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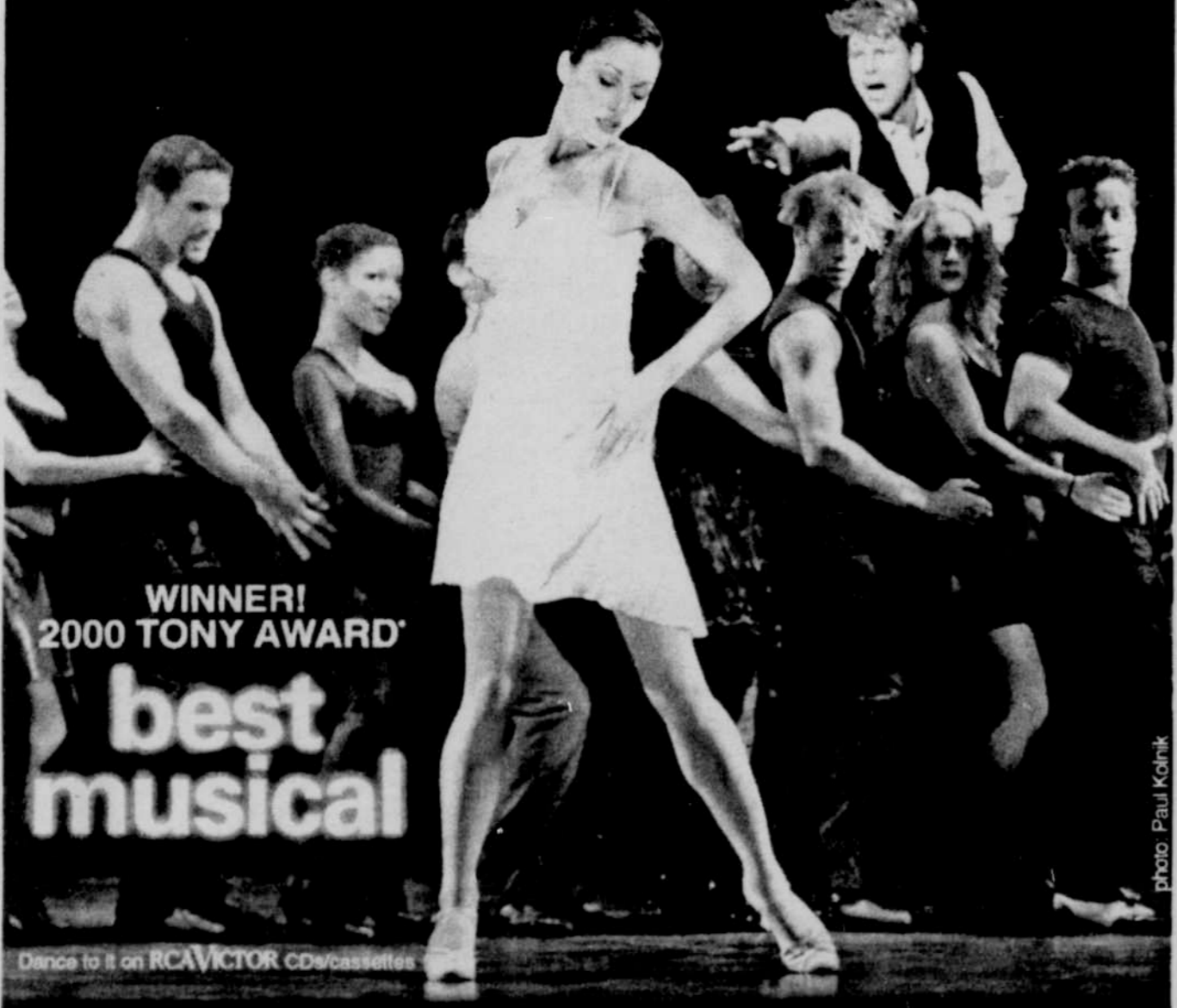
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