



Offbeat Oregon History: Ashland's Shakespeare Festival

By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

In 1931, at the height of the Great Depression, a young, charismatic drama teacher named Angus

Bowmer got a job at Southern Oregon Normal School in Ashland.

Bowmer, a fresh graduate of Washington State Normal School in Bellingham (now Western Washington University), had specifically set out to find a teachers' college (known then as "normal schools") to start his career in. He had applied for employment at two of them, the only two openings at normal schools in the country. The first, the more established Eastern Washington school at Ellensburg, looked at his record of producing and participating in less-than-high-brow dramatic productions, wrinkled its nose, and passed. Luckily for all involved, Southern Oregon did not.

Today, Southern Oregon University is a fine liberal arts college with a large and thriving community of scholars. In 1931, though, it was barely off the ground. Its entire student body was less than 100; its history dated back to the 1890s but it had spent most of the intervening time closed. Its facilities were correspondingly antiquated and rudimentary.

But one day, shortly after coming to the college, Bowmer made a visit to Lithia Park. And while he was there, he happened to look out at a derelict old building across the way, and something about it suddenly looked familiar to him.

The building was an old Chautauqua house, built in 1917 to house Ashland's then-booming Chautauqua scene. At the time, the unreinforced wooden dome covering its top was the second-largest structure of its kind in the United States. Unfortunately, by the early 1930s time, the elements and the laws of physics had rather ganged up on the old building, and the ceiling was getting dangerous. So one of the Civilian Conservation Corps groups had been tasked with dismantling it, leaving nothing behind but a huge

semi-cylindrical stone wall.

And that wall, as Bowmer looked out at it, looked an awful lot like the Globe Theater in London — the onetime home stage of William Shakespeare himself.

Bowmer got busy doing what artists specialize in: dreaming big. Knowing from a previous production that Ashland residents really enjoyed Shakespeare when it was presented to them, he pitched the Ashland Fourth of July Celebration committee on doing a couple Shakespeare plays in the old Chautauqua building as part of the celebration. Based on previous performance, Bowmer was confident that it would pull in at least enough money to cover its expenses.

The committee took the whole thing under advisement. Despite the example of Bowmer's previous play, none of them really believed that something like that would make money. But Bowmer was persuasive, and they hated to turn him down, and all of them were good small-town boosters interested in the educational betterment of their town.

Finally, a delegation of businessmen from the Committee came to see Bowmer. Although they liked the idea, they told him somewhat sheepishly, they were worried that his plays would cause a "deficit in the celebration budget," as Bowmer dryly phrased it in his autobiography 40 years later; and to make up for this anticipated fiscal hemorrhage, they had a suggestion that would, they said, guarantee success.

The diffidence with which they were approaching Bowmer made it very clear that they expected him to hate the idea. But finally one of them blurted it out: What would he think of sharing the Elizabethan stage with a series of boxing matches?

To their astonishment, Bowmer said it sounded like a fine idea.

"I assured them that such an event would be quite typical of the kind of thing that appealed to Elizabethan audiences," Bowmer wrote, "though,

to be sure, their tastes were somewhat more bloody."

And so it was that, in 1935, the very first event in what would soon become the Oregon Shakespeare Festival shared billing with a series of prizefights.

The plays, of course, were a great success. And when the holiday was over and the tickets were being counted, Bowmer and his band discovered that they had covered their expenses with a good bit of cash left over.

Which was very fortunate, because the boxing matches that were supposed to guarantee the festival's solvency were a miserable flop. Nearly all the Shakespeare company's surplus earnings had to be pumped into making up the boxing program's losses, and Bowmer found himself facing the next year with an empty purse.

But, of course, there was never any thought of ending the Shakespeare plays.

Ironically enough, this was not the only year the plays ended up being forced to subsidize something else. At the end of the second year, the festival was once again in the black — but by a slimmer margin this time: just \$84.73. The plays were sponsored by Southern Oregon Normal School that year rather than the Fourth of July Celebration Committee; so Bowmer went to the president of the college and asked if the funds could be placed in a special bank account for the festival.

