

Fresh Take on Two Classics

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

ceral energy that Shakespeare's words emerge as if in a genuine fight for clarity. Yet Molina still channels the young wastrel; his cynicism still courses not far below the surface, so that his struggles for meaning contain a sense of playfulness and even mischief. He is a marvel to watch, and is backed by an equally marvelous, facile, and energetic cast that feels much larger than it is.

Director Rosa Joshi has said that she conceives Shakespeare's history plays as being more about politics than history and this production successfully pitches the action in a register that feels both specific and universal. What compels people to follow a leader? What is the distance between what compels them and the actual person? What are the costs of war and the incentives that drive it? The staging is spare, with a vibrant design that involves interlocking boxes which shift and move throughout the production, often in a manner that helps us grasp what the story's fights and struggles and deaths are costing the characters. Death and bloodshed and scene changes are conveyed with splashes of color and shifts in energy; the design and action have been enlisted to lend the action immediacy. It's an original approach and part of what makes this production feel relevant and fresh.



PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM, OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

Bardolph (Robert Vincent Frank, in back) tries to keep his drinking buddies from killing each other in 'Henry V,' Shakespeare's play about a young king who openly struggles with the questions of what it means to be a political leader.

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"Sense and Sensibility" is pitched in a different register entirely; We are in Jane Austen's England, and director Hana Sharif is an Austen fan who wants us to experience a Regency aesthetic. And yet that aesthetic is delightfully askew in a way that reveals its truth. In the usual Austen story, the conflicts seem appealingly frivolous; though women are central, romance and marriage are the focus, which seems fluffy to our modern eyes. But in Sharif's rendering, working from a smart script by Kate Hamill, we see more clearly how high the stakes are for these women; it's a world where a good match is one's only hope for avoiding poverty, no matter how bright and witty one is.

The production strikes a very delicate balance that preserves Austen's humor and light touch while building a sense of the extremes that drive the story. The oppression and social forces that underlie all the social niceties that the characters feel constrained to observe make sense of their occasional pettiness, the harsh judgments that ruin reputations, the gossip that drives so much of the action, the nervous complaints that neutralize women and facilitate their mistreatment. Somehow I sensed that this talented cast, which is dominated by people of color, was particularly well equipped to convey a lived-in sense of what it means to be trapped and constrained.

In this setting, the Austen happy ending resonates more deeply, especially because here, the action culminates in a final scene that is pure joy. I don't want to spoil it, so I'll just say that in those last moments, all that has gone before is lifted and the women at the heart of the story find a buoyancy that resonates all the more because they so embodied its absence.

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

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