

# IN LOVE WITH Shakespeare

Ashland's Oregon Shakespeare Festival  
kicks off its season with four new shows

BY BOB KEEFER

It's Bill Rauch's tenth season as artistic director at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, and on Saturday morning of opening weekend last month he sat on stage with OSF actor Rex Young and answered questions before a delighted crowd.

Example: Did the Tony-winning *All the Way* make a lot of money for the festival when it jumped from OSF to Broadway? Well, Rauch said, not nearly as much as *Hamilton*, calling the blockbuster show, which was *not* from OSF, "the OSF musical that got away."

So what should he and the festival be doing to address these trying political times?

Rauch didn't hesitate.

"I am exactly where I need to be," he said. "And we are doing exactly what we need to do."

He ticked off all the Shakespeare festival has been doing under his leadership: A hugely broadened diversity in casting and in play selection. A focus on new plays. A focus on American history, particularly the history of under-represented groups. A focus on musicals. And, of course, a continued focus on Shakespeare.

The best way to look at what Rauch and his players are up to is to enjoy the plays. Here's a quick look at the four shows — two by Shakespeare — that opened in late February.

## SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE

In the Angus Bowmer Theatre through Oct. 29

Yes, you've seen the movie. With a screenplay co-written by Tom Stoppard, the mad genius behind such stage nuggets as *Arcadia* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, the movie version of this fanciful tale, which came out in 1998 with Gwyneth Paltrow and Joseph Fiennes in the lead roles, took seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

So why go see it again?

Because it's so much more fun to watch a play about theater on a real stage. And because OSF is offering the U.S. premiere of this stage version, which was 16 years in the making. It's been previously produced in London's West End (2014) and at the Stratford Festival in Canada (2016).

The story is simple, sweet, hilarious and, should you make the mistake of taking it for actual history, wildly inaccurate. Young playwright Will Shakespeare (William DeMerritt) suffers writer's block while working on his new comedy, tentatively titled *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate's Daughter*, which he is trying to purvey to Henslowe (Brent Hinkley), an entrepreneur who holds that all successful shows must be comedies featuring a pirate and a dog.

(And, yes, there's a dog in this show. A real live dog. Cue the audience: "Awwwwwww ...")

Along the way Will meets a young actor named Thomas Kent, who does an unusually good onstage turn as Ethel, men being required to play women in the theater in those Elizabethan days. It turns out, of course, that Kent is so good at portraying a woman because he really is a woman, though not in any 21st-century transgender sense. "He" is Viola de Lesseps, a wealthy young woman who wants to be an actor and who is, unfortunately, betrothed by family obligation to the older and more boring Lord Wessex.

VIOLA'S (JAMIE ANN ROMERO) CAST MATES (ENSEMBLE) DISCOVER HER TRUE IDENTITY.  
PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM



Sound Shakespearean yet?

This is two and a half hours of sheer razzle-dazzle, fast dialogue and accessible fun fitted out in faux Elizabethan English. And, as with the movie, a thoroughly engaging love story underlies all the action, both of the intellectual (spot that fleeting Shakespeare reference!) and slapstick variety.

Christopher Liam Moore directs a cast that is essentially an ensemble, with almost every actor taking on

multiple roles. DeMerritt is solid as Will, the struggling playwright; Jamie Ann Romero is sweet as his eventual Juliet. The wonderful K.T. Vogt (remember her from last year's country-western *Yeomen of the Guard*) is splendid as Viola's loyal nurse.

Rachel Hauck's set is straightforward and reminiscent of Shakespeare's Globe Theater.

My bet is that this will be the sell-out play of the season. Get tickets early if you plan to go.