

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE
DARLEEN ORTEGA



Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Summer Season Highlights

The height of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival season is underway, which means three outdoor shows and two new shows inside. I've yet to see *Sweat*, Lynn Nottage's new play exploring life as experienced by those on the losing end of the decline of American industry; I'll see it in September and expect to be inspired to write about it, given the buzz I am hearing. There is some delightful variety among the other four shows, though I can't quite recommend all of them.

The Happiest Song Plays Last completes Quiara Alegria Hudes' trilogy of plays exploring the experiences of Puerto Rican cousins Elliott and Yaz. (*Water By the Spoonful* moved me last year, as I expressed in my review earlier this year). In this play, set later in time, Iraq war veteran Elliott, still struggling with the physical and psychic wounds of his military service, spends some time in Jordan working as an actor on a film that stirs up some of those wartime memories. His timing coincides with the Arab spring protests, and the connections he makes on this return visit to the Middle East deepen his thinking about how to carry his own pain and the pain he has inflicted on others. Meanwhile, his cousin Yaz has become a leader in their home Puerto Rican community in Philadelphia, and is engaged in her own struggle over how to manage the fury and hope of activism and the limits of her own resources.

This play, like *Water*, stands on its own, though experience with others in the trilogy enriches the action. These are characters to savor; their dilemmas will resonate especially among communities of color, where activists like Yaz may struggle with similar quandaries and where many young people have found that military service promised them opportunities but left them with scars and trauma they could not have anticipated. This production features an extremely gifted cast--notably, Armando Duran brings music and soul to his portrayal of a heroic voice denied recognition that he deserved in both life and death; Nancy Rodriguez captures the depth of Yaz's hopes and disappointments; and Barzin Akhavan's portrayal of an Iraqi man with whom Elliott shares a connection feels especially reverent and rich. One senses the work of soul and community that di-



Count of Monte Cristo



Antony and Cleopatra



Head Over Heels

rector Shishir Kurup and his talented cast and design team have nurtured in creating this production; their invitation into the lives of these characters feels like a call to dialogue with deeper questions, for those who can hear that invitation.

My hands-on favorite of the outdoor shows is *Head Over Heels*, a bawdy mash-up of story, song, and themes that one could not have imagined would work together so brilliantly. It is the brainchild of Coos Bay native Jeff Whitty, who won a Tony Award for his book for the witty and irreverent *Avenue Q*. This time he has combined an Elizabethan story that captured his imagination while he was a student at the University of Oregon, with the music of the Go-Go's--and then further tweaked the story in ways that are truly inspired.

The bone structure of the original story involves a king who has two daughters, one a beauty with many suitors, the other plain, with just one suitor who is beneath the king's social standards. An oracle makes ominous predictions about the future of the king's family that he seeks to avoid, so he takes them into the forest to thwart the oracle--and each prediction comes true.

To this Whitty adds not only the upbeat music of the groundbreaking, all-women '80s band, but also some distinctly current elements. The actresses playing the two daughters are brilliantly cast against type--the "plain" daughter (Tala Ashe) is conventionally pretty and demure, and the beautiful daughter (Bonnie Milligan) is a voluptuous vocal powerhouse who likely does not typically get cast as the beauty. Their respective energy is wonderfully, comically refreshing, as are the costumes, a gender-bending plot line involving the "plain" daughter's unsuitable suitor, and the beautiful daughter's emerging sexual identity. I am telling you, this new play is headed places -- and you can be one of the first to catch it in its artistic home.

I had the particular good fortune to experience the opening performance sitting directly behind Whitty (who was suitably emotional and whose friends and buddies were over the moon) and two rows behind the Go-Go's themselves. I'm just slightly younger than they are, and could not help

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