

Greta Oglesby, who originated the role of Aunt Ester in the remarkable *Gem of the Ocean*, brings experience and depth to the part, and everyone else in the cast lives up to her intensity



JENNY GRAHAM

tion at OSF this season. For that reason alone, it's worth a viewing, especially for parents with kids in tow. — CA

Gem of the Ocean

(Angus Bowmer Theatre, through Oct. 27)

Going into *Gem*, one of us had read it ahead of time and the other hadn't. Neither of us (embarrassingly) had seen an August Wilson play before. We left silent, moved and utterly captured by the script, acting and staging of this smart, fine, truly meaningful play.

The only problem with *Gem* is that everything else at the OSF pales (yes, that's figurative and literal) in comparison: The subject matter — workers' rights, the Civil War and slavery, the impact of Reconstruction on African American communities in the North and South at the dawn of the 20th century, the courage it takes simply to rise out of bed in a world gone so mad — gives it broad reach. Greta Oglesby, who originated the role of Aunt Ester in this remarkable play, brings experience and depth to the part, and everyone else in the cast lives up to her intensity. Even Derrick Lee Weeden — so wooden in *The Tempest* — comes alive here as Caesar, a cop with a vengeance.

Perhaps because of the cast's work with "movement guru" Patdro Harris — and intelligent lighting design from Robert Peterson — even a potentially problematic "magic" scene works its true magic and leaves the audience shaken and weeping.

Gem is performed with appropriate skill on a perfect set with smart lighting. While the music feels a bit off — did they borrow the theme from *Fried Green Tomatoes*? — the production easily overcomes it. This is the major play of the OSF season, a play that hits at the vital heart of our self-definition as a country. Go see it. — CA/SS

On the Razzle

(Angus Bowmer Theatre, through Oct. 28)

The perfect blend of goofy movie marquee, arch-ironic vaudevillian slapstick and translated-from-19th-century-Vienna farce, *On the Razzle* delights and dazzles from its opening moments on. The play is Tom Stoppard's adaptation and interpretation of Johann Nestroy's *Einen jux will er sich machen*, which was also

adapted by Thornton Wilder as *The Merchant of Yonkers* and *The Matchmaker*, which eventually became *Hello, Dolly!*

Is that confusing? Well, it's only theater history; audiences don't really need to know it to enjoy this farce. And be clear: This play is almost the definition of farce. Do not go to *On the Razzle* if you don't enjoy a good dose of

comedy leavened with mistaken identities, outrageous lies and dares, zipping in and out of windows and doors and incredible wordplay. Because it's Stoppard, this is all combined with nods and winks to meta-jokes about language and the way German sounds to English speakers (specifically to the British, which means Americans miss some of the jokes). The garish set and the costumes of everyone including the two mostly wonderful leads,

Weinberl (a brilliant Rex Young) and Christopher (Tasso Feldman), could keep a health care worker awake after a 36-hour shift. The only sour notes come from OSF regulars who essentially play their personas in every show, and that's a casting problem Bill Rauch should solve. But in general, this powerful, unstoppable farce gathers momentum for its dazzling, many-balls-in-the-air scenes of hilarity, and though it ends with a whimper, the show is a nice antidote to the more serious fare on offer. — SS

Romeo and Juliet

(Elizabethan Stage, through Oct. 5)

(With apologies for the non-iambus ...)

Was ever a hackneyed tale more well known than that

Of this fiery Montague and his young Capulet?

I refuse to recount the plot of *R&J*; check

out the gazillion movies, musicals and plays for more info. Onward: Much has been made, both in Ashland and for anyone who reads about the OSF, of incoming artistic director Bill Rauch's supposed boldness in keeping the adults of *R&J* in Elizabethan costume while showing the "generation gap" between adults and youth by dressing the youth in "modern" outfits (a kind of Hogwarts lite, combined with some *sweet* soccer kits for the boys in later acts). Fine. Nice idea! No problem, especially for those who have read the script to *West Side Story* and know its emphasis on how adults *just don't understand* teens. But costumes, wonderful as they may be (and they are lovely), do not a production make. How is the acting?

