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Wrapped Up in Humanity

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE
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Oregon Shakespeare Festival works stir heart and soul

Love. Loss. Longing. Hope. Treachery. Resilience. All are the stuff of human existence -- and also the stuff of theater. In real life, even as we suffer and struggle, it can be hard to sit with the depth of our experience. The feelings, even the good ones, may be too profound, too painful. Two shows now playing at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, by different methods, plunge us there, offering the chance to feel what we may often only have the courage to give a sidelong glance.

"Pericles" -- Shakespeare's tale of love, betrayal, loss, and recovery -- offers the way of poetry and song. "Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land" -- a beloved Taiwanese play that sprang from the seeds of a tragic episode in Chinese history -- offers interlocking pathways of humor and pathos.

"Pericles" isn't performed often, though it was quite popular in Shakespeare's day. Perhaps back then people were more receptive to a story that doesn't try to answer why bad things happen to good people, or why good things might just happen again. We expect answers to such questions now -- but in reality, life doesn't always offer them.

The protagonist is a young prince who embarks confidently on a journey to find a wife. He does, but only after having to run for his life when he stumbles into a nest of incest and treachery. Then, having righted his path and found love and family, he loses both for many years. He lives in exile, separated from the wife and daughter he believes are dead. His daughter then also encounters peril and treachery, before all are finally united.

There is no rhyme or reason for any of this. Neither Pericles nor his wife and daughter deserve the perils that befall them. They are buffeted about, shipwrecked, used, enslaved. Life is unfair -- yet without warning, things can be set right too.

Director Joe Haj, the son of Palestinian immigrants, brings to the play an enthusiasm for the mysteries embedded in life's unfairness. This is not a play that reinforces our wish to believe that everything happens for a reason, but that is territory immigrants know well. And among a uniformly wonderful cast, Pericles and his daughter Marina are beautifully played by African-American actors



PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM

Pericles (Wayne T. Carr, left) washes ashore from a shipwreck and is met by a group of fishermen (Michael J. Hume, U. Jonathan Toppo, Cedric Lamar) in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival production of a classic tale of love, betrayal, loss and recovery.

Wayne T. Carr and Jennie Greenberry; their heritage especially qualifies them to play characters whose family members are lost to them and whose control of their destinies is taken from them by brutal circumstances.

Father and daughter offer contrasting responses to the whims of fortune. Pericles begins his life with beauty and wealth and naively embarks on his life's voyage assuming that all will be well. When his fortunes are dashed, he is stripped of hope, and lives for many years isolated and defeated. Marina, never having tasted the bright truth of her heritage and with no more reason to hope, nevertheless approaches her life with unflinching determination, as though convinced that she is master of her destiny in the face of all evidence to the contrary.

The play doesn't answer why any of this should be so, and the artists yield to its mysteries. Director Haj and his artistic team have found inventive ways to convey that these characters are part of a larger story, filling the production with music and buoyant visual effects. The journey they take us on over these rough seas communicates on a soul level.

"Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land" is also a tale of journeys and separations, and traveled quite a distance to land on the Ashland stage. It is perhaps the most famous play in modern Chinese theater, having been produced hundreds of times since the original Taiwanese production in the mid-1980s. It is directed and written by Stan Lai, who was born in Washington, D.C. to Chinese parents from Taiwan but who has spent most of his life in Taiwan. This is the first commercial production in the U.S.

The play is rooted in a particularly painful period in Chinese history. In 1949, when revolution happened on the mainland, many people fled China to the small island of Taiwan for what they expected would be a few months. Those few months stretched into decades when families and lovers and friends were separated and not allowed to communicate with one another. The resulting tragic ripples for both Chinese and Taiwanese people are profound, though little understood by people in the U.S.

"Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land" builds off of those tragic ripples, with a story of two plays being rehearsed on a stage which has been double-booked by mistake. "Secret Love" tells the tragic story of two Chinese lovers about to part for what they believe will be a matter of weeks, and then reconnecting in Taiwan after 40 years. "Peach Blossom Land" is a farcical take on an ancient fable about a hapless cuckolded husband who is unhappy with his life and then stumbles on a mythical utopian place. "Secret Love" is direct and poignant; "Peach Blossom Land" is stylized and full of slapstick and buffoonery.

Watching the two stories take shape is chaotic, as the casts squabble and both productions fumble. An essential part of the play -- and perhaps part of what gives it such staying power -- is that each production makes use of its particular time and place, so the OSF production cleverly uses a multiracial cast and weaves in some Ashland in-jokes. It's a stretch for an American audience to grapple with material so distinctly Chinese -- and yet the payoff is immense. What

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