

Let's Have a Spectacle

Choreographer Randy Duncan finds out Ashland's more than "cute" BY SUZI STEFFEN

When Chris Acebo, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's associate artistic director, called Randy Duncan in 2009 to see if he could choreograph a show, Duncan said yes because he knew Acebo.

He also knew Chuck Smith, the director of *Death and the King's Horseman*, and respected his work. But Duncan wondered where the heck he'd just agreed to work. "I thought, I've heard of Portland, I've heard of Eugene, but I've never heard of Ashland," he says. Acebo told him that the little town was halfway between Portland and San Francisco. "I said, 'OK, cute,'" Duncan says he told Acebo, with a doubtful tone. "I didn't realize how absolutely sophisticated and wonderful this place was."



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Duncan has worked with the Joffrey Ballet in Hollywood, Amsterdam, Mexico and more international locales – and on many a musical during his career. So after choreographing *King's Horseman* and 2010's *Ruined*, he told OSF Artistic Director Bill Rauch, "You know, I do more than West African or African plays."

Rauch responded, eventually, by asking Duncan to come out to Ashland for a couple of months to choreograph *Pirates of Penzance*, the first musical offering on the Elizabethan Stage.

The Elizabethan, by the way, isn't a very large stage, especially not for the numbers of pirates, gentle ladies, London police and supporting cast of *Pirates*. One of Duncan's friends who went to see it asked him, "How in the world did you get all of the people on that stage to do that stuff?"

"Some of it is rather dangerous," Duncan says. "But it just comes from practice. They've got to know what they're doing and keep right time."

The choreography includes puppeteers in tuxes and tails moving birds, bats, boulders and flags around the stage, not to mention the cast having to wave swords and brandish nightsticks or umbrellas awfully close to the head of the conductor of the *Pirates* orchestra. In early design meetings, Duncan says, every designer came up with more and more ideas. "It was like, 'Why not do the whole thing?' You know, let's have a spectacle, the first musical outdoors!"

OSF actors know how to move fluidly through normal stage blocking, but they aren't exactly the Joffrey Ballet. Duncan's used to working with actors, though. He says that one of the greatest things about their level of vanity is that "actors do not want to get up there looking bad. So whatever it takes, they're going to do it. However long they have to work, they'll get this right."

To choreograph steps for the actors, Duncan spent time observing the way they moved when they weren't dancing. "I'm not asking them to do frappés," he says. And he delighted in working with Michael Elich, the Pirate King. He'd say to Elich, "OK, let's jump off *this* thing! Have you practiced this with a sword?" And, Duncan says, Elich responded beautifully.

He has now worked in all three of OSF's main theaters. He says he loves the New Theatre, and he enjoyed the Bowmer – and he notes that the Elizabethan comes with unique challenges. Duncan flew back to Chicago just to fetch his winter gear. "Having to work out there in the elements – it was like watching a football game, some of those rehearsals!"

The snow and the rain – or, as Duncan puts it, "the rain, my goodness, the rain!" – meant that he had to talk with his dance captain (Emily Sophia Knapp, who also plays one of the daughters of the Major-General) about what to do when storms hit the outside stage.

Usually, the actors know how to stop performing turns or moves that won't work on a damp stage. But with such a big cast, that doesn't really fly all of the time. "In some cases,"

Duncan says, "it is really unsafe *not* to do certain things because you're not used to not doing it."

Duncan now knows where Ashland is, and he's glad it's more than cute. "It's really wonderful working there, with the people who are there," he says, "everybody from the backstage to the folks in the office to the company manager," he says.

Frederic (Eddie Lopez) dances with his love, Mabel (Khorl Dastoor)

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