

All except for the elderly, white-haired guy sitting next to me, who took his seat five minutes before the *Beast* started and promptly fell asleep. He only woke up from his \$108 nap once, when I accidentally jostled him with my arm and he turned to stare daggers at me for a full minute and a half.

This, then, perfectly encapsulates my experience in Ashland: Shakespeare behind glass, presented to an audience of educated sniffs like me, so homogenized by race and class, so insulated by money and proper attitudes, that it brings to mind Wagner being performed for the party elite in the Bavarian Alps.

“O brave new world, that has such people in’t!”

Oregon cities like Ashland and Eugene love to pimp themselves furiously as embattled outposts of the arts and progressive politics, but once you dig below the surface, all the liberal flapdoodle starts to wear pretty thin, and you can always detect the stink of Big Money oozing into reservoirs of opportunity. Perhaps, just perhaps, places like Ashland stand not in opposition to the white-supremacist history of Oregon, but are instead an overt extension of it — a quaint privilege of eugenic success, as it were.

It's easy to post “Black Lives Matter” signs on your front lawn when the only black problem you've ever encountered is who to cast as Othello. It's easy to celebrate diversity when the only place it's represented within a circumference of 300 miles is safely up on stage, acting out a role upon which your lavish your applause.

Regarding diversity, and the lack thereof, the folks at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival offer a lot of horseshit about being a “people's theater” and reaching out to diverse populations put off by the stereotype that theater is an elitist art form. In OSF's “Long Range Plan 2016-2025,” they congratulate themselves on being “closer than ever to mirroring the current racial and ethnic demographics of the United States.”

This is a stunning claim — one that could only be made in the liberal bubbles of Oregon, where personality politics matter more than facts themselves. But dig a bit deeper into the self-perpetuating delusions of OSF's stated priorities, and you find a very interesting nugget. In a document that has everything to do with tourist dollars and very little to do with art, you find this under the heading of “Security”: “Aggressive panhandling and harassment by transient people in Ashland is regularly the source of altercations.”

Apparently, diversity does not extend to socio-economic diversity, which unfortunately includes poor people of all races and sexual orientation. Philanthropy, as Mark Twain noted, is a sure sign of wickedness, and as OSF reaches out its hands to “diversity,” the city kicks the poor in the teeth by treating them as an inconvenience to the audience of liberal NIMBYs it caters with all the toothy vigor of a carpetbagger.

It is not moral sentiment or a concern for public health that fuels measures like the smoking ban Ashland has implemented; it's economic discrimination and class warfare, plain and simple, and it is a law put in place to serve the shining beacon of tourism that you present to the gullible world — whether what you're offering is slots in Vegas, Track Town in Eugene, or the Bard and bad organic burgers in Southern Oregon.

OSF's “Audience Development Manifesto” of March 2010 expresses a desire to expand the “socioeconomic diversity of our audience” by expanding ticket access to “those who are not a part of our current core audience,” though exactly how this will be enacted is not stated. Current ticket specials include “rush” tickets (made available one hour before the show) ranging from \$15 to \$45 dollars, as well as discounts for families and members of the military. This does not, however, equal any concerted or systematic effort to open up the theater to people on the low end of the income scale.

OSF founder Angus Bowmer warned of several things a community theater should not be, including “an exclusive watering place for the socially ambitious.” But that is exactly what OSF looks like: a watering hole for wealthy and well-behaved.

Sitting in a Thai restaurant off the beaten path in Ashland, I listened to a local woman at a table across from mine bitch about the fact that OSF only pays one dollar in rent to the city for the real estate it occupies. She was lamenting the loss of tax revenues, and wondering how the absent funds might have gone to serve a public held in thrall to a festival it, at best, tolerates, and at worst, resents.

Actually, OSF transferred all of its property to the city of Ashland, and the festival now occupies those buildings and theaters rent-free through the year 2075. The festival pays nothing — not even the dollar it might charge to let transients into the cheap seats, God forbid.

That's a good business deal, considering all the money OSF brings into the region. Of course, it's not as simple as that. Bucking the Oregon model, Ashland in 1990 implemented a 5 percent sales tax on prepared food and beverages, which goes to pay for the purchase of open spaces as well as to offset the costs of building a new wastewater treatment plant. The tax expires Dec. 31, 2030.

That must be one hell of a wastewater treatment plant.

With such an arrangement in place, do you think there's anything OSF might ask for that the city would say no to? Is something rotten in Ashland? Doth the writer protest too much?