The young lovers are played by John Tufts and Christine Albright; Benvolio is Juan Rivera LeBron, and Mercutio the excellent Dan Donohue (who, I'm happy to hear, is playing Iago next year). I'm not clear on why Tufts instead of LeBron played Romeo — to my mind, LeBron is the better actor. Nevertheless, Tufts does a decent job. So does Albright who, while young, looks far too mature for this role. Jonathan Haugen chews the scenery as Lord Capulet; Mark Murphey gets his props as Friar Laurence; and, of course, Demetra Pittman as the Nurse puts in

a good night's work. But, even if you enjoy this oft-produced tale of star-crossed lovers, the reason to see it is Donohue. As is often the case with *R&J*, Mercutio's brilliance (almost) makes up for the self-centered blather of the teenage lovers.

— SS

Taming of the Shrew

(Elizabethan Stage, through Oct. 7)

Rereading *Taming* before the trip, I thought about how clearly the language shows this was an early play. Over time, Shakespeare refined his use of blank verse; in plays like *Taming* and *Richard II*, the language is pristinely beautiful, but the couplet reigns supreme, and inconvenient things like character develop-

ment can be disposed of with a well-turned phrase. How would the OSF deal with the language and the final submissive speech of Kate (Vilma Silva)?

To the first, the answer is well, well, well. To the second? Sometimes, there's not much you can do. Later, I heard opinions ranging from "At least [director] Kate Buckley played it straight and didn't try to subvert it" to "Oh, that was a total subversion!" Neither seems quite accurate; in the glorious combative wordplay between Kate and the incredibly energetic Petruchio (Michael Elich, who racks up the I-5 miles as a Portland State prof and an OSF mainstage actor), one can read a certain amount of winking and nodding, but despite a bit of amusing stage business at the very end, Kate's speech remains a blot that takes modern audiences right out of the play.

Luckily, Buckley didn't remove the comedic bits with Bianca (Sarah Rutan) and her suitors Gremio (James Edmondson), Hortensio (Shad Willingham) and the lucky Lucentio (Danforth Comins). These classic Shakespearean interplays of dialogue, physical comedy and clever deception delight the audience. The actors obviously enjoy themselves in this production, which is gorgeously costumed and lit; thanks to Elich's mania and the sweet staging, it's the outdoor production not to miss. — SS

Tartuffe

(Angus Bowmer Theatre, through Oct. 27)

Religion: A truthful game played by liars, believed only by fools. At least that's what French playwright Molière might be trying to say with his *Tartuffe*, penned in 1664, a comedy about religious hypocrisy at a time when religious fervor was at its apex in France. Fittingly, the play was immediately banned from the stage by *dévots* (the devout faithful), many of whom turned out to be (big surprise!) religious imposters themselves.

For those unfamiliar with *Tartuffe*, the storyline is straightforward. Rich aristocrat Orgon (Richard Elmore, in scenery chewing mode) has taken in the charlatan Tartuffe (Anthony Heald, in full sleaze mode) as a spiritual advisor to his household. The only problem is that while Orgon sees piety, the others smell a scoundrel. Orgon's children, Mariane (Laura Morache) and Damis (Gregory Linington), his wife, Elmire (Suzanne Irving), her maid Dorine (Linda Alper, fiery as ever) and her brother Cleante (Richard Howard) all wish to open Orgon's eyes to Tartuffe's trickery, but this task is difficult when, in fact, Tartuffe never lies. Orgon rebuffs his family and orders Mariane to marry Tartuffe instead of her true love, Valère (Kevin Kenerly). Mortified, Mariane pleads with the others to set a trap for Tartuffe; they do, and the imposter is, literally, caught with his pants down. But it's too late, and only a



Romeo (John Tufts) and Juliet (Christine Albright)

JENNY GRAHAM

Adults just don't understand teenage love



JENNY GRAHAM

Tartuffe (Anthony Heald) listens to the arguing Orgon (Richard Elmore, back left) and Damis (Gregory Linington)

Tickets, discussions, info and a list of 2008's plays can all be found at the OSF's website (www.osfashland.org).