

commissioned by Elizabeth I, who hadn't had enough of the Fat Man in *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*. Here, Falstaff is that most sympathetic of con men: the one who's beaten at his own game.

Hoping to access their husbands' purses, he woos both Mistress Page and Mistress Ford. They revenge themselves on his duplicity by arranging a rendezvous at which he is threatened with discovery, reveals his cowardice and is punished for a pleasure he never got close to enjoying.

This slight scenario, which the Bard borrowed from commedia dell'arte, needs a lot of comic invention to keep things interesting. In Lillian Garrett-Groag's production, the comedy starts with the costumes by Deborah Dryden, which manage to be at once faithful to the period, over-the-top, beautiful and ridiculous. Thus lavishly dressed, a large cast of eccentrics indulges in every comic trick in the book.

The most fey is Slender (Jeff Cummings), a rich young man who has no idea what to do when left alone with his wife-to-be. Having seen Cummings as the romantic Bassanio in *Merchant* and the eroticized Paris in *Troilus*, one marvels not only at his versatility but at the commitment of stage actors to resist typecasting.

But the standout in a crowd of whimsical characters is Richard Howard as the jealous Mr. Ford. This exquisite actor instills his slap-



Ariel (Christopher Jean) and an island spirit (René Thornton Jr.) in *The Tempest*

Unfortunately, director Penny Metropoulos has conceived of the all-powerful magician along Zen lines without any Hong Kong action influence to spice things up. This Prospero is in touch with her own and everyone else's feelings, given to earth tones and benign beyond belief.

What does work are her scenes with Ariel (Christopher Jean), who's the perfect willowy complement to her earth mother groundedness. Prospero's evil brother is here an evil sister

(Linda Alper), who shares the family trait of being overly earnest.

Last but not least, *Fuddy Meers* is one of the final plays that will grace the 140-seat Black Swan, the most intimate of the festival's three venues. (In March 2002, a brand-new, 300-seat theater will replace it.) This surreal comedy by David Lindsay-Abaire about a family of criminals and lunatics is staged by James Edmondson as a breakneck series of blackout sketches.

Protagonist Claire (Judith-Marie Bergan) wakes each day unable to remember anything about her life; each day, husband Richard (John Pribyl) tells her only what he wants her to know. Teen-age son Kenny (Gregory Lington) is a dope-smoking slacker; poststroke mother Gertie (Catherine Coulson) has trouble talking. (*Fuddy Meers* is her version of "fun house mirrors.") The so-called Limping Man (Richard Elmore), who disturbs their daily routine by kidnapping Claire, is a mutilated man: One ear melted in a fire, he's got an equally mean lisp, limp and temper.

Although there's nothing explicitly gay about Lindsay-Abaire's script, everything about this two-husband family is decidedly queer. On second viewing, this technically flawless production of a brilliant text revealed surprising levels of meaning.

Fuddy Meers is a metaphor for those particular filters (or blinders) we all go through life trying to see through (or past). The play is about consciousness: the denial we're forced to live in and the pandemonium and chaos that can accompany the healing process.

Sound familiar? Most people will recognize the bizarre levels of secrecy and miscomprehension inherent to family life. ■

Although many people might think of seeing plays at the OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL as a summer activity, the shows actually run through Oct. 28. And autumn in Ashland is especially delightful—and less crowded. Located just 285 miles south of Portland on Interstate 5, it's perfect for a long weekend getaway. Tickets are available from 541-482-4331, boxoffice@osfashland.org or www.osfashland.org.

ERIN BLACKWELL, editor of *Girlfriends* magazine, also writes theater reviews for San Francisco Frontiers.

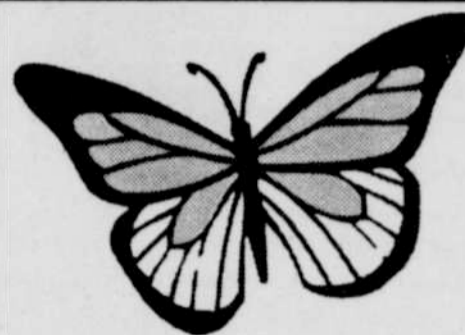
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Millet (Ray Porter) fights for the phone with Gertie (Catherine Coulson) as the puppet Hinky-Binky speaks Millet's mind in David Lindsay-Abaire's *Fuddy Meers*

stick with a nuanced paranoia on the theme of cuckoldry. The play ends with an explosion of fairies, real and imagined, that pays tribute to Victorian children's books.

