

Planned by History

BY SUZI STEFFEN

Actors don't have to do anything but look pretty, some think. Those who tread the boards at something like the Oregon Shakespeare Festival might have to memorize iambic pentameter and speak it convincingly, but the directors and designers and dramaturges do the intellectual heavy lifting.

That's bollocks.

Just ask John Tufts and Christine Albright, two members of the OSF company who spent their spring traveling on what they call "The Royal Road." On the way, the actors blogged and made video of their time researching and retracing the steps of Henry V, king of England from 1413-1422, as he went from Prince Hal to a monarch who conquered the French on their own territory at Agincourt.

Tufts has played Prince Hal for the past two summers in *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, and he'll be playing Henry V in next summer's finale to the Henriad. Albright, who has played Lady Elizabeth Percy in the same plays, will play the Boy in Henry V (you may remember Kenneth Branagh crying over the body of the Boy in the 1989 film of *Henry V*).

The duo married in 2009 and has co-starred in *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Equivocation* and *The Cherry Orchard* at OSF (along with *The Seagull* at Marin Theatre Company, just before this trip). Because they married in the three days between the time *Equivocation* closed in Ashland and the day it opened in Seattle, Albright and Tufts never had time for a honeymoon. So they considered this trip a way to celebrate their wedding in nerd-tastic style.

"It might seem funny to other people," Albright says, "but for us, it was perfect."

She says it was also the perfect opportunity to combine their love for travel and history while letting others peek in on the experience. Tufts wanted to bring the audience along with him during the research phase of his character-building process, and that's obvious from the videos and the warm tone of the blog posts. (See all of those at <http://wkly.ws/13e>)

He and Albright both talk about playing people who lived, who once walked the same ground the couple now wandered in the two countries that fought the Hundred Years' War. And they have the usual OSF actorly passion for their characters and Shakespeare's plays as well.

"Audiences can be turned off by the term 'history play,'" Tufts says. "But these plays are enormously entertaining and exploding with life."

Speaking of entertaining, the trip mixed fun with research. One of the videos shows Tufts explaining the challenges of driving in London on the wrong side of the road. "We were honked at more than if I'd had an 'I Heart Sarah Palin' bumper sticker driving through Ashland," Tufts says.

Once they made it out of London to Shrewsbury Battlefield, where Prince Hal killed Harry "Hotspur" Percy in a civil conflict, things got both more fun and more serious. They met a man called Robin Spencer, an ancient artillery expert and medieval re-enactor who taught them

how to shoot the longbow (the longbow, a Welsh-created instrument of war, gave the English superiority in battle for decades). Tufts says that when he finally started shooting at the targets, "Spencer called me a natural, but it made me wonder if 'natural' meant something different in British English."

They also walked through the one-room Shrewsbury Battlefield museum, where Albright discovered the gruesome fact that King Henry IV had Hotspur's body exhumed, drawn and quartered, his body parts sent to all the corners of England and his head returned to be impaled on the gate at the Percy home. Lady Percy spent six months recovering his body so she could rebury him.

In *Part 2*, Lady Percy (played by Albright) tries to convince her father-in-law not to fight anymore, despite the death of Hotspur. Albright says that this summer, as she speaks the words, she knows that if Lady Percy ever actually did say something like that to her father-in-law, "she did it with her husband's head pitted on their front gate."

On that quiet, rainy day they also entered the chapel there, built over a mass grave of English soldiers who died in the rebellion that day. "The fog was thick; there was no lighting inside the chapel, just the little bit of light that filtered in through the stained-glass windows," Albright says. "I know it sounds clichéd, but it felt haunted."

Shrewsbury isn't the only battlefield to have that effect on the actors. They took the ferry to France and drove to the site of the Battle of Agincourt (or Azincourt, in French). That's where, in 1415, Henry's few thousand British soldiers defeated at least 20,000 French, thanks to the longbow. The battlefield was so huge that even now the couple had to drive around it, with a driving map from the Agincourt museum.

"This is a small farm that, 600 years ago, was a muddy, rain-soaked bloodbath," Tufts says. "I couldn't stop imagining the sounds, the fear, the exhaustion, the anxiety and the ultimate triumph of the battle itself."

Of course, both actors feel that it deepened their connections to their characters. But beyond that, they feel passionate about making sure that audiences see and experience that connection as well. "OSF audiences are special," Albright says. "They are uniquely attached to the actors they see year after year, and the blog was a little window into a part of the process they don't see."

Tufts says that other actors in the company have given them great feedback, even as everyone waits for them to edit the final two videos of the trip (which may be a challenge; they also both have roles in *Love's Labor's Lost* and this season's twelfth play, *Willful*, opening just after *EW* goes to press).

Albright says that audience members stop them on the street to thank them for the blog.

"The festival as set up by Angus Bowmer has had a long tradition of bringing the audience into the process," Tufts says, "and I think the company sees that projects like this expand pretty dramatically on that vision." **EW**

I'll Have the Family Dysfunction Plate, Please

August: Osage County overflows with screw-ups, lost loves, mistakes, missed connections, addictions, depressions, poor choices, creepy potential in-laws, creepy actual in-laws and secrets so layered and maliciously revealed that it's a miracle the Bowmer beam didn't crack earlier under the sheer weight of the Weston family's issues.

But don't get me wrong: It's also hilarious, shockingly funny while also simply shocking, flinging the audience around the tornado that is Violet Weston (Judith-Marie Bergan, in what I'd call a tour de force turn if that weren't what any critic would say about any Violet, so I'll just say that she almost always manages, with finesse, to present as realistic the histrionics the part requires). She combines the peculiarly devastating insults of a Southern (in this case, Oklahoman) gentlewoman with the neediness and manipulation of an addict, her howls of naked need vying with calculated spite for the attention of her daughters, her sister, her granddaughter and even the maid/cook/servant, Johnna (DeLanna Studi).

The play's not perfect – Robynn Rodriguez' performance needs more emotional shading, and the script definitely hits a few too many sitcom buttons – but this is a knockout of a play, complete with uncomfortable racialized interactions between Johnna and almost every member of the white Westons. It's disturbing, cracklingly amusing and deeply sad.

August: Osage County runs through Nov. 5 at the Bowmer Theatre. – Suzi Steffen

Violet Weston (Judith-Marie Bergan) sinks into the darkness of her world



JENNY GRAHAM



OSF actors John Tufts and Christine Albright try their hands at the longbow while travelling "The Royal Road"