

GOING TO SHAKESPEARE FOR THE FIRST TIME?

Here are a few tips for getting the most out of your visit to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival

What is it?

The festival, founded in 1935, is one of the largest repertory theaters in the United States. A repertory theater is one that puts on more than one show during the same time period, meaning you can see several different plays during a typical weekend visit.

During its season, which runs from mid February through the end of October, OSF stages 11 plays at its three theaters in downtown Ashland, though most don't run for the entire season.

Isn't Shakespeare kind of dead-white-European boring?

Particularly under Bill Rauch, OSF's artistic director since 2008, OSF has been known for contemporary programming with an emphasis on cultural diversity. Even before Rauch, OSF had instituted race-blind casting. These days the festival offers a yeasty collision of traditional Western canon plays — now including American musicals — alongside stories from Asia, Africa and Latin America.

More than half of the festival's shows are not by Shakespeare. Ten years ago, OSF embarked on an ambitious project, American Revolutions, to commission 37 new plays (the number written by Shakespeare) about American history from leading playwrights. Seven have been staged so far. Robert Schenkkan's *All the Way*, which premiered at OSF as part of American Revolutions in 2012, went on to Broadway two years later and won the Tony Award for Best Play.

Do I have to sit outside?

Only if you attend a play at the festival's outdoor 1,190-seat Allen Elizabethan Theatre. It doesn't open until the beginning of June. The two indoor venues are the Angus Bowmer Theatre, which seats 600 in front of a conventional stage, and the black-box Thomas Theatre, which can be configured in various ways to seat between 270 and 360.

What else do I need to know?

Buy tickets and make hotel reservations early. Some shows at the festival have sold out their entire run before opening night. Get tickets online at OSFAshland.org. This year's big sellers so far are *Shakespeare in Love*, *Hannah and the Dread Gazebo* and Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*.

Don't be late. Plays at OSF start on time to the minute, and latecomers aren't seated. Parking in downtown Ashland can be challenging, especially during the summer season, so give yourself plenty of time.

Enjoy the festival's many educational opportunities, from ticketed noon talks to free outdoor programs. The morning back-stage tours (tickets \$20, \$14 for ages 6-17), conducted by company members, are especially fascinating.

most striking character in this show is the mob, made monstrous by gray masks, that forms and ebbs and flows after the assassination: a lesson, perhaps, for our own times.

In the end, though, the show fails to satisfy, largely due to those incessant melodramatic dance routines by choreographer Paul James Prendergast. There's only so much warlike drumming and chest thumping an audience can take on stage these days when there's so much already happening in the real world.

HENRY IV, PART I

In the Thomas Theatre through Oct. 28

Before any of you Shakespeare novices tune out this play on account of its slightly tedious title, you need to know it was *Henry* that brought us, among other things, the marvelous character of Falstaff.

Fat, farting, drunk, vain, cowardly and oozing insincerity, Falstaff is a pillar of human frailty served up in a charmingly overweight package.

In Lileana Blain-Cruz's tight new production of *Henry*, OSF veteran G. Valmont Thomas portrays Sir John Falstaff as a pink-suited denizen of Mistress Quickly's cocaine-infused disco world, complete with flashing strobes and black lights.

Thomas, who's been at OSF for 13 seasons, is a marvel to watch in one of the most popular roles in all Shakespeare. Flashing the whites of his eyes for emphasis, his Falstaff whines and minces his way through one comic catastrophe after another — stealing money, losing it, and hilariously describing his own heroism against a horde of imaginary attackers whose number increases with each telling.

Oh, all right, there's more to this play than the excellent comic relief. The story is about the coming of age of the young prince Hal — played here by a perfectly insouciant Daniel José Molina — who has been squandering his life in the inebriated company of Falstaff and his merry band, as events are about to demand he grow up to become a king.

In the best scene in the play, Molina's Hal and Thomas' Falstaff rehearse Hal's pending confrontation with his father, Henry IV. At first Falstaff plays the king and dutifully chides young Hal for his immature behavior. But then Hal insists they swap roles, meaning Hal now plays the king and Falstaff, Hal, leading to the kind of nuanced through-the-looking-glass reversal that makes Shakespeare Shakespeare.

Adam Rigg's abstract set is spectacularly odd, with the cast performing amid a series of steel pipes that rise up from the floor of the Thomas. It works well, providing a firm skeleton to hold the disparate parts of this story together. Well done.



MARK ANTONY (JORDAN BARBOUR) VOWS REVENGE AFTER THE ASSASSINATION OF JULIUS CAESAR (ARMANDO DURÁN), VIEWED BY CALPURNIA (AMY KIM WASCHKE).
PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM

SEVEN MORE PLAYS ARE COMING UP at the festival this season.

My two picks among them, sight unseen:

The Odyssey opens June 6 and runs through Oct. 14 in the outdoor Allen Elizabethan Theatre. It's directed by Mary Zimmerman, whose amazing *The White Snake* in 2012 was the best show I've seen there. She also did *Guys and Dolls* at OSF in 2015 and directed Dvořák's opera *Rusalka* to great acclaim this season at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

Off the Rails, which opens July 27 and runs through the season in the Angus Bowmer Theatre, is making its world premiere in Ashland, directed by Bill Rauch. An adaptation of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* set in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, it's the first play staged at the festival by a Native American playwright, Randy Reinholz.

The other five upcoming plays are: In the Angus Bowmer Theatre, August Wilson's poetry in *UniSon*, April 19 – Oct. 28. In the Thomas Theatre, *Hannah and the Dread Gazebo*, March 29 – Oct. 28; and *Henry IV, Part 2*, July 4 – Oct. 29. In the Allen Elizabethan Theatre, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, June 6 – Oct. 13; and Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, June 8 – Oct. 15. ■



KING HENRY IV (JEFFREY KING) IS TROUBLED BY THE THREAT OF REBELLION AND THE WILD BEHAVIOR OF HIS SON PRINCE HAL.
PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM