

Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

A Worthy Production for Live Shows Return

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY
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“Fannie: The Music and Life of Fannie Lou Hamer”

In-person performance has been one of the casualties of the past 18 months of a global pandemic—theater and music venues have been shuttered, and artists have been left to create however they can, generally without a live audience or any audience at all. Those of us who register the impact that theater and other forms of live performance often have in getting past our collective defens-

es to open minds and hearts know that the loss is larger than it might appear.

The need for innovation persists in this wobbly time of recovery, but the Oregon Shakespeare Festival has chosen a worthy vehicle for its return invitation to live audiences: “Fannie: The Music and Life of Fannie Lou Hamer.”

Hamer lacks the notoriety of many other civil rights icons; the most visible leaders were young men, and Hamer joined the movement as a middle-aged woman, having spent decades as a sharecropper and having first realized she had a right to vote at age 44. What she did with that realization over the last 15 years of her life,



E. Faye Butler stars in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival production of *Fannie: The Music and Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*. Photo by Jenny Graham/Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

though, puts any of our struggles into perspective if we’ll let it. She weathered beatings, attempts on her life, minimizations, and betrayals, and yet spoke out relentlessly for the simple human dignity of the Black community, whose struggles she knew all too well. One could not hope for a better teacher on how to find the gifts in adversity, and how to live a life relentlessly committed to the truth.

Playwright Cheryl West developed the play with actress E. Faye Butler in mind (Butler

plays Hamer at OSF through August, and then able OSF veteran Greta Ogelsby will assume the role through October 9). Before its OSF run, the play took various forms through the pandemic. Working with Butler and director Henry Godinez (who also directs OSF’s production), a shortened version of the play was mounted in the summer and fall of 2020, in parks in Chicago and various other cities, in support of voter registration efforts. OSF’s production occurs in its outdoor theater, and

has already been riding the pandemic waves; early shows had audience members distanced and masked, while I was lucky enough to be there a few weeks after opening during a period when audience members were unmasked and seated closer together. Beginning this week, audiences will again be masked and, for the entire run so far, audience members have been asked to show proof of vaccination or a negative COVID test.

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Supporting Oregonians

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Times Are Changing

Summer. The season so many of us have waited for, with its promise of cheerful weather, camping, daytrips, and street fairs — so much to do! And, this year, we’re able to make summer plans with fewer cares around social distancing and masks. As vaccination levels increase, our worries start to lessen. Dare we say it? Life feels like it’s getting back to normal this summer.

But right on the heels of those comforting thoughts, some of us still have doubts. We’re encouraged to continue taking precautions for public health. Many of our favorite summer gatherings are still holding off. Even the sunny skies and warm weather sometimes turn into too much of a good thing. Coping with all the change can feel like a bit of a roller coaster. For some of us, issues like problem gambling can be harder to control when life still feels so uncertain.

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