

## CREATING OPPORTUNITY

High school drama teachers warn aspiring actresses “there will be ten male roles for every female role!” And to some extent, that won’t change too much when you’re talking about classical theater. But OSF is clearly working on the issue.

“Because our resident playwright is Shakespeare, there are going to be more great men’s roles,” says Silva. “While there has been an increase of female roles in contemporary theater, I think the buzz at OSF is more about certain choices and casting in this theater.”

Silva is certainly in a position to talk about casting choices. Last summer she didn’t just play the title role in *Julius Caesar*, she rocked it. Hard.

“You cast a woman as Julius Caesar and that’s going to create some buzz,” Silva says. “The festival, to their credit, wasn’t shy about it.” From the moment she was chosen to play the ill-fated dictator, Silva began to encounter eager fans in the local Bi-Mart as well as a few grimacing naysayers in the seats. Love it or hate it, she notes, “The buzz factor had a long arc.”

*Julius Caesar* certainly wasn’t the first time a woman filled the shoes of a male character at OSF, and judging from the cast list of the upcoming *As You Like It*, it won’t be the last. “They’re not afraid to mess with things here,” Escalante notes.

Challenging gender roles isn’t the only thing the festival does to encourage women who want to take part. For Escalante, it is OSF’s willingness to stage the works of major female playwrights, who tend to (not surprisingly) write more and better female roles.

Next summer will see the staging of Tanya Saracho’s *Dreams of the Muse*, a Latina playwright Escalante says she is particularly excited about. “She writes plays for women,” she explains of Saracho, “and to do a show with an entirely female cast is really brave.”

## JULIET IN THE FACE OF PUBLIC OPINION

Expectations run high for female artists at OSF, particularly when you’re talking about *Romeo and Juliet*. For this year’s production, set among the fading glory of Californio culture in 1840s, Silva is playing Doña Capulet while Escalante tackles the role of Juliet.

And everyone has an opinion about it.

Silva played Juliet in her second year with OSF. “There are so many preconceived notions about this character,” she says. “And to be the perfect Juliet to every single person who walks in the room is impossible.”

Escalante and Silva traded stories about nasty letters to the editor about their performances, about folks stopping them in the street, calling them whiney. “I had a guy tell me my hands were too big to play Juliet,” Silva says.

Seriously?

According to Silva, *Romeo and Juliet* is, for most people, the first Shakespeare play they connected with. “They read it as a sophomore in high school,” she says, “and have an idea of who Juliet is supposed to be.”

“You have to trust your own voice,” Escalante explains of playing Juliet, which she calls “a huge opportunity, and you want to do it right. I finally came to the realization that the only way to get it right was if it was mine. I can’t try to do a Juliet that someone (else) needed or wanted.”

Not that anyone’s looking for 24/7 approval.

“The boys have the crazier fans,” Escalante says, speaking of her co-worker Daniel José Molina, who is playing Romeo this season.

Silva agrees, recalling an intelligent conversation she had with a young woman after a performance. Concluding their talk, the woman suggested to Silva that Romeo could keep his shirt off throughout the entire production. “They love him, and scream for him,” Escalante says with a shudder.

It’s an area of equality the ladies are willing to skip. A barrage of screaming 14-year-old boys is remarkably unappealing.



PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM

## THE UPSIDE TO AGING

American film and theater have been guilty of promoting the idea that, while men gain gravitas as they age, women simply expire. But recently, with Oprah declaring 50 to be the new 40 and former ingénue Kate Winslet taking on tough roles and refusing to go in for Botox, there has been some Hollywood leadership around age appreciation for women.

Can this translate to a regional theater?

Escalante and Silva look a little confused when I ask this. Was I suggesting that there is anything wrong with aging?

“The roles are certainly going to be different,” Silva finally says. “Luckily they’ve been really challenging and wonderful so far.”

Escalante says she is looking forward to the older, meatier roles. “During my four years of college, I was always cast as much more mature women,” she says. “Since I got out of school I keep playing younger and younger roles. My first professional role was a 17-year-old, and I was like, ‘Oh my god, I don’t know how to play someone my own age.’ So I have to rework my brain, especially playing Juliet, who is 13.”

Does it get Escalante down to think about playing the ingénue for the next ten years?

“Yes and no.” She grabs her cheeks and mocks an admirer saying, “Oh, you’re so cute, you’ve got such a baby face.” Suddenly straight again, Escalante says, “I just never thought of myself that way, but I’m excited for whatever. Throw it at me, I’ll do it.”

## CHANGING WHAT’S POSSIBLE

Young women have been on the edge of their seats with excitement while watching last year’s *Julius Caesar* and this year’s *Romeo and Juliet*. While advancing their own careers, Escalante and Silva are advancing opportunities for the next generation of theater artists as well.

Speaking of *Julius Caesar*, Silva says, “The girls would go crazy. I love that. To play the title character was a big step. Some people were fine with it, some were not convinced, but I loved that the girls would really get a kick out of that. It’s a huge step in confidence about who you are, what you can achieve, what’s possible. What’s possible is changing, and that’s exciting.”

Escalante says she’s been moved and excited about inspiring a younger generation of Latinos. “Many of the discussions I’ve done have been with groups of Latino students,” she says. “I see a lot of kids like the kids I went to high school with, some of them who got into so much trouble. I see myself in those groups, the tight pants that I used to wear and the big hoop earrings, all the makeup. And you see them becoming really interested in Shakespeare.”

Escalante smiles reflectively. “When I was in college,” she continues, “I strayed away from the Latino image. I didn’t want to be classified as a Latina actress. I wanted to be an actress. Once I got out of college I realized what an asset that was. It’s braver to take on the responsibility of saying I will help to represent a people in a positive light.”

## A LONG ROAD

Refraining from lighting up a Virginia Slims, I have to note that they *have* come a long way. Yet along with Tanya Saracho’s script, there are plans at next year’s OSF to stage *My Fair Lady*, *Taming of the Shrew* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, none of which hold my favorite portrayals of female power. Is it too early to thank the world for getting more enlightened? Or can OSF work their magic with these scripts as well?

EW

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