

Rhythms of Cultures

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY
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Something for everyone at Oregon Shakespeare Festival

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival is open for its first full season since lockdown in 2020, the first under the direction of Artistic Director Nataki Garrett. Five shows are currently on stage; I'll begin with the three I saw first, which rage widely in tone and may each have their own audience. That may well be the point; if theater really is for everyone, that may not mean that everyone likes each show but rather than there is something for everyone.

"Once On This Island" may have the most wide-ranging appeal of the three and runs all season. It is a buoyant one-act musical that can be experienced purely for dance and music and vibrant color—but to the particular delight of some of us, OSF's production is built with particular mindfulness around Haitian culture. The show is usually set on an unnamed Caribbean island and, though its source material is a novel written by Rosa Guy, an immigrant to the U.S. from Trinidad, the show's white creators (book and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens and music by Stephen Flaherty) kept the cultural references generic, a feature commonly found in "ethnic" plays. Director Lili-Anne Brown sought to honor specificity by setting OSF's production in Haiti, with particular attention to the rhythms of that country's language, its history, its indigenous Vodou religion, and its swirl of colonized cultures.

For those who approach the work with curiosity about and admiration for Haitian culture, this production holds particular

delights that hold the story well. During a storm, the village storytellers comfort a young girl with a tale about another peasant girl, Ti Moune, who falls in love with Daniel, a lighter-skinned man descended from a French colonizer who bore children with a dark-skinned native woman. The island is divided among the wealthier lighter-skinned descendants of colonizers and darker-skinned peasants like Ti Moune, but when Daniel gets into an accident on the "wrong" side of the island, she nurses him back to health. The colorism and prejudice that follow colonization doom Ti Moune's love for Daniel and her dreams of a better life in typically nonsensical and unyielding ways. Yet pure of heart, Ti Moune grasps for more than fate appears ready to allow her, and the gods respond in quixotic ways; her prayers, love, and efforts to push against the strictures of her circumstances are expressed in song and dance, as are the responses of her loved ones, the gods, Daniel, and his privileged relations.

Though most of us will miss many of the show's cultural references, the production feels like a celebration of Haitian life, including the resilience, struggles, creativity, and joy that have persisted through centuries of colonization and exploitation. It strikes me that the source material itself reflects a colonization process that director Brown and her creative partners (including a talented and diverse cast of Black performers) have attempted to push back against—a worthy practice that may well contain clues about surmounting barriers to love evoked in fables like this one. "Once On This Island" plays in the Angus Bowmer Theater through Oct. 30.

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PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM/OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival is back with its first full season since the coronavirus pandemic. Five shows are currently on stage, including 'Once On This Island,' (above), a production that adds a particular mindfulness around Haitian culture.



PHOTO BY SAMU3L PRATHER/PORTLAND PARKS & RECREATION

Portland's own, five-time Grammy winner Esperanza Spalding will perform during the second night of first annual East Portland Summer Arts Festival, taking place Saturday and Sunday, July 9 and 10 at Ventura Park, 460 S.E. 113th.

First East Portland Festival

Grammy sensation to headline free event

Grammy award-winning Portland native and artist Esperanza Spalding will headline the first annual East Portland Summer Arts Festival, held Saturday and Sunday, July 9 and 10, at Ventura Park, 460 S.E. 113th Ave., the latest of Portland Parks & Recreation's Summer Free for All celebrations this summer.

Spalding's performance is the evening of July 10. Aaron Nigel Smith & 1 World Chorus + Sora Shodo, a reggae fusion and live painting performance, will also be featured at the

festival. Daytime arts activities are scheduled from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. with the headlining performance at 6 p.m. both days

"There is no Portland without a vibrant arts and culture community, and without vibrant arts and culture across our whole community," said Portland Parks Commissioner Carmen Rubio, who also serves as the City's Arts and Culture Commissioner. "This first-ever East Portland Summer Arts Festival accessibly brings arts and culture to East Portland, and I'm hopefully it will be a treasured annual event."

Free drop-in mini music lessons, art activities, and more are also planned. For more information, visit portland.gov/parks/sffa.

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