an out-and-out embarrassment for OSF. Since it is playing in the intimate Black Swan, the show will undoubtedly draw near-capacity audiences, but the unfunny dialogue and the incredibly misconceived production will leave the audience wondering why OSF ever selected the script. Be forewarned.

Two new productions, *A Pair of Threes* and Clifford Odets' legendary *Awake and Sing!*, have opened recently. *A Pair of Threes* is a cleverly conceived double-billing of two contemporary plays, each composed of three monologues. As a Black Swan staging, it could be the runaway hit of the spring and summer.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Coriolanus* and *Love's Labor's Lost* open in mid-June. Two additional plays—*Cabaret Verboten* and the world premiere of Rita Dove's eagerly anticipated *The Darker Face of the Earth*—open in July to round out the season.

Ticket information for all OSF productions is available by calling (541) 482-4331.



Dan Donohue (seated) and Andrew Borba in Oregon Shakespeare Festival's *Arcadia*

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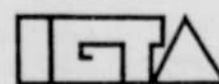
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