

Art as Social Justice

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

from a variety of Asian cultures represent the range of humanity on stage. There are so many cultures left out of the way we are used to seeing Shakespeare; it is a joy to watch this production play with melding the beauty and relative rigidity of ancient traditions as embodied in the first act with a lighthearted mix of cultures washed up on a single shore in the second act.

Among this production's best assets are its strongly-embodied female characters: Amy Kim Waschke is a memorably noble and tragic Hermione; Miriam Laube (who herself played Hermione in OSF's last production of this play) as Paulina embodies courage and female power wresting transformation from folly; and Cindy Im floats and sings like an earthy angel as Perdita, easily inspiring love in all who encounter her.

My favorite of the outdoor shows this season is a rare opportunity to see "The Wiz." White audience members likely don't appreciate either the significance of "The Wiz" to African American audience members or the challenges of mounting a production in Oregon. So much of mainstream theater is written by white people, produced by white people, and tells stories from a white perspective.

As originally conceived in the 1970s, "The Wiz" took an icon of American musicals and reset it to be sung and played by and for African Americans. Its creators found a way to embody the hopes and humor and yearnings of African Americans in a setting that everyone could recognize, and to add a funky edge that celebrated the culture riches found among members of that community. They accomplished something almost unthinkable in 1975, building an audience for something new to Broadway, and garnering seven Tony Awards in the process.

That historical backdrop contains inspiration for OSF, a leader in the theater world set in a state with a troublingly racist history. Black exclusion laws existed here until the 1860s, and for long afterwards conveyed a message of unwelcome to African Americans, reinforced by Oregon's failure to ratify the 14th and 15th Amendments for another century. Now OSF seeks to diversify its audiences in a state that is still one

of the whitest in the union, and where most of its white citizens remain unaware of our state's racist legacy.

Where "The Wiz" built an audience and an appetite that didn't yet exist in the 1970s, OSF seeks to build new audiences and appetite in southern Oregon 40 years later. This production offers the perfect vehicle; it is a fitting embodiment of African American resilience and playfulness



Horatio (Christiana Clark), Osric (Benjamin Bonenfant) and Gertrude (Robin Goodrin Nordli) watch as Hamlet (Danforth Comins) and Laertes (Tramell Tillman) engage in a fencing match.

and badassness, adding a strong flavor of black gay pride as well. There is so much intention reflected in the casting, costumes, and choreography--piece by joyous piece, OSF has constructed a world that contains strong pieces of the cultural richness of African Americans.

Pulling that off, however, has included some challenges. White audience members often approach the play from a certain distance that alienates the players, and may evince annoyance with black audience members offering what the actors would experience as more appropriate enthusiasm. It's likely that white audiences may miss some of the richness that appears before them because they lack the cultural context -- though that doesn't mean that critics (who are rarely African Americans) haven't felt free to pronounce judgment on artistic choices from outside their own cultures. It

is easy to miss how we allow certain voices more agency in defining good art.

Moreover, southern Oregon has much to learn about being truly welcoming to an influx of African American actors and artists; a bookstore near OSF has defiantly pushed a free-speech narrative as it persists in presenting a display of "Lil Black Sambo" books alongside "Wizard of Oz" books, deaf to the expressions of African American artists who find the display troubling and offensive. When OSF attempted to back the concerns of those artists, the

cast of loveable characters must struggle to think clearly and honor their hearts and locate courage and a place that truly feels like home. The talented cast of "The Wiz" pulls off that feat with such grace and guts and joy that they may yet succeed in easing the audience they are building down the road to a world they will help us to imagine. Whether "The Wiz" feels like your culture and your people or is a new journey for you, now is the time to head down to Ashland, cheer on these players as they deserve to be cheered, and build a theater

PHOTO BY DALE ROBINETTE, OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

local newspapers quickly rushed to the defense of the bookstore and quoted a chorus of local residents expressing righteous indignation about censorship. It is troubling to see such a lack of concern or even curiosity about the perspective of African Americans who found the display hurtful.

It strikes me as ironic that so many of those artists are performing in a story about a confusing and alien place, Oz, where a

audience that embodies a community that transcends our failures of imagination.

Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. She also serves on the Oregon Shakespeare Festival board. Her movie review column *Opinionated Judge* appears regularly in *The Portland Observer*. You can find her movie blog at opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com.



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