

# A DEFINING MOMENT IN ASHLAND

THE OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL  
LAUNCHES ITS FINAL SEASON  
UNDER BILL RAUCH

**B**eleaguered by financial woes from last season's wildfires, whose smoke caused cancellations of a couple dozen outdoor performances, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival kicked off its new season in early March with four plays — a Shakespeare standard to open the weekend, a revival of a popular musical, a drama making its world premiere and a searingly beautiful new show that's sure to be an audience favorite.

Few signs on opening weekend betrayed the challenges the festival is facing. OSF opened a week late and plans to close the outdoor season early. Its popular booklet *Illuminations*, with essays on the shows, won't be out until May. And no announcement had yet been made of a replacement for Bill Rauch, the festival's artistic director, who is leaving in August. More than a week later on March 19 the festival announced the new artistic director will be Nataki Garrett.

But every show opened to a packed house in the festival's two indoor theaters, and every show was worth the trip to Ashland to see.

## AS YOU LIKE IT

Angus Bowmer Theatre through Oct. 26

One of the backstage rock stars of the past couple seasons at OSF is Los Angeles theatrical designer Sara Ryung Clement. Who, you ask? It's not usual for scenic and costume designers to get more than passing credit for their work, at least not outside the profession.

It was Clement who designed the costumes for last season's incredible *Henry V*. Her costumes made it possible for a cast of a dozen to present this epic bloody tale in the tiny Thomas Theatre, swapping roles instantly with folds of cloth. Clement also designed sets and costumes for 2016's amazing *Vietgone*.

And now Clement has designed one of the most beautiful sets I've ever seen on a stage, to open the 2019 season on Friday, March 8, with *As You Like It*.

Constructed of angular, modernist elements — think Piet Mondrian with subdued colors — Clement's simple but gorgeous set evolves organically into an abstract but magical Forest of Arden in which the young lovers Orlando (Román Zaragoza) and Rosalind (Jessica Ko) work out their romantic destiny.

One of the show's best scenes is the wrestling match between Orlando and Charles (James Ryen). Tightly choreographed, it comes across as graceful ballet — and, in the story, piques Rosalind's interest in Orlando when he wins the bout.

Zaragoza is lithe and amiable as Orlando, easily commanding the stage with his tall presence.

Much like the show itself, Ko's Rosalind starts slow but grows on you. She is best being sharp, witty and even irritable as she — disguised as a young man — tests the truth of Orlando's affection. The two of them have a natural chemistry together that makes Shakespeare's outlandish story believable.

Director Rosa Joshi, who directed last season's *Henry V*, brings the cultural politics of *As You Like It* into sharp focus, beginning with the drab melancholy of the opening scenes, which find the people, at a time of political conflict, trapped in dark monotonies reflecting an authoritarian regime, marching in lock-step formation like a scene out of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.

This works, to a degree, but Joshi's production often tries too hard, losing some of Shakespeare's magic and joy in the process. Numerous gender swaps in casting — a fine tradition at OSF — seem random here, and thus more confusing than illuminating.

But oh, that set. It remains captivating right to the end of the show, when — in an odd bit of shuffling the script — Jaques (Erica Sullivan) delivers the famous "All the world's a stage" speech in a series of stop-action asides to end the play.

## CAMBODIAN ROCK BAND

Thomas Theatre through Oct. 27

When the lights — and music — come up on Lauren Yee's new play *Cambodian Rock Band*, we're at a club show in Phnom Penh in 2008 — or is it 1975? — where five young musicians are playing pretty good American rock 'n' roll, with a southeast Asian twist.

Then the slick emcee, played by Daisuke Tsuji on opening night, and sometimes during the run by James Ryen, leaps to the stage to challenge the audience. What are we seeing? American rock? Traditional Khmer music? Why is there a Sheraton sign in the background?

"Are you confused?" he shouts at last. "Welcome to Cambodia!"

This is an amazing show, combining excellent entertainment with deeply provocative themes. Yee's play, which premiered last year at Southern California's South Coast Rep, weaves together reflections on music, art, the world's abandonment of Cambodia when the U.S. pulled out of the country in 1975, the guilt of the Holocaust, the difficulty of parental love and the possibility of redemption — and does all this without a dull or preachy moment.

The story centers on a Cambodian-American woman, Neary (Brooke Ishibashi) who suddenly gets a visit while working in Phnom Penh from her not-very-Americanized Cambodian-American father, Chum (Joe Ngo), who flies out from Massachusetts without warning to see her.