



Oregon Beams with Surprise, Revives Rep with Style, Tries Patience with Panache, and Delivers on Death and Drama

by Jim Volz. Written on 2011-07-20. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Julius Caesar (2011, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, USA).

THESE HAVE BEEN TRYING, EXHILARATING AND HEADY TIMES FOR THE OREGON SHAKESPEARE Festival as they've wrestled with the most challenging on-stage crisis in their 76-year history—the surprise closing of the Angus Bowmer Theatre, OSF's largest indoor space, smack dab in the middle of their eight-play repertory season. The theatre was closed June 18, when a crack in a major structural beam was discovered (with a reopening set for August 2). In the meantime, *Measure for Measure*, *The Imaginary Invalid*, and *August Osage County* quickly found new homes in everything from an old Armory in Ashland to a speedily constructed, air-conditioned and outfitted “Bowmer in the Park” tent.

In the meantime, that's six weeks of sometimes ingenious, often giddy improvising for a company scrambling to produce over 780 performances for approximately 400,000 visitors. “This has been a most amazing time for our company, our audiences and this community,” said OSF Artistic Director Bill Rauch. “While none of us would have wished for this, and we are thrilled to return to the theatre on August 2, credit must be given to everyone who participated in this temporary relocation process. The commitment, patience, passion and generosity of thousands of people have redefined the ideas of ‘company’ and ‘resiliency’ for us.”

Sitting in the 598-seat audience for the packed premiere “Bowmer in the Park” tent performance of *August Osage County*, this reviewer had to marvel at the virtuosity of a company who had performed Tracy Letts' Pulitzer-Prize winning drama no fewer than four times in four different venues due to the Bowmer beam fiasco. Quite a triumph for the OSF company and the citizens of Ashland who rallied to raise the tent, redesign and re-tech the production, secure the space next to a duck pond in the City's Lithia Park and spark a standing ovation for the company's hard-hitting, small town Oklahoma tale of dysfunctional families

who raise hell, almost defy description and traumatize dinner partners (not to mention unsuspecting audiences).

As the Editor of the Shakespeare Theatre Association's quarto, my assignment was to cover eight plays in four days and pay special attention to *Julius Caesar*, *Love's Labor's Lost*, *Measure for Measure*, the seldom produced *Henry IV, Part Two*, and the world premiere of the Hamlet-referencing, *Ghost Light*, written by Tony Taccone, conceived and developed by Jonathan Moscone and Mr. Taccone, and directed by Mr. Moscone. Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance* was a delightful non-Bard-based diversion, and some hilarious comic turns in Moliere's *The Imaginary Invalid* helped it survive the brutal seats and sightlines of the temporary, emergency Armory staging.

Oregon Shakespeare is one of the few remaining repertory companies in America and miraculously survives, even in times of distress, thanks to a committed ensemble of actors, artists and craftspeople, more than a \$26-million budget, and what Artistic Director Bill Rauch and Executive Director Paul Nicholson describe as a "curious and courageous audience that returns, year after year, to see where we'll go—and to go with us."

OSF's large repertory season is a tremendous financial boost to a city and state that is hailed nationwide as a tourism destination mecca (the 2010 season's economic impact on Oregon is estimated at over \$179-million). By producing eleven plays in three theatres (and adding myriad educational and ancillary events), repertory allows traveling patrons to see many shows and spend a lot of money in just one visit. Historically however, repertory was actually created for artistic reasons—especially to even-out casting, hopefully attract brilliant actors from top to bottom, and allow audiences the thrill of seeing someone play a major role in a classical piece one afternoon, a midsize role in a contemporary piece the same night, and a sword-carrying pirate (for instance) in the next day's musical. Oregon Shakespeare's season is so busy and the company is so large that most actors appear in just two productions but the joy of watching actors in diverse roles in repertory remains a happy surprise when it happens.

Artistic Director Bill Rauch, awarded the Theatre Communication Group's 2010 Visionary Leadership Award, was recognized by the national theatre community as an individual who has "gone above and beyond the call of duty to advance the theatre field as a whole, nationally and/or internationally. Recipients of this award are individuals who regularly think beyond their day-to-day work in order to implement practices, new models, advocacy efforts, etc. on behalf of the field." Soon after Mr. Rauch joined OSF in 2007, he outlined his plans to significantly expand OSF's new play development efforts, to put more resources into artistic development for the acting company and casting; to increase the variety of directorial voices at OSF; to place a designer in an artistic leadership position; to diversify producing

responsibilities; and to offer the greatest possible variety of pre-show experiences on the Green Show stage. In discussions with American Theatre Critics Association members in 2011, he discussed the excitement and challenges of his new visions and directions and noted that the directors and audiences recognize “we are now in the 21st century.” This is oftentimes a controversial approach for audiences seeking “Elizabethan Shakespeare in period costumes,” wondering about Spanish songs and rewrites of the Bard in *Measure for Measure*, encountering a Japanese soothsayer in a modern dress *Julius Caesar*, or even witnessing a very silly and surprising gay marriage at the conclusion of *The Pirates of Penzance*. The commitment to cultural diversity, anachronistic playfulness, and sarcastic contemporary nods to age-old societal mores often resonates with the hopefully, ever-growing younger audiences while irritating or confusing other patrons who feel abruptly pulled from the life of the play.

Julius Caesar: Director Amanda Dehnert grabs the audience right from the start. Actress Vilma Silva & her supporting entourage cajole the audience into turning off their cell phones (or else) and works the crowd into a mini-frenzy with pre-show instructions before blending seamlessly into the opening moments of the show. So, instead of the usually tedious bouts of exposition, the audience is now formally inducted chanting and screaming into Caesar’s world—where all roads lead to a very bloody Rome.

As the audience quickly surmises, this Julius Caesar is also their warm-up ruler, Ms. Silva, a surprising casting choice that she deftly embraces and quