

At Oregon Shakespeare Festival, stagehands want a union

By Don McIntosh
Associate Editor

ASHLAND—A group of 65 stagehands at Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF)—the famed theater company in Ashland, Oregon—will vote June 10 on whether to join International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE).

The campaign began in August 2014, after managers cut the pay of several dozen stage operators and assigned them new duties, without giving them any say in that decision. That prompted stage operator Brian Rockwell to reach out to IATSE, which represents theater workers at similar companies.

“The issues are safety, a living wage, and having a voice in the decisions that affect us,” Rockwell said.

IATSE assigned organizer Chris “Radar” Bateman to help workers unionize. Bateman says OSF stagehand wages are several dollars an hour below comparable IATSE-represented theaters in Portland and Seattle.

With roughly \$35 million in annual revenue, non-profit OSF is thriving. And it has productive relationships with several other groups of union-represented employees: Actors and stage managers are members of Actors’ Equity; directors and choreographers are members of Stage Directors and Choreographers Society; and costume, sound, light, set designers are members of United Scenic Artists, a separate division of IATSE. But the theater’s production workers are nonunion, and management would like to keep it that way.

OSF stagehands came within two votes of joining IATSE in June 1999. According to the Ashland Daily Tidings newspaper, the company spent \$50,000 to oppose that union effort, which ended in a 44 to 46 vote.

As the newest IATSE campaign got under way, so did the campaign to oppose it. At company-wide and departmental meetings, OSF artistic director Bill Rauch, executive director Cynthia Rider, and production director Alys Holden urged employees not to join IATSE.

“There’s a degree to which they’re taking it personally, I think,” said wardrobe assistant Courtney Cunningham, an IATSE supporter. “They think it means a failure on their part.”

Union supporters have rejected that narrative: They say they like



Behind the scenes camaraderie: Backstage on the set of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival performance of *Pericles*, cast and crew members mug for the camera. Back row, from left: technician Rocky Garcia-Flores, stagehand Jack Buckley, stagehand Brian Rockwell, sound tech Amanda Sager, actor Cedric Lamar. Front row: wardrobe assistant Katie Sidwell, actor Barzin Akhavan, and wardrobe assistant Laura Coe.

their managers, and they’ve maintained a resolutely positive approach, pushing the hashtag #proUnionANDprocompany in online communications.

“We love the company we work for,” Cunningham said. “We want a voice in our work, to make it better, so as employ-

ees we have the best possible experience.”

Union supporters also say fears expressed by managers are overblown. In at least three employee meetings, Rauch has told a story about a piece of toast. Rauch declined through a spokesperson to speak with the

Labor Press, but several workers gave an account of the anecdote: Years ago, during an on-stage rehearsal at another theater where stagehands were represented by IATSE, Rauch wanted a piece of toast to be moved from one plate to another, but had to wait while a stagehand could be found, because the union contract said only stagehands could handle props.

IATSE supporters interviewed by the Labor Press said there might be good reasons for such a rule elsewhere, but they wouldn’t propose it at OSF, where workers commonly help each other out.

“Boil it down, what we’re asking for is just a voice at the table with management,” says sound engineer Amanda Sager. Sager previously worked with IATSE in Chicago, and says when she came to OSF she was surprised that stagehands at such a large company weren’t union-represented. OSF employs around 500 people in a typical season. “We want to be able to support our families and be respected with the rest of our peers,” Sager said.

Despite the management push-back, there’s been no sign of the kind of scorched-earth

anti-union campaign that so often takes place elsewhere. OSF management even allowed workers to use an empty theater to discuss the union.

But OSF did employ a standard anti-union tactic after IATSE asked the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to schedule a union election. IATSE’s petition, filed April 27, called for a union election among the “run crew”—the 65 workers who handle lighting, video and projections, sound, stage operations, wardrobe, wig and hair during the nine months of the year that plays are being performed. But OSF, represented by management attorney Rick Liebman of Barran Liebman, filed legal objections, saying the unit should also include another 125 workers in the scene shop and costume shop, who work year-round. Why would OSF managers oppose unionization and yet propose a larger bargaining unit? In all likelihood, it’s because they believed most workers in those units would vote against the union.

The NLRB rejected OSF’s arguments, ruled that IATSE’s proposed bargaining unit was acceptable, and set an election for June 10.

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