No, the president said; because the college had just become part of the Unified System of Higher Education in Oregon, the money had to go into the general fund. But, he added, it would be "earmarked" for the next year's festival, so all would be fine.

Thus reassured, Bowmer happily headed off on sabbatical, traveling to England to soak up some Shakespearean influences right from the source. But when he returned the following June, he



was informed that the Southern Oregon Normal School football team had had a bad season, and the school had used the festival's \$84.73 to pay its debts.

"You can imagine my depression," Bowmer wrote. "I could see an endless succession of seasons stretching into the future, seasons in which the Festival would continue to exist only for the purpose of providing money to needy boxing matches, football seasons and other athletic events."

The situation incensed Bowmer enough that he started looking for alternative arrangements. And, through discreet inquiries, he learned that the festival's local credit rating was great. With two money-making years under their belt, the festival had convinced the key vendors in Ashland that they would be paid for anything they advanced. So Bowmer was able to cut all ties to the school and the celebration committee, and incorporate the Oregon Shakespearean Festival Association as a nonprofit educational institution.

And so it has remained ever since.

Omega-3 fatty acids for brain health through all stages of life

By Joel Fuhrman MD
For The Sentinel



There are three major omega-3 fatty acids that we get from our diets. Alpha-linolenic acid (ALA) is a short-chain omega-3 found in flaxseeds, hemp seeds, walnuts, and other plant foods. When we take in ALA from plant foods, the body can convert it into long-chain omega-3s: DHA and EPA, most commonly obtained by eating fish. The long-chain omega-3 fatty acids DHA and EPA are associated with many aspects of brain health, and DHA is especially important for early brain development. Conversion efficiency of ALA from plant foods alone may not be sufficient for many people to achieve adequate DHA and EPA status.

I recommend supplementing with these beneficial fats, since most modern diets are low in DHA and EPA unless fish is consumed regularly, and research has confirmed that vegans tend to have a low omega-3 index. DHA is concentrated in the membranes of brain cells; there, DHA provides structure to the membrane and is involved in signaling, connectivity between cells, and neurotransmitter production, among other important actions. EPA and DHA have

some common functions and some distinctive ones. DHA is most often associated with brain development, learning and cognition and EPA with mood, behavior, and anti-inflammatory effects.¹⁻⁴

DHA is a building block of human brain and eye tissue, and sufficient levels of DHA throughout life are important for vision and learning.^{1, 5} During pregnancy, maternal stores provide the developing baby with the DHA for brain and eye development, and after birth, the DHA is provided by breast milk. There is some evidence that having higher DHA levels, or taking DHA supplements during pregnancy and nursing benefits the child's cognitive development and intelligence.^{6,7} Infants exposed to DHA-containing formula have similarly shown cognitive improvements at 9 months compared to those whose formula did not contain DHA.⁸

Although the time between birth and 2 years represents the phase of the brain's largest growth, brain development is not complete after age 2; it continues through childhood and into the late twenties.^{1, 9} The majority of omega-3 supplementation trials in children and adolescents have reported improvements in measures of school performance (such as reading, spelling or learning ability) or behavior.^{1,10,11}

One interesting study used functional MRI to view activity in

the brains of young boys (8-10 years of age) who took either placebo or a DHA supplement for 8 weeks. The boys who took DHA showed increased functional brain activity during a cognitive task, and their level of activation correlated directly with their blood DHA levels.¹⁰ This suggests that DHA helps the learning process in children. This research has significant implications, since early academic success helps to build confidence and set the stage for future college and career performance.

Insufficient DHA levels have been implicated in a number of childhood cognitive and developmental disorders such as ADHD, dyslexia, and autism spectrum disorders.^{12, 13} Supplementation with omega-3s, especially in combination with certain omega-6 fatty acids, has been found to improve behavior and ADHD symptoms.¹⁴⁻¹⁸ Not enough research has been done on autism spectrum disorders to determine whether omega-3 supplementation would also be helpful for these children.¹⁹

Supplemental DHA and EPA is available as fish oil or oil derived from lab-grown algae. I recommend using the algae-based supplements, because they are acceptable to vegans and vegetarians, more sustainable than fish or fish-derived supplements, and free of the environmental pollutants that we may ingest from eating fish.

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