

HANNAH AND UNISON

Two fine world premieres at Oregon Shakespeare



You have two great new reasons to visit the Oregon Shakespeare Festival right now — *Hannah and the Dread Gazebo*, a charming, balanced inquiry into race, culture and family, and *UniSon*, a new musical based on almost-forgotten poetry by genius playwright August Wilson.

Both plays make their world premieres this spring at the Ashland festival.

Directed by Chay Yew, Jiehae Park's *Hannah and the Dread Gazebo*, running through Oct. 28 in the intimate Thomas Theatre, has a brilliantly curious title, evoking a kind of gothic cautionary tale.

Hannah, played by Cindy Im, has a major exam coming up to become a board certified pediatric neurosurgeon — "It's a very important time for her," as her father would say — but before she can sit for the test, Hannah learns that there's trouble back home.

Home is South Korea, a place Hannah barely knows and where they speak a language she never learned.

Hannah's father, played with affable Dad-ness by Paul Juhn, and her depressed mother (a taut, stoic Amy Kim

Waschke) reside in the high-rise Seoul condo where Hannah and her brother Dang (a hilarious Sean Jones) try to make heads or tails of this place they both know and don't know.

Jessica Ko, as the Shapeshifter, plays a myriad of characters in a piece that takes the wistful wishes between the generations and imbues them with weighty story-crafting and genuine humor.

Scenic designer Collette Pollard, lighting designer David Weiner, costume designer Sara Ryung Clement and sound designer Obadiah Eaves see to it that, as we goggle around this glowing dreamscape, we're never far from the grounding comfort of reality and its indelible quirks.

An audience of multiple ages — from school groups to seniors — clearly responded to this play and its fresh, inclusive perspective.

UniSon, which runs through Oct. 28 in the indoor Angus Bowmer Theatre, is like nothing I've seen before. It takes huge risks — weaving together dance, music and poetry — and assails all obstacles so artfully, and with such grace and conviction, that I was left utterly stunned.

Choreographer Byron Easley's movement buttresses characterization and seamlessly scaffolds emotional shifts. Christopher Acebo's scenic design — in cooperation with video design by Darrel Maloney — creates sublimely fluid, interactive anchors for the audience.

Under Alex Jainchill's saturated lighting score, Dede M. Ayite's costumes sing — resolute and detailed, Ayite's work enconces the effort in visual meaning.

This collaborative effort — by Steven Sapp (who plays Poet), Mildred Ruiz-Sapp (who plays Hunter) and William Ruiz, a.k.a. Ninja (who plays Butcher), in association with Constanza Romero — is stuffed to the rafters with star power.

This is OSF, where even the ensemble is made up of leading men and women — Christiana Clark, Kevin Kenerly, Rodney Gardiner, Yvette Monique Clark and Jonathan Luke Stevens. It's like a "who's who" of OSF greats. Even relative newcomer Asia Mark dazzles.

Director Robert O'Hara makes brilliant choices, creating a collaborative crucible that includes UNIVERSES with Broken Chord and the incomparable national treasure Toshi Reagon.

No wonder I was so emotionally invested. Does *anyone* in the United States of America have a better sense of the power of music than Reagon? I doubt it. (Except maybe her mom — legendary civil rights activist and songwriter Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon.)

And coupled with August Wilson's words? Well, the work reaches an angelic height and a painful depth I've not seen in a musical until now.

Think poetry is boring? Think it's irrelevant? Think again.

UniSon is the coolest ticket this season, and it would not surprise me if it rolls to New York on the heels of this run. It'd be a shoo-in. ■

For dates, times and tickets to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, visit osfashland.org.

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