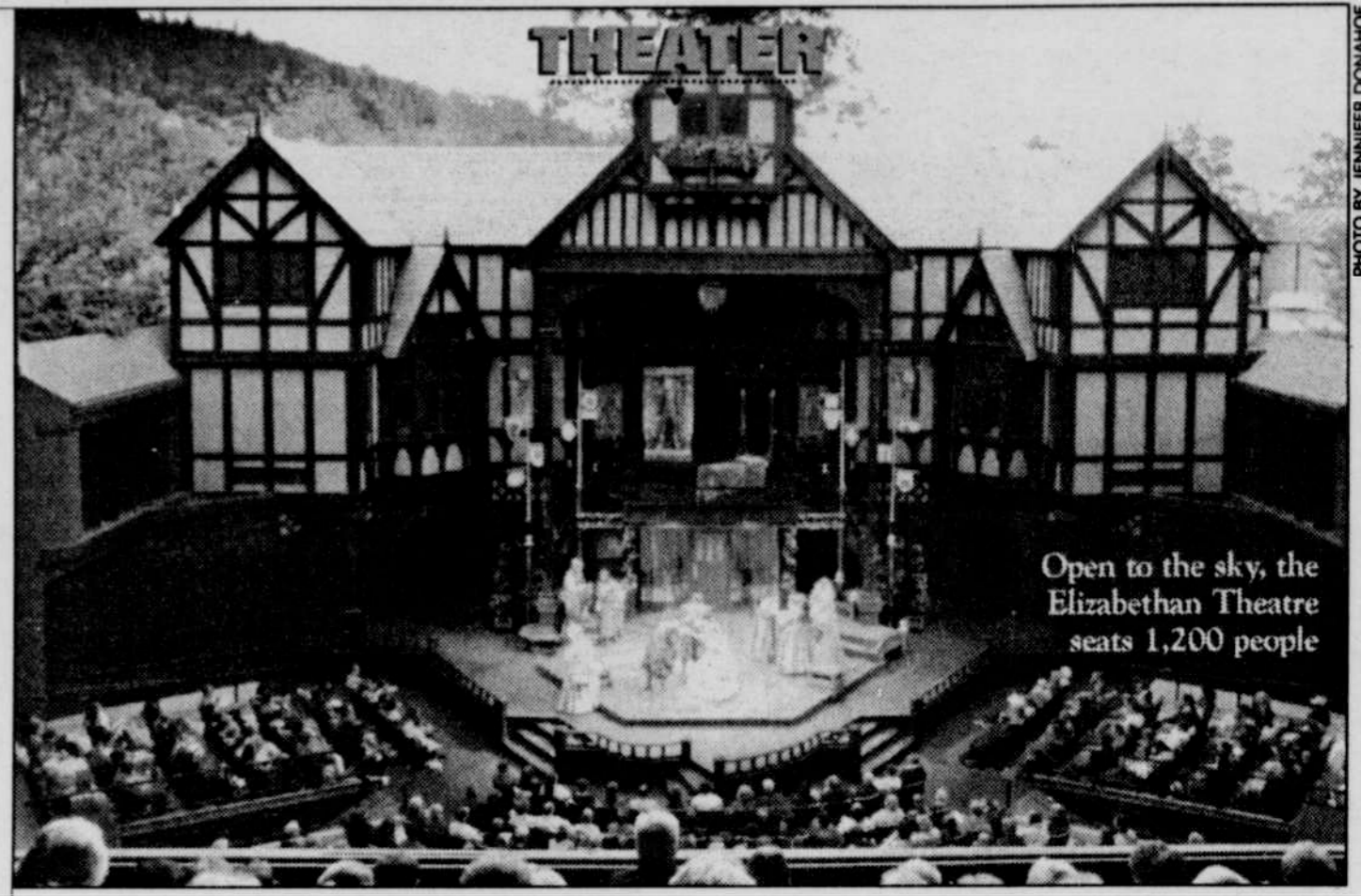
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Out under the stars

Gay-tinged theater makes Ashland worth the trip

BY ERIN BLACKWELL

Shakespeare festivals aren't the first place most people look for gay theater, even though the Bard's plays—originally performed exclusively by men—feature gay characters and lots of cross-dressing. Maybe that's because some companies do "normative Shakespeare," in which men are men and women are wimps.

But the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland does queer-friendly, racially inclusive, equal-opportunity productions—while setting a U.S. standard for aesthetic excellence. This season's highlights include gay subplots in both *The Merchant of Venice* and *Troilus and Cressida*, a crossgender Prospero in *The Tempest*, a gleefully dysfunctional family in *Fuddy Meers* and fairies—both literal and figurative—in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

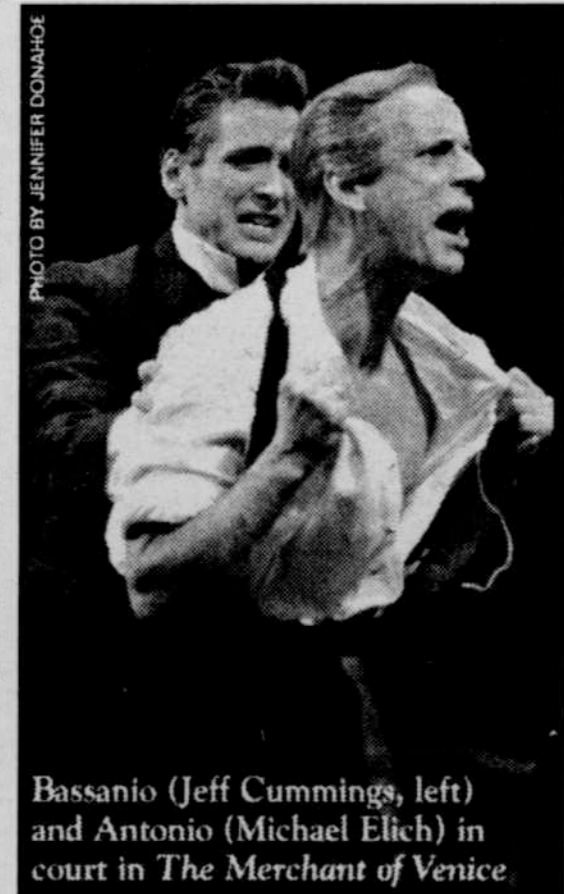
Michael Donald Edwards' staging of *The Merchant of Venice* is the festival's breakaway hit. This story of a Jewish moneylender robbed of both his daughter and his ducats by a bunch of smug Christians—considered a comedy—is a hard sell for politically correct sensibilities. Edwards' solution is to put anti-Semitism on stage in the form of masked carousers and everyday shows of prejudice. We see Shylock (Tony DeBruno) refused service in a "Christian" cafe; in another scene, a character he's talking to casually knocks Shylock's hat off his head.

The atmosphere of perpetual harassment thus established explains the Jew's eventual insistence on the "pound of [Christian] flesh" due him for a debt. In the queer spectator's mind, the parallels between religious intolerance and homophobia are quickly drawn. Against this politically charged background, the Antonio-Bassanio-Portia love triangle is played out. Rich merchant Antonio (Michael Elich) dotes on penniless noble Bassanio (Jeff Cummings), who needs money to court rich heiress Portia (Robin Goodrin Nordli).

Winning his lady love, Bassanio puts his rich male admirer at risk. So Portia rises to the occasion, in male drag, and defeats Shylock's

legal claim to Antonio's flesh. Only then do the sad old queen, the boy toy and the cross-dresser settle down in uneasy domesticity.

The performances are uniformly fabulous. DeBruno is affecting as a proud man driven mad by his second-class status. Elich is equal parts dignity and passion as a man made melancholy by unrealizable love. Cummings convinces as a "normal" guy too clueless to question the nature of Antonio's devotion. Nordli looks equally fetching in a Victorian ball gown or a suit and tie.



Bassanio (Jeff Cummings, left) and Antonio (Michael Elich) in court in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Troilus and Cressida, less well known and maybe less well written, is all about war and lechery. This is the dish about the Trojan War, that epic squabble started when Trojan Paris stole Greek Helen from her husband, Menelaus.

Everybody in the play suffers from some form of moral corruption. Achilles (Jeffrey King), most valiant of the Greeks, is perversely refusing to fight, his exploits having gone to his head. So he's lolling in his tent with his love, Patroclus (Christopher Jean). Director Ken Albers leaves spectators in no doubt as to the nature of their relationship.

A very languid Patroclus spends most of the play draped over a very butch Achilles.

Unfortunately, there's not much subtlety in the characterization, so they just sort of stand around being gay, until Patroclus is killed in battle. Then we're treated to the eyesore of his strung-up corpse, one-armed and daubed with blood.

Anyone who remembers Matthew Shepard will find the sight either moving or gratuitous. The opposite end of the moral universe from *Merchant*, this production seems to wallow in, rather than transcend, the sordidness of the play's subject. We're repulsed by the characters but gain no real insight into the relationship of lechery—gay or straight—to war.

The third Shakespeare play showing in the 1,200-seat Elizabethan Theatre, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is a comedy starring Falstaff,

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