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Daniel Pollack-Pelzner

Linfield College

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Oregon Shakespeare Festival: Changing the social order

Daniel Pollack-Pelzner views the first four plays of OSF's season as expressions of social change

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By DANIEL POLLACK-PELZNER

“We’re here to change the social order. So deal with it.”

That’s the cheery, cheeky ensemble announcement that begins Karen Zacarías’s wildly entertaining Destiny of Desire—a deliciously theatrical homage to the mistaken identities, thwarted romances, and swooning pageantry that drive Latin American telenovelas—and it could well serve as the motto for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s new season.

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival production of “Destiny of Desire” by Karen Zacarías is pointedly riotous. Or is that riotously pointed?/Photo by Jenny Graham.

“I’m a Latina and I’m a woman; I’m not exactly popular right now,” Zacarías admitted after the opening performance last month, but as audience members danced to a mariachi band in the Angus Bowmer Theatre lobby, her popularity, and the appeal of theater that reflects her imagination, looked poised to soar.

An 80-year-old tourist destination in small-town southern Oregon that has a dead white male as its middle name, as its staff is fond of joking, might not seem the likeliest engine of social change. Under its
outgoing artistic director, Bill Rauch, however, its resident company has become 70 percent actors of color, and the 2018 lineup features five new plays by women. Those include Mary Kathryn Nagle’s brilliant *Manahatta*, which tracks land frauds from the Dutch West India Company to Lehman Brothers, and Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig’s adaptation of a Chinese classic about criminal justice and climate change, *Snow in Midsummer*—not everyday tourist fare.

I’ll confess my OSF evangelism: I’ve been a visiting scholar there in past years, and I’ve written articles for this season’s program on Rauch’s upcoming *Oklahoma!*—with same-sex couples in the leading roles, and Lauren Gunderson’s backstage caper, *The Book of Will*, about the actors who preserved Shakespeare’s legacy. Also on the summer calendar is Idris Goodwin’s *The Way the Mountain Moved*, an exploration of African-Americans, Native Americans, and Mormons on the nineteenth-century Western frontier; it’s the latest product of OSF’s ambitious commissioning project, American Revolutions, which aims to build a cycle of 37 plays—each dramatizing a moment of change in American history—on the scale of Shakespeare’s complete works.

The results of American Revolutions so far have depicted change from above (Robert Schenkkan’s riveting LBJ chronicle, *All the Way*, which barreled from the Bowmer to Broadway and HBO, strewing Tonys and Emmys in its wake) and from below (Lynn Nottage’s *Sweat*, a searing tragedy of factory workers locked out in Reading, Pennsylvania, which won last year’s Pulitzer Prize). I don’t think it’s too much to say that these commissions have also changed OSF’s role from an innovative revival house to the engine behind a new American canon.

That sense of a canon in flux animates *Destiny of Desire*. In José Luis Valenzuela’s ingenious production, chimes interrupt the fevered action with footnotes that ground each wacky plot twist in real-life numbers, jauntily delivered from the wings by the splendid Latinx ensemble. The stats are sometimes astounding (percentage of babies swapped at hospitals), sometimes chilling (percentage of Mexican immigrants who perish on the US border), and they suggest a thirst for social justice that motivates Zacarías’s cross-class romance plots. The figure that earned the biggest response from the audience? “Mexico is the largest Spanish-speaking country in the world. The second largest is the United States.” Paired with the chiming claim that telenovelas are the world’s most popular entertainment, watched by two billion people, Zacarías’s confection looks less like a niche slot than a vision of the future, buoyed by OSF’s past productions of plays by Tanya Saracho, Luis Alfaro, Octavio Solis, and Quiara Alegria Hudes, and lavished with the large-scale stage effects (sandstorms, thunderclouds, giddy ensemble dance numbers, a live pianist to score the melodrama) that OSF usually devotes to Shakespeare comedies.

Hana Sharif’s staging of *Sense and Sensibility*, also in the Bowmer (in a new adaptation by Kate Hamill), seems rather more decorous by comparison, and yet it, too, is here to change the social order. You’ve probably seen marriage plots play out in Regency costumes before, but have you seen Jane Austen’s world unite Asian-American, African-American, and Latinx couples? Nancy Rodriguez, a daffy pan dulce entrepreneur in last season’s *Mojada*, brings such wells of intelligent reserve to Elinor Dashwood, whose sense balances the emotive sensibility of her younger sister (Emily Ota), that her stifled sob at the prospect of finding marital happiness at last provided one of the most moving moments of the opening weekend.
A diverse cast gives “Sense and Sensibility” at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival a sharper edge/Photo by Jenny Graham

Although the female characters’ financial prospects are constrained by patriarchal inheritance, the stage is theirs to own, and a scheming Amy Newman, a deadpan Lauren Modica, and an irrepressible K. T. Vogt (last year’s codpiece-twirling Falstaff) fuel the show’s comic energy. With women as the director, playwright, dramaturg, choreographer, and set designer, too, the Bowmer itself becomes a space for female authority to shape our imagination, and it’s the Dashwood sisters who clasp hands at the end to lead a charming Regency hip-hop dance.