Those three Shakespeare plays are performed on the open-air Elizabethan stage, the original of the festival's three houses. *The Tempest* is performed in the 600-seat Bowmer Theatre, named for the company's founder, Angus Bowmer.

This means more scenery. Set designer William Bloodgood and lighting designer Robert Peterson make the most of their opportunity, creating undulating fields of pastels and giving Prospero's island an otherworldly feel.

The inspiration to cast a woman as Prospero—the role generally regarded as Shakespeare's farewell self-portrait—is clearly an idea whose time has come. (Vanessa Redgrave recently played the part in London.)

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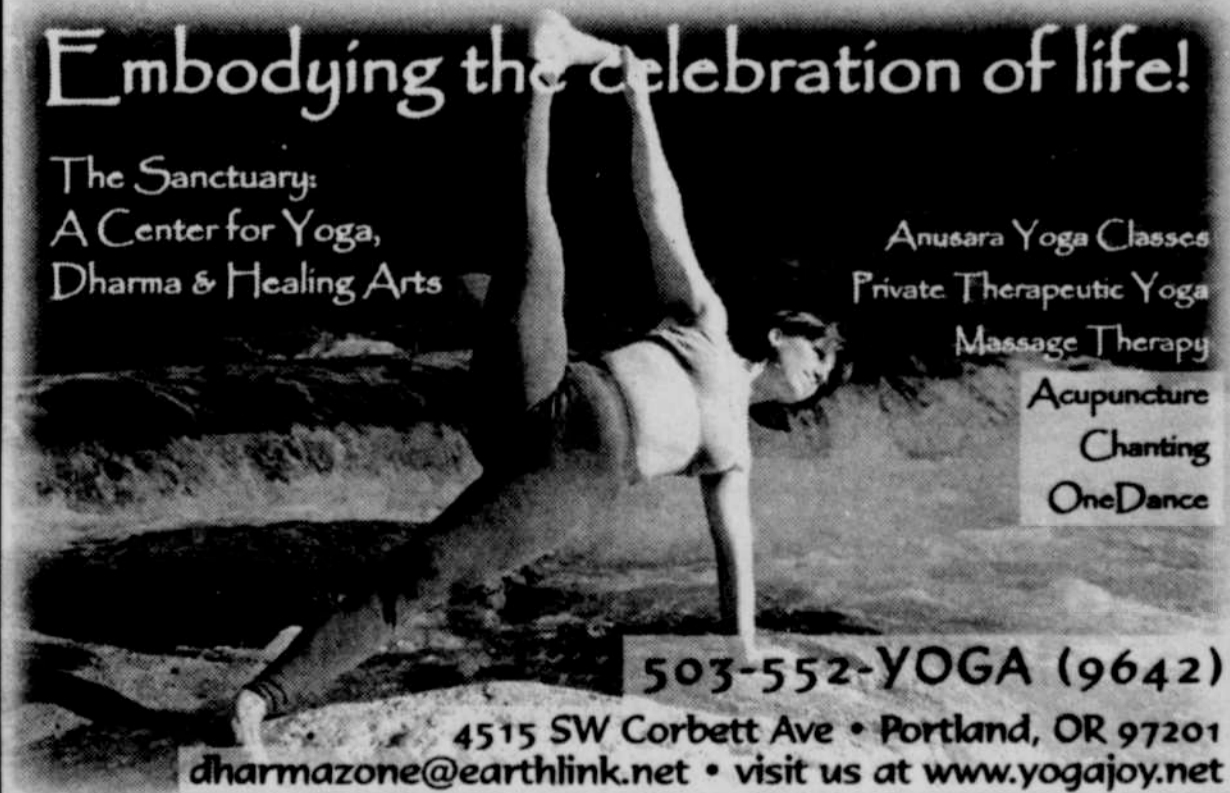
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