Ashland, like Eugene, is not nearly the liberal mecca it likes to think itself. In fact, the liberalism of both cities masks an intolerance and hypocrisy that is less a symptom of our social decline than its direct cause: nobles oblige and civic engagement in full retreat, as the wealthy and educated of the so-called democratic persuasion build ramparts against the deplorable deluge: the poor, the working class, the uneducated, all those Trump supporters we superior *New York Times* types snicker and snort about over our lattes and spiced apple kombuchas.

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival is Disneyland for rich, white people who wouldn't be caught dead at Disneyland. And Ashland itself is Las Vegas for leftward-leaning neoliberals, a sanitized utopia where politically correct attitudes are nothing more than a means of group identification.

The product as OSF is driven by market considerations, which leads to the uncomfortable placement of *Beauty and the Beast* next to *Henry IV*, a statement of priorities that says entertainment and art are now indecipherably intertwined in a negation of both.

At least in Las Vegas the prostitutes admit they're prostitutes.

Money is as money does. What money does is consolidate and monopolize, and whether that's in Trump Tower or the Allen Elizabethan Theatre is, in the deepest sense, irrelevant. The Big Dipper looks down on all the living and all the dead alike, a vision of eternal indifference. And, yes, we're all just playing dress up. It's just too bad that the dressing down that Shakespeare gave to the dressing up of pride and greed is being kept behind museum glass, a mere luxury item for the world's fastest growing industry of cultural tourism.

And now for the reviews

THE PLAYS, THEN, IN ORDER OF MY WITNESSING:

The *Merry Wives of Windsor* isn't the best thing Shakespeare ever did — far from it. The play, about a group of wives who take comic revenge on the fallen Sir John Falstaff for his lusty advances, is rambling and exceedingly loose-limbed, with a middle section that lags desperately.

Director Dawn Monique Williams does her best with *Merry Wives*, re-envisioning it as a kind of footloose romp complete with New Wave costumes and an '80s soundtrack featuring everything from “Total Eclipse of the Heart” to Devo's “Whip It” and Blondie's “One Way or the Other.”

Of course, even bad Shakespeare is pretty good, and Williams injects the opening act with such a frenetic, zany energy that you'd almost wish for a truncated version of the play; eventually the conceit loses steam, especially in the endless expository of the second act.

In keeping with the MTV-urbanized beat of Williams' vision, the talented actress K.T. Vogt is cast in the über-testicular role of Falstaff, with mostly strong results. Watching a woman parody the raunchy self-aggrandizing of such an infamous scoundrel brings a certain frisson to the play; her exaggerated pelvis thrusting and smarmy carousing amplify the parody of masculine vulgarity and aggression, and the comeuppance it receives.

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Whereas *Merry Wives* was a boisterous, glittery affair, Mary Zimmerman's adaptation of *The Odyssey* is played pretty straight and bare bones. Entering the Allen Theatre the next night, I was surprised to see a stage utterly devoid of sets and props. Really? I thought. Could this be the setting for Homer's epic? Nothing?

Zimmerman, however, as befits the oral tradition, allows the actors to tell the tale, largely through a physicality that sparks the imagination in the most childlike way imaginable. Witness, for instance, that moment when Odysseus (well played as an exhausted, melancholy hero/anti-hero by Christopher Donahue) hurls his spear and it is, literally, carried out of the auditorium by the goddess Athena (Christiana Clark, in the play's finest performance).

Such moments weave a kind of spell during this staging of *The Odyssey*, creating an environment that is at once magical and yet reduced to its most essential elements — the stuff of myth. Zimmerman's pacing is perfect, as is her reliance on gesture and utterance to tell the timeless tale of one man's journey home after being stranded by war or, perhaps, by the ambition and ego of which war are merely the direst symptom. And her feminist re-envisioning of the song of the sirens, luring Odysseus's crew to potential doom, is a stroke of genius.

Setting aside all aesthetic and moral and philosophical objections one might have to Oregon Shakespeare Festival putting on a Disney-approved Broadway musical adaptation of a Disney film based on a fairy tale that was first published in 1740, director Eric Tucker's production of *Disney's Beauty and the Beast* is, quite simply, amazing. Featuring a live orchestra and the most extraordinary costumes and sets, this show is delightful from beginning to end. The cast — led by Jennie Greenberry as Belle and Jordan Barbour as the Beast — is first-rate.

Tucker claims that this particular *Beast* is a bit darker than the Disney version, though I just didn't see it (and, besides, seeing as he had to run everything by Disney execs, just how dark could it be?). What I saw on stage was a spectacular, faithful and highly nostalgic recreation of the Disney film on stage, which is no small feat. From the music to the performances to the outlandish and elaborate choreography, this is a stunning carnival of a show. No matter how much you love the film, no matter how high your expectations might be, this production doesn't disappoint. — *Rick Levin*