



JENNY GRAHAM

Homeless Plays Seek Shelter

OSF and the Ongoing Battle of the Ashland's Broken Bowmer Beam

With a sickening *crack!* scores of actors were driven from the stage, out of their dressing rooms and onto the bricks. The Bowmer Theatre in Ashland, home to five of Oregon Shakespeare Festival's dozen shows this season, is closed for an indeterminate number of weeks, forcing the company to put on plays wherever they can find a few footlights.

For those of you who have little background in structural integrity, here's the skinny: The main supporting beam of the Bowmer Theater cracked. This massive 70-footer is the backbone of the whole theater (which dashes the popular belief that David Kelly is the backbone of all OSF theaters). When the Bowmer was built in the late '60s, glulam beams were all the rage. They still are.

Glulam is an economical replacement for big, solid pieces of old-growth timber. You take a bunch of sticks, bond them with some heavy-duty adhesive and, voila! — a beam. Which sounds about as smart as agglutinating a bunch of words together and calling it an essay (though that never stopped me).

The failure of Bowmer's beam has kicked more than a third of the plays in a truly awesome OSF season out on the streets — where, in fact, they are thriving.

With only one performance of one show canceled, OSF and its many friends have scrambled to keep the season running. Southern Oregon University, the city of Ashland, a couple of event planning groups, the Ashland Parks staff

and wealthy patrons, alongside dedicated Ashlandites, have all pitched in to help OSF move on with the show.

Most of the Bowmer productions have settled in what they're calling "Bowmer in The Park." Actual genius Christopher Acebo (you remember him, mastermind of the *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* set?) designed a tent to shelter the homeless plays. Beginning July 7, *August: Osage County*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Imaginary Invalid* and *The African Company Presents Richard III* will play al fresco until somebody gets that beam fixed. *To Kill a Mockingbird* landed at the Craterian Ginger Rogers Theater in Medford for the month of July.

Getting the plays settled in new spaces has taken more muscle and imagination than procuring matching pedicures for every mandrill monkey in Equatorial Guinea. Coming in strong for the most-work-created-by-the-big-beam-break award would be the costumers. Imagine setting up dressing rooms all over town and shuffling the appropriate clothing, wigs, make-up, etc., for every misplaced play. And they're still running production on three of the season's upcoming shows.

It is somewhat surprising, then, that OSF costume shop manager Chris McNamara should find herself in charge of setting up the new performance tent. Why?

"I volunteered," she says, as though it's the most natural thing in the world. So a lady who is really good at coordinating the arrival of brocades with belt buckles and accurately placing poke bonnets in their appropriate

era finds herself negotiating big, heavy trucks into Lithia Park. "It's something I've never done before," McNamara says wryly.

When I ask how the first show in the tent played, she laughs: "I was in my office, creating more signs!" It seems patrons still need to know where to park their cars and how to find a bathroom. But once the details have cleared, McNamara says she hopes to see a production thriving in the tent. "It harkens back to the old Chautauqua days of Lithia Park," she adds.

Excitement in the park is all very well, but many readers would still prefer the air-conditioning and awesome experience of the Bowmer. The cracked beam is on its way to shouldering the theater once again. Western Wood Structures has been hired to rig up some cables and mess about with pins and epoxy, which will result in the same venerable old glulam with the strength of a modern beam. And in a major break from traditional theater repair practices, there will be no duct tape involved in the process.

We can only imagine the final price, what with the labor for shuffling the shows, the lost ticket sales and the creation of a new space, not to mention the cost of repairing the beam.

Patrons across the country are pitching in to the best of their abilities — patrons like Charlotte Lin and Robert Porter. Longtime members of the Artistic Director's Circle, last year the couple from Bellevue, Wash., donated \$25,000 to sponsor *Pirates of Penzance*. This summer, Lin and Porter are giving \$50,000 to support the upcoming

season, and tossing in an additional \$2,500 to the Bowmer Society. Why?

Because they can. An engineer by trade, Porter says he was dragged to the festival 30 years ago by his wife and her parents, and was hooked. Since then, Porter and Lin have become increasingly committed to giving their financial support to the theater. "It's all about cash flow," Lin says. "The festival has always been so prudent with their money. We wanted them to be able to continue their fiscal responsibility."

Porter says he believes that much of the credit for OSF weathering this crisis goes to artistic director Bill Rauch. "Bill is an amazing person, an amazing director," he says. "He understands the theater on so many levels."

According to Porter, Rauch's goodwill campaign with the town of Ashland has paid off. "This crisis has shown that while the space is important, it's not what brings people to [OSF]," he explains. "It's the relationship between the audience and the actors."

As I sat with girlfriends, discussing epoxy and wood grain over drinks at Lucky Noodle, I pondered the passion we all feel for the Bowmer. What is it about that space that felt invulnerable to us?

The Bowmer has been home to a hundred magical journeys. It is where many people in this area saw their first play, as a middle-schooler unwillingly bused down only to have her imagination ignited by Shakespeare. And judging from the trembling hands and shuffling walks of some patrons, it may be where many see their last play.

This is the space where we waged epic battles, fell in love, occasionally fell asleep and, ultimately, understood the human condition a little more clearly, one play at a time. My heart beats faster every time I find my seat in the Bowmer and settle in for another adventure. We love the space as much as we love what happens in it.

Angus L. Bowmer, founder of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, said of the Bowmer that: "Every theatre person who steps in can feel excitement built into the design because of the close audience-actor relationship."

He was right. Ultimately, however, our experiences are larger than any theater, and the commitment of OSF audiences is stronger than the most modern glulam beam. In the end, it is community that has held up the theater. **EW**

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