

Beyond White Culture

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

better life in a U.S. culture which they experience as alien and hostile. Here Medea is a young undocumented immigrant who sews piecework for a pittance out of her home, and trusts her husband Jason to fight his way to a better life for their family. Their border crossing has left her traumatized and afraid to leave their little home in Boyle Heights, while Jason appears better equipped to play by new rules that seem to reward cunning, ambition, and sacrifice. But at what cost?

This production, which I've seen several times and hope to see again in Portland, is devastating in its depiction of how those at the margins are often subtly pushed to turn on each other to compete for the scraps that oppression affords them. Alfaro captures so poignantly the trauma and desperation that commonly characterizes the immigrant experience, and the countless ways in which being othered chips away at one's identity, seeding a sense of desperation that can lead a good person to make choices he would never have considered. Medea (embodied with wrenching, prophetic honesty by Sabina Zuniga Varela) is the main tragic heroine here, but she is not the only one; all the characters hold in these portrayals complexities of goodness and moral failure that are the natural result of pressure to confirm to new

rules. The dilemma creeps into their language, as they constantly process the loss of a former way of life and the new customs that first confound and then convince them of the need for selfishness and greed. It's the American way.

Director Juliette Carillo and her marvelous cast and creative team will move this remarkable production to Portland in November. At a time when our ideas of immigrant and refugee experience and our analysis of the pressures on the marginalized desperately need grounding in deeper reality, this production provides a necessary re-frame. It's worth prioritizing.

The remaining OSF season offers many reasons to prioritize a trip to Ashland as well. For a start, a wonderful production of "Julius Caesar" runs all season through October. Director Shana Cooper has approached this timeless tale of political intrigue from the standpoint of the toll which cycles of violence exact on the human body and soul. Shakespeare's history play is built around power plays and shifting allegiances and manipulation of public opinion that will feel familiar; this production uses movement to emphasize how such shifts are ultimately inevitable and relentless. Fight choreography moves between literal and metaphorical, until eventually actors are killed and rise again moments later to resume fighting. An excellent multiracial cast con-

veys the stress on their bodies with such visceral force that I felt breathless even watching them. One leaves with an appropriate recognition that war, including the merely political kind, destroys in more ways than we usually recognize.

A fine production of "Shakespeare in Love" also runs all season through October. Riffing off the Academy Award-winning Hollywood screenplay of the same name, this stage adaptation offers an opportunity to see a talented and very diverse cast play and sing and goof on the joy of making theater and on the importance and joy and inspiration of pursuing love wherever and however it materializes. It is perhaps the most broadly appealing of all the shows on offer this season, packed with deftly-executed comic bits and an uncomplicated warm heart.

The world premiere of "Hannah and the Dread Gazebo," by Korean-American playwright Jiehae Park, offers an entirely different lens on immigrant experience. As Hannah prepares to take the exams that will make her a board-certified neurologist, her grandmother's death prompts her to travel to South Korea, where her parents have returned after many years living in the U.S. The play shifts between the perspectives of Hannah and her brother (who live in the U.S. but are accustomed to feeling alien both at home and in South Korea), their



PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM

A Korean-American family offers a window on the immigrant experience in "Hannah and the Dread Gazebo," one of the stories of people of color written by people of color now playing at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland.

parents, whose experiences of alienation weigh on them in an entirely different way, and various mystical South Korean characters. The Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea provides a potent manifestation of other wounds that arise and lay unresolved in families like Hannah's.

Park's play, nimbly directed by Chay Yew, explores questions of identity, loss, and generational differences in a non-linear and sometimes poetic way that gently serves up questions that we don't think to ask, and that recognizes the value of leaving such questions unanswered. The production features a strong and buoyant cast; I especially appreciated Amy Kim Waschke's stoic and yet surprisingly lovable portrayal of Hannah's depressed mother and Jessica Ko's captivating shifts through a whole host of mystical characters.

Shakespeare's "Henry IV" is actually two plays, and this season Part One and Part Two are both being performed and can be seen separately or back-to-back. They are directed by two rising African-American directors, Lilliana Blain-Cruz and Carl Cofield, and feature largely the same very strong diverse cast. They concern the reign of Henry IV, whose kingdom is embattled by rebellions in both parts, and his troubled relationship with his oldest son and heir, Prince Hal. In Part One, Hal seems determined to thwart his father's expectations,

wasting his resources and considerable intelligence in hard-living with his drinking buddy, the older Sir John Falstaff. Blain-Cruz's production sets the play in a modern context and is one of the most accessible Shakespeare histories I've ever seen, conveying Hal's dissolution and the play's many conflicts with a current and visceral urgency.

Part Two continues Hal's journey away from Falstaff and toward the expectations of the throne. Though its tone is much more somber, Cofield's production includes some deeply funny bits involving a host of outrageous side characters. Daniel Jose' Molina's Hal bristles with intelligence and wit, and G. Valmont Thomas is fine as the scheming Falstaff. The ensemble cast of both shows embodies a dazzling variety of characters, shifting nimbly from broad comedy to nuanced melancholy. The productions offer a feast of great acting, especially for Shakespeare aficionados.

I'll post soon about the remaining shows, including a particularly strong outdoor season.

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



PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM

Voices of the marginalized are lifted up with sensitivity and respect in "Mojada," a play that explores life among Mexican immigrants. The production just finished its run at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and will get a repeat production this fall by Portland Center Stage.