



Behold the cosmos. The Big Dipper hangs suspended in space, eternally tilted and framed perfectly by the walls of the theater. It's a stunning sight, somehow liberating and terrifying and humbling all at once.

Craning my neck, I drank in this immaculate postage stamp of ever-receding infinity, stars and darkness, darkness and stars, and I felt myself stretched thin like a rubber band, a man alone in the universe. Odysseus on stage, making his eternal journey home. Me, sitting in Ashland, Oregon, watching this ancient adventure staged under a vaulted ceiling of burning suns millions of miles away. Microcosms and macrocosms.

And then I snapped back to Earth.

"Have I spent my life playing dress up?" This rhetorical question, posed during a Saturday morning director's talk by Mary Zimmerman, director of *The Odyssey* at this year's Shakespeare fest, chilled me to the bone.

Addressing the hellish fix this country's now in, Zimmerman was meditating on the viability and relevance of theater in an age of total civic collapse, with the empire growing more malevolent and divisive by the day.

An empire, by the way, ruled by a priapic, pathological Caesar in full flight from reality. Shakespeare would have had a field day with this belligerent bastard.

"You are, in fact, being at peace in that wonderful place," Zimmerman said of sitting among like-minded folk in the Allen Theatre and watching a staging of *The Odyssey*. "In the world you're in, you're sort of doing your part. The theater is a very ephemeral act, but it's a very communal one at the same time."

Granted and agreed. Theater, unlike film, is a fragile and fluid art, full of risks and yet, at the same time, capable of achieving moments of incomparable grace and beauty, never to be repeated again. As Zimmerman put it so elegantly: "Our calling card in the theater is presence."

The community and presence of theater in William Shakespeare's time largely comprised an audience of lumpenproletariat rowdies packed into London's Globe Theatre — an audience of working-class blokes in the throes of the Protestant Reformation, hipped to the bawdy, cleverly seditious language and defiantly humane message of all those brilliant comedies and heartwrenching tragedies. Many of these tradespeople paid a penny to get in, and they were as loud and aggressive as a mosh pit.

The community and presence of theater at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival is, in many ways, the antithesis of this: fabulously well-heeled NPR subscribers, the tweed-and-open-collar glitterati set, Magoos and Maguettes whose Prius runs the color wheel from aqua-blue to lime-green — people who nodded knowingly when Hillary Clinton called half of Trump's supporters a "basket of deplorables," a remarkably Shakespearean turn of phrase from a woman who more than a little resembles Lady Macbeth.

Ashland's OSF caters to these people the way Las Vegas caters to the middle-management binge drinker, and the similarities don't stop there. Like Vegas, Ashland

feels like a completely manufactured community, a white-as-Wonder-Bread place where overpriced non-GMO restaurants and colorful Victorian B&Bs have opportunistically arisen in a liberal fantasia of good living that, at times, feels as propped up as a set piece.

But there's a Manson Family vibe burbling under the surface of Ashland, and once you clue into it, it's hard to shake. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that, despite its artsy, progressive facade, the city exists like a bourgeois bio-dome in a broad swath of Oregon that, historically, has been a stronghold of white supremacists, far-right nutjobs and Mexican street gangs.

Take a ten-minute drive from Ashland to Medford, and you get a thumbnail sketch of the surreal and seemingly untenable social and political divide now ripping this country apart. Medford is a busted-out city dominated by monochromatic strip malls and featuring a deracinated urban core that speaks to the death of the great American small town. If anyone might appreciate a Globe-like dose of politicized Shakespearean razzing, it's the people of Medford. They might even pay a penny for the cheap seats.

Medford is where I finally fled to get a decent, affordable meal during the weekend I spent at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival — at the local Denny's.

You can feel the anger seething in Medford; the fear and loathing is palpable; it's part of the atmosphere. Conversely, you can smell the money in Ashland, the self-satisfied self-regard of privileged white people who consume Shakespeare like a boutique commodity, a badge of class distinction. I'm one of these people, and I'm starting to question the whole thing myself. I wear my education and politics like armor these days, and it's doing nothing to stop the rising tide.

Medford died for Ashland's sins. You want to know why Trump won and fascism is surging? Look to Ashland, not Medford. Medford is the drop-dead truth of where the American Dream has gotten us, and Ashland is where we pretend we don't all shop at Wal-Mart once in a while.

It's always a tale of two cities: Ashland and Medford, Eugene and Springfield. Ashland, really, is more Eugene than Eugene. It's no accidents that both cities, Ashland and Eugene, have recently participated in acts of outright class warfare, the one banning dogs downtown, the other smoking and, for Christ's sake, vaping.

So, the question remains: Is all of this just a game of dress up? Or, put differently: Is all of this just a game of personality politics? Have the haves forgotten that the have-nots used to have entry to the Globe?

On the purely artistic, dress-up side of things, I will say that the product OSF marches up on stage tends to be top-notch, the best theater money can buy. And, in keeping with the idea of cost, it's interesting to me that, among the three plays I saw this past weekend — *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Odyssey* and *Beauty and the Beast* — the Disney musical was far and away the most magnificent, the most splendid and lavish and, ironically, the best received by the audience.