



Pantalone (David Kelly)

The Servant of Two Masters

At the New Theatre through Nov. 1

This triumph of ensemble casting and tight, close acting serves up delight after delight. With mastery of improvisation, comic timing and the sheer hilarity of piling on one ridiculous moment after another, the adapted commedia dell'arte piece sends up the Festival's budget woes, the audience, the history of theater, its own art form and so much more.

Before intermission, especially, the energy and high spirits of the cast create an atmosphere of deep, collaborative enjoyment. Mark Bedard plays the traditional Harlequin role as Truffaldino, a servant who decides to make extra money — and food — by serving two masters. Mistaken identity, cross-dressing and a damn funny dinner scene ensue. Bedard must be in the running for major awards, as should be director Tracy Young and stage manager Jill Rendall. Elijah Alexander springs blithely from playing the king in *Henry VIII* to nailing the part of Florindo here, and both David Kelly and Richard Howard contribute compelling performances. The set and costumes, scavenged from former shows, make for excellent long-time audience conversation pieces (and brought *Servant* in far, far under budget). When the improv stops, some of the energy goes out of *Servant*, but it's still one of the hottest tickets at the festival. Do not miss it. (See my interview with director Young at blogs.eugeneweekly.com/node/1198)



Queen Katherine (Vilma Silva) & King Henry VIII (Elijah Alexander)

Henry VIII

On the Elizabethan Stage through Oct. 9

Love costume drama? Prefer Elizabethan clothes to any modern interpretations? You're on for *Henry VIII*. This piece can hardly be called Shakespearean (collaborator/reviser John Fletcher should have more credit; the language rarely sounds like the Will we know and

love), but *Henry VIII* is the most solid of the three outdoor plays. That's often due to the stunning performance of Vilma Silva as Queen Katherine of Aragon, supported ably by Anthony Heald as Cardinal Wolsey.

Director John Sipes keeps our focus on three main characters — Katherine, Wolsey and Henry (Elijah Alexander, whose Henry is a dissipated, powerful man with a roving eye) — but the supporting cast, including Michael Elich, Derrick Lee Weeden, David Kelly, Gregory Linington and Richard Howard, brings more political nuance to the tale. You might want to watch *Anne of the Thousand Days* or catch up on your Tudors so the political actors are clear in your mind.

Tudor England is a man's world, and mostly *Henry VIII* is a play about men, but Silva shows how very much this costs women. Her Queen Katherine is magnificent and doomed (as is her replacement). Ironically, at the end of the play, we know its true thrust: toward a world dominated by a woman, the baby girl whose name is Elizabeth.



The King's Company

Equivocation

At the Bowmer Theatre through Oct. 31

In a season that's absolutely superb for the men of the OSF company, *Equivocation*, a world premiere by Bill Cain, provides yet another opportunity for the guys to bite into their roles. Cain controls this world of power, art and word-play, and OSF Artistic Director Bill Rauch proves his range by directing *Music Man* and this work during the same season.

Equivocation begins in a post-Elizabeth world, with James I (John Tufts) holding the throne and his spymaster Robert Cecil (Jonathan Haugen in a towering performance) putting the screws to whomever he thinks will help secure the polity. Catholics don't have a chance in this England, and a plot to blow up Parliament has just been uncovered. The King writes a play (or, more likely, a treatment) about this episode, and Cecil commissions William Shakespeare — here known as Shag, played by Anthony Heald — to revise and polish the King's work. But what is truth and what is a lie for political gain? Shakespeare wonders, vacillates and endangers his company. All of the male (OSF) actors switch roles, playing company members, soldiers, torturers and tortured, and they're uniformly strong.

Where are the women? There's a gesture, an attempt, to show a woman and deflect feminist criticism by including Shag's daughter Judith (Christine Albright), whose role as company laundress doesn't prevent her from saving the company from time to time. But *Equivocation* could be stronger without this fakey, sentimental thread.

Very nearly a great play with brilliant performances and humorous, meaty, thoughtful

writing, *Equivocation* moves (cast and all) to the Seattle Rep in mid-November.



The Countess of Rossillion (Dee Maaske)

All's Well That Ends Well

At the New Theatre through Nov. 1

Danforth Comins has played many Shakespearean roles in Ashland, but neither as Orlando nor Coriolanus nor Cassio did he find as rich as role as he plays in *All's Well*. He makes Bertram — a privileged, arrogant liar and misogynist who attempts to deceive his mother and the King but somehow ends up a military leader and a happy husband, son and father — convincing and even sympathetic.

This splendid production with its additional Clown (Armando Durán) deserved its planned (but cancelled) run in China. To Director Amanda Dehnert, scenic designer Christopher Acebo and all of the designers and crew, deep bows of appreciation. And the cast! From Emily Sophia Knapp as a sparkling proto-feminist in solidarity with Bertram's betrayed wife to G. Valmont Thomas as a military officer and nobleman to John Tufts as goofy Parolles, it's charming. Dee Maaske, playing Bertram's mother, the Countess of Rossillion, turns in a steely, generous portrait of an elderly woman whose hopes for the younger generation don't blind her to their faults. Helena, Bertram's wife, proves too much of a challenge for Kjerstine Rose Anderson — but no matter, the entirety of the show's excellence outweighs this one casting flaw.



Quixote (Armando Duran) and Rocinante (James Jesse Peck)

Don Quixote

On the Elizabethan Stage through Oct. 10

A meditation on the act of creation so bold as to call down the power of the Inquisition, *Don Quixote* has room for endless retellings.

This simply isn't one of the better ones. But I saw *Quixote* on a rain-drenched night, when the OSF held the curtain for 30 minutes because of lightning. For safety reasons the fight scenes and dance scenes went off at half-speed. This is a true spectacle, and if you enjoy puppets or never-ending stage business with a horse, you might make it through this newly adapted version of one of the greatest books ever written.

Armando Durán uses a gentle touch with the self-titled knight, letting the full weight of *Quixote*'s nostalgia and delusional thinking spool out for us to see. But to feel the courage, the poignance and the full power of his tale, we need to see his ideal(ized) woman in the flesh. For Dulcinea, a puppet won't do. That lack of emotional connection tinges the entire evening, however well Josiah Phillips fits the role of Sancho Panza or Jeffrey King plays a cruel Miguel de Cervantes. Four lovers (Danforth Comins, Vilma Silva, René Millan and Miriam Laube) demonstrate, in a story-within-the-story, the power of storytelling to wound as well as heal, and finally some emotion other than humor or horror enters the stage. Still, for experimentation and stagecraft, puppetry and general spectacle, this is a fine choice.



Beatrice (Robynn Rodriguez) & Don Pedro (Peter Macon)

Much Ado About Nothing

On the Elizabethan Stage through Oct. 11

Much Ado might be one of the most enjoyable of all Shakespeare comedies, at least for a modern audience; Beatrice and Benedick's bickering remains gender-equal, and equally amusing, throughout the entire script. On the other hand, it's got the horribly patriarchal Hero-Claudio bit where the men decry and abuse a woman for not being a virgin. Bleah, right?

Only, in this production, Juan Rivera LeBoron makes Claudio believable and sympathetic, which changes the feel. David Kelly, somewhat ... mature ... for Benedick, makes a game run at it and, as usual, earns many laughs; ditto for Robynn Rodriguez as Beatrice. But, despite the generally strong execution, nothing quite sparks in this WWII-era production. And many actors, the night I attended, seemed to need serious vocal amplification.

Points to Peter Macon for a strong performance as Don Pedro and Tony DeBruno for keeping Dogberry's antics reined in and therefore tolerable — and to the scene shop for the superb pool. Fun, but not the best *Much Ado* or the OSF can offer.