

OMG: OSF!



Christopher (Tasso Feldman) and Weinberl (Rex Young) take it all in

JENNY GRAHAM

Catch some shows for a spectacular end to the summer

BY CHUCK ADAMS AND SUZI STEFFEN

Ashland's starting to cool off. The Californians are leaving, going back to school and work. And oh yeah, the season's about to get a little bit cheaper, too.

What does that mean, Eugene? It means: **Get thee to Ashland for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival!** The two of us went to eight plays in four days (plus a backstage tour — which we recommend highly), and one of us made another trip down for the ninth play — so we have all kinds of info for you. If you can buy only one ticket, make it *Gem of the Ocean* or *Tartuffe*. The outdoor theater not to miss is *Taming of the Shrew*, thanks to Michael Elich, and of the two contemporary pieces at the New Theatre, we recommend the rough but interesting *Tracy's Tiger*. Value season begins Oct. 2, but for comfort at the outdoor shows, which close the first weekend in October, we'd recommend going a bit sooner and saving money for those full-price tix by staying at the Ashland Hostel, a nice price (\$25 or \$59 for a private room) and a quick three-block walk from the theaters.

In alphabetical order, then, here are our reviews:

As You Like It

(Angus Bowmer Theatre, through Oct. 28)

A miscast Rosalind and clunky set design mar an otherwise delightful excursion into the twisted, pastoral romp of Shakespeare's romantic comedy, *As You Like It*. The story, if you can follow its twists and turns, goes something like this: Oliver (Jeff Cummings) wants his brother, Orlando (Danforth Comins), dead. So he tells Charles the wrestler to break Orlando's bones in a match.

Though David Kelly nails the role of Touchstone, the set — complete with motorized plaster-cast greenery — looks as if it were designed and implemented at a high school production



Audrey (Teri Watts) and Touchstone (David Kelly)

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Rosalind (Miriam Laube) attends the fight, and she soon falls for the victorious Orlando. Rosalind's uncle banishes her, sending her and Roz's cousin Celia (Julie Oda) into the Forest of Arden, where Rosalind's father dwells. They take along Touchstone (David Kelly, in a role he slam dunks), the court clown, for protection and amusement.

For more protection, Roz slips into the male guise and calls herself Ganymede. She twists Orlando, who has entered the Forest of Arden seeking her, into knots when she, as Ganymede, plays the part of herself — for Orlando's benefit. Maybe Laube was suffering allergies during this production, but she gave the impression that she was always crying. Are they tears of joy? I couldn't tell; I was too distracted by Laube's always-squinted eyes and hoarse voice.

Director J.R. Sullivan's attempt to set *AYLI* in the Great Depression era partly misfires. His description of the era, that "there was no such thing ... as security," could well suit any era. But the big problem with this time period is the set, which starts off on a good foot in Act I's bootlegging warehouse. When the action moves to the Forest of Arden, the set looks as if it were designed and implemented at a high school production of *AYLI*, complete with motorized plaster-cast greenery. Progressive audience members won't swallow the ending too easily. When Phebe steadfastly refuses to wed Rosalind (a woman, imagine!) and chooses Silvius because he offers "a good man's love," the collective eyes will roll.

— CA

Distracted

(New Theatre, through Oct. 28)

Distracted is a play about searching for the end-all cure for societal ills and always coming up short. Whom do we seek for answers? Our partner after the football game but before the weekly sex act? The friends we meet on the street? Therapists who can't even keep their own lives together? Teachers who mistake tenure for wisdom? In faith? In drugs?

Mama (as played to distressed semi-perfection by Robynn Rodriguez) is the kind of soccer mom who has way too much time on her hands. Living in a suburban Target-furnished house, Mama wants peace and quiet,

but she also wants to be the best person she can be. Unsurprisingly, these two ideals clash, constantly, in a world where staying on task won't cut it anymore and one must multitask to survive. As Mama struggles to rear her misbehaving son, Jesse (James Edson, heard in voiceover throughout the play until finally coming onstage at the end), and resists the urge to dope him up on Ritalin, her marriage to Dad (U. Jonathan Toppo, in a slightly TV commercial version of a "Dad") is stressed to the breaking point.

The key word here, and overall theme, is stress. Large flat-screen monitors project images of chaos or calm (a faucet pouring hot water in a sink or Monet's *Water Lilies*), depending on Mama's state of being. Using the theater-in-the-round staging allows for quick on/off appearances of characters through four entrances, creating a flurry of movement that never totally ceases, not even when Mama meditates. The intimacy of the New Theatre also complements the Brechtian style employed by playwright Lisa Loomer. As just about every character tells the audience *what they really think*, the artificial nature of their every action is revealed.

Special kudos go to Kjerstine Anderson, playing the wrist-cutting, neglected teen Natalie with spot-on mannerisms and agonizing frailty, and Thom Rivera, playing three wildly different "health care professionals" and even an actor on Ritalin *playing* a doctor. With its small cast, intimate setting, contemporary themes and interactive set design, *Distracted* is unlike any other play in produc-

Mama (Robynn Rodriguez), Dad (U. Jonathan Toppo) and Natalie (Kjerstine Anderson)



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