That’s a bracing contrast to the final tableau of Othello, the third Bowmer show, where the light fades on the corpses of Desdemona (Alejandra Escalante) and her loyal servant Emilia (Amy Kim Waschke), casualties of the toxic masculinity that Emilia’s husband stirs in Desdemona’s husband when, in Bill Rauch’s clever contemporary production, their locker-room banter after a weight-lifting session turns venomous. Or perhaps, Rauch’s casting implies, it’s white fragility that spurs Iago’s revenge. Played as an affable psychopath by Danforth Comins, whose nonchalant exterior barely masks a churning rage, Iago’s frequent racial slurs suggest he notices that everyone else in the play, besides his dupe Roderigo and the aging duke and senator of Venice, is a person of color, including both the African-immigrant, Muslim-convert General Othello (a lyrical Chris Butler) and his preferred lieutenant, Cassio (the Wichita Nation actor Derek Garza). Changing the social order can unleash violent resentment, as Rauch saw in 2016, when two of OSF’s black company members received KKK-driven death threats, and Ashland became embroiled in debates over hate speech.

This production feels most energized when it stands up to injustice: “I will speak,” Waschke’s fierce Emilia insists, revealing her husband’s perfidy before he stabs her—a #metoo testament both to the power of female voices and to the backlash that would silence them. The most haunting image in the production, however, comes when the entire ensemble wheels Desdemona into her fatal bedchamber, a rare break from realism into ritual, as if in collective guilty response to Emilia’s question over her brutally strangled body, “O, who hath done this deed?”

The realistic stabbing and strangling that ends the tragedy is deeply uncomfortable to watch, and no
doubt Rauch wants the audience to feel the ugliness that results from misogyny and racism. A less literal but no less powerful solution to the challenge of critiquing social ills without replicating them arrives in Rosa Joshi’s *Henry V*, which turns the black-box Thomas Theatre into what the prologue calls “the brightest heaven of invention.” Although film versions often render this war play as a battlefield bloodfest, Shakespeare’s chorus calls for the audience to let the actors “on your imaginary forces work…/For ’tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings”; there’s an implied parallel between the work the actors must perform to get us to imagine the fields of France onstage and the work the newly crowned King Henry V must perform to legitimate his sovereignty and enlist his skeptical troops into an overseas campaign.

*Henry V* (Daniel José Molina, center) disguises himself as he interacts with his soldiers (left to right: Shaun Taylor-Corbett, Robert Vincent Frank) on the eve of battle./Photo by Jenny Graham, Oregon Shakespeare Festival

Working with choreographer Alice Gosti and longtime OSF design wizard Dick Hay, Joshi crafts a fluid production that feels as improvisatory, funny, steely, and momentous as Daniel José Molina’s magnetic turn as the monarch at its center, as bemused as any of his critics that he has grown up from the privileged playboy Prince Hal (seen last season snorting coke and cavorting in a bubble bath with prostitutes) to rule a kingdom. The tight ensemble speaks the opening chorus together, then places a crown on Molina’s head and nimbly swaps medieval costumes—now English red, now French blue, now noble silk, now common rags. Spare grey boxes become a throne room, a barricade, a pile of baggage, a row of coffins. And when the bloodshed begins, the soldiers hurl red clothes at each other—a conceit that seems flimsy at first, but which soon gains power, especially in a harrowing scene when Jessica Ko (last year’s miraculous shapeshifter in *Hannah and the Dread Gazebo*) convulses under a barrage of crimson garments, her body registering the repeated torque of every boy killed at Agincourt.

As in *Destiny of Desire*, the ensemble’s awareness of the illusion it’s creating makes the theatrical artifice more compelling; it seems paradoxical, but the effect comes from the enlistment of the audience as a collaborator. We have to work as well to conjure the injustices onstage, which also allows us to imagine alternatives. Joshi doesn’t diminish the thrill of the nationalist, masculine rhetoric that Molina renders fresh in his “band of brothers” speech, but she tests it against the macho swagger that Kimberly
Scott embodies as a marvelously crazed Pistol, and against the staggering casualties that the king’s war engenders.

When the final chorus tells us that Henry V’s successors “lost France/And made his England bleed,” the ensemble tears open every grey box and blankets the stage in red cloth. It’s a stunning coup to end as smart, timely, satisfying, and disturbing a Shakespeare production as I have seen in Ashland. And it raises a question of leadership beyond the play. Bill Rauch has led OSF to the forefront of American regional theater as an agent for change, onstage and off, and has surrounded himself with staff as diverse as the acting company. When it comes time to choose his successor, Rosa Joshi—who ran the Northwest Asian American Theatre and co-founded an all-female Shakespeare company in Seattle—looks like a strong contender.

NOTE

Barry Johnson reviewed the first four shows of OSF’s 2018 season for ArtsWatch earlier.