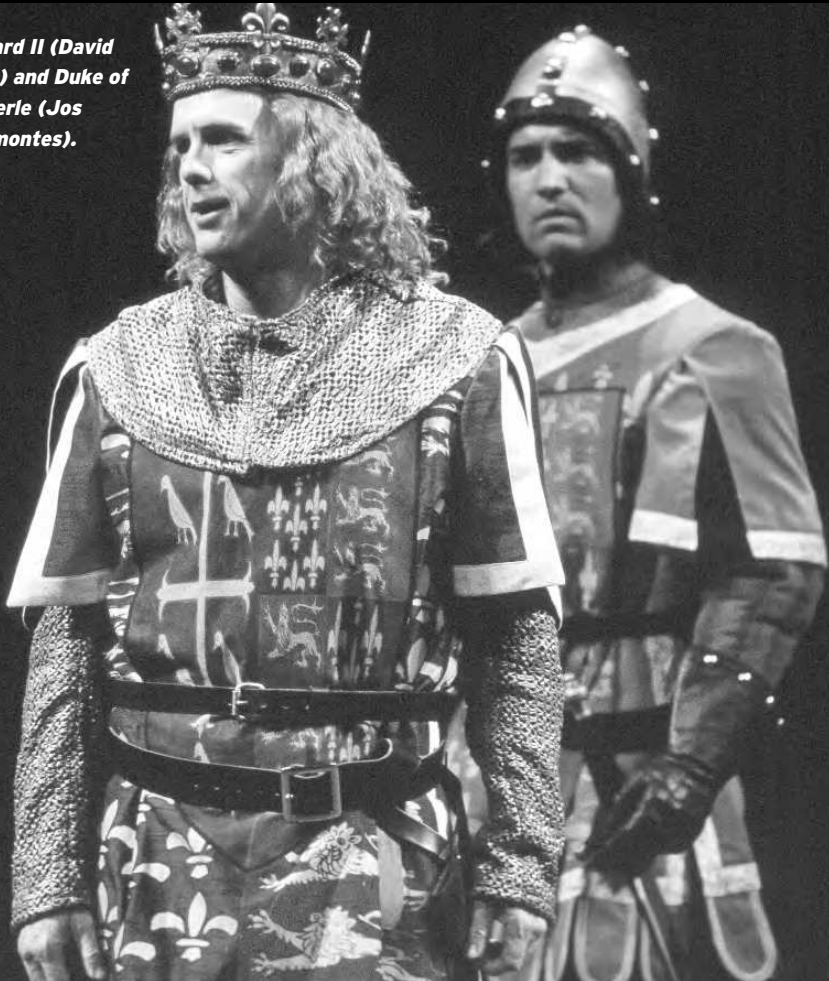


Richard II (David Kelly) and Duke of Aumerle (Jos Viramontes).



DAVID COOPER

## Ashland Al Fresco

Summer arrives with high drama.

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival welcomed the arrival of summer last weekend with its traditional Solstice ritual of opening the outdoor Elizabethan Theatre. Theatergoers were treated to Ashland's temperate climate — sunny, warm days that turned into cool nights, with stars and waning moon interplaying with light cloud cover and some surprising gusts of chill wind to cast the perfect mood for the opening of *Richard II*.

The first of Shakespeare's eight-play cycle that chronicles the rise and fall of the Plantagenet line of English kings, *Richard II* is a character study of the sensitive, poetic, divinely right heir to the British throne. The effects of power on human nature, for good or ill, are broadly outlined.

The right of succession plays a key theme in this history. R2 had undisputed lineage to William the Conqueror; he was the grandson of King Edward III, who reigned from 1327 to 1377. Edward III and Queen Philippa had 12 children, seven of whom were sons. The eldest son, Edward, known as the Black Prince, was one of the many children who died, leaving his eldest, Richard II, to be named king upon Edward III's death when R2 was only 10 years old.

Richard's uncles held power while he was a minor, and save for Gloucester, were loyal to him, in a nod to the Godly sanctimony of proper succession. That plays a key theme, for the play opens in 1398, 11 years into R2's reign (He assumed power at age 20).

In the opening scene, R2's cousin, Henry Hereford, or Bolingbroke, accuses Thomas Mowbray, the Duke of Norfolk, of plotting to kill Gloucester, Henry's and Richard's uncle. Mowbray and Bolingbroke decide to duel to the death to prove who's right, but R2, a pacifist like his mother, Joan the Fair Maid of Kent, calls off the match and instead banishes them both: Henry for 10 years, a sentence later reduced to six years, and Mowbray for life.

Then comes Richard II's tragic move. Despite the loyalty he's been shown all his life as divine successor to the throne, he shows no such loyalty to cousin Henry. When Henry's father, John of Gaunt dies, R2 takes all his land and holdings, even though they're rightfully Henry's.

War ensues. Factions battle against each other. Henry, with the help of Northumberland, ends up taking the throne away from R2. (Later, Northumberland will turn against Henry, setting the stage for *Henry IV*, parts 1 and 2.)

His rise and fall from power give R2 much to emote about, and finally, alone and imprisoned, he finds solace in the realm of the spirit. Never having the nature to be king, and having made poor choices and decisions, he, as a sensitive, artistic, peaceloving man, can now see the folly in his own pride and ambition.

This production, directed by OSF Artistic Director Libby Appel, shows promise, but by opening night had simply not yet come to-

gether. Many casts know the feeling of "if only we had one more week" and this seemed to fit that bill. Problems with the set, some awkward staging, and actors who couldn't remember their blocking and lines were distractions. Perhaps because of these problems, the play becomes tiresome after awhile and it seems the text could be somewhat edited.

Great attention to costuming by Elizabeth Novak is what really stands out in this production. By the late 14th century, women had doffed their veils and let their hair flow freely, and wore long, elegant dresses. The men wore highly stylized tunics and rich, flowing robes. These touches, especially the royal blue velvet cloaks of the king's council, along with the pomp and ceremony befitting the artistic R2, are well done here.

The most notable aspect of OSF's production of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* is the compelling script, translated by Jerry Turner. Gone is the formal, stilted speech of many Ibsen translations. Here is the modern, American dialect in a book easily accessible to audiences and more readily available to actors. After that, everything just falls into place in this phenomenal production that shows off the range of Robin Goodrin Nordli (Hedda), from manic to suicidal. Impeccable performances by Jeffrey King (George Tesman), Terri McMahon (Thea), Richard Farrell (Judge Brack) and Jonathan Haugen (Eilert) in addition to tight direction by Bill Rauch put the shine on this diamond, along with a lighting scheme that showcases the heavy emotions experienced by Hedda.

The play continues to fascinate audiences because of the questions it produces. Just what makes Hedda tick? No one really knows, or claims to know, why she makes the choices she does. Rauch offers this production as an exploration of her psyche, with no tidy answers.

Like other Ibsen women, Hedda is a prisoner of her time. She makes choices even she can't explain, but director Rauch suggests — through appearances of her father's ghost — that her actions may be borne out of a serious depression she's suffered since her father died.

After the death of her father, she accepts the only offer of marriage she receives, although she has numerous suitors. Jeffrey King's George is a loving, innocent, childlike man who has been doted upon his entire life by two aunts and has just received a doctorate in cultural history. A man of books, he is moral and dignified, but unprepared for anything other than academia. To the end, he is astonished he has won the love of the exciting Hedda.

From Hedda's perspective, George is respectable and seems to have a solid future in front of him. Ironically, her former beau, Eilert Lovborg, and her would-be suitor, Judge Brack, taunt her

for marrying him and pursue her, although neither is marriage-minded.

A spitfire with a love of drama, however, Hedda, after only five months of marriage is already bored and has returned from her lengthy honeymoon desperate to begin her social life. After all, she moans, how boring to be stuck with the same person day in, day out. But she soon finds her life at home is less than ideal. Her husband cannot afford just yet to entertain her aristocratic friends. Hedda immediately feels imprisoned by her social position. She is intellectually starved, but has neither interests nor the slightest clue how to pursue any.

Brack capitalizes on her boredom. Farrell plays him perfectly as the opportunist whose evil gradually grows, creeping up on Hedda only to force her final act.

When Hedda's old school acquaintance, Thea, enters her life, Hedda immediately becomes envious of Thea's role as inspiration to Eilert, also a man of books. Thea has helped Eilert write a groundbreaking manuscript and has left her husband because Eilert gave her something he would not — the opportunity to play the role of intellectual equal.

Hedda doesn't know how to phrase the longing this knowledge creates in her; she wants to "be responsible for another person's life" she says, but what she desperately desires is the role of playing a brilliant man's muse. Her husband, she claims, isn't worth the effort, but neither does he turn to her for such inspiration.

Through a series of lies and manipulations, Hedda manages to find a way to influence Eilert, and to ultimately become responsible for his life.

A victim of her time, Hedda is trapped in a marriage she doesn't desire, in a beautiful house she doesn't care about and with fine furnishings she didn't pick out. What Hedda needs is more than the ability to go out and get a job, however. She needs respect. Her inability to gain that from any of the men in her life, juxtaposed to Thea's ability to get that from both Hedda's former companion and husband, helps drive Hedda crazy.

In the end, like many of Ibsen's women, Hedda can find only one way out. **EW**



Hedda (Robin Goodrin Nordli) contemplates events.

JENNIFER REILEY

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