



The ensemble dances in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*

Those of us who hadn't yet peeked at the program wondered, sometimes out loud: Is Curly McClain (the cowboy who opens the traditional show singing the theme song "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'") and who falls in love with farm girl Laurey Williams) going to be a cowboy — or a cowgirl?

At last we were seated, the house lights went down and the stage lights came up, and onto a simple, open, asymmetrical set designed by Sibyl Wickersheimer strolled Rauch's version of Curly, singing along in chaps and spurs, and very definitely a cowgirl (Tatiana Wechsler).

The festival has been doing race-blind casting now for decades, so it came as no surprise that Wechsler is of African-Jewish descent. What was surprising, and gratifying, is how seamlessly she and Royer Bockus, who played the farm girl Laurey, introduced us to Rauch's gay utopia.

Nothing was campy here, and not a bit was ironic. Instead this Curly and Laurey live in an early 20th-century frontier world where, of course women can fall in love with other women, and not even a foul-mouthed, violent, white-trash cowboy like Jud Fry (played with perfect menace by Michael Sharon) thinks anything of it, except that he's got his eye on Laurey, too.

So does the whole audience. A relative newcomer at OSF (she was in the ensemble in 2013's *My Fair Lady* and was Rapunzel in 2014's *Into the Woods*), Bockus lights up the stage with her tall presence, and when she sings it's with the lyricism of opera. Just to cap it all off, she can dance, too.

The other romantic couple in the traditional *Oklahoma!* is cowhand Will Parker, who's smitten with the farmer's daughter Ado Annie, a homespun gal who likes her pleasures. In this production, though, Will (Jordan Barbour) has his eye on Ado Andy (Jonathan Luke Stevens), who sings and dances deliciously that "I'm just a boy who cain't say no."

Even the high school kids, who seemed to make up half the audience, bought effortlessly into Rauch's fantasy world, cheering on Ado Andy's pure lustiness and breaking into applause without a smirk when Curly and Laurey finally sort out their romantic denials ("People Will Say We're in Love") with a climactic kiss. To my surprise, I loved having the theater full of smart, engaged teenagers,

most of whom probably had done actual homework about the show before they reached their seats.

Live music by a small orchestra conducted by Daniel Gary Busby and actually performing in a pit brings the whole thing to satisfying life.

This *Oklahoma!* could stand on its own as a great, engaging production even if Rauch hadn't changed up the casting. That he spun the world so sideways, and did it successfully, makes it a brilliant show. Go see it if you can.

Across the bricks at the festival's small Thomas Theatre you can find a completely different *Oklahoma*.

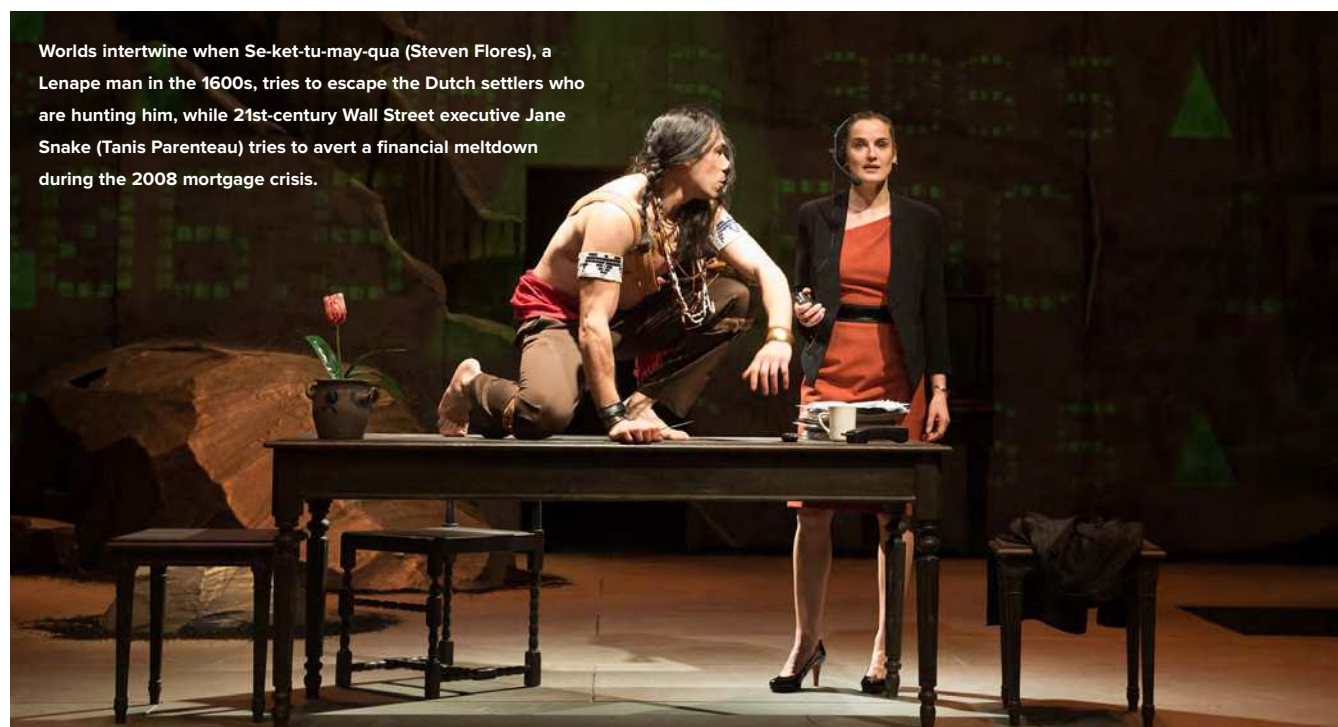
Mary Kathryn Nagle's new *Manahatta*, which also opened in April, is running there for the rest of the season in a world premiere. The small, tight and intense little play — the first to be presented at OSF by a Native American playwright — tells the story of the Lenape people who once lived in the island we now call Manhattan, and which they called Manahatta.

Nagle, who also works as a lawyer, sets her story in both the 21st and 17th centuries. In both, Tanis Parenteau plays a Lenape woman who in one century becomes a fur trader exploited by the Dutch, and in the other, a financial trader at Lehman Brothers before and during the 2008 financial crash.

In 2008, the remaining Lenape people have long since been pushed from their Manahatta homeland to, eventually, Oklahoma after their ancestors, not understanding European notions of ownership, sold the island for a handful of trinkets. Nagle's poetic play is told in layers with roots in Native storytelling.

It's short — 90 minutes — and gripping all the way through. ■

Oklahoma! and *Manahatta* both run through October 27 at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland. Tickets are \$50 to \$135 for *Oklahoma!*, \$40 to \$105 for *Manahatta*. Many performances are sold out. Info at osfashland.org.



Worlds intertwine when Se-ket-tu-may-qua (Steven Flores), a Lenape man in the 1600s, tries to escape the Dutch settlers who are hunting him, while 21st-century Wall Street executive Jane Snake (Tanis Parenteau) tries to avert a financial meltdown during the 2008 mortgage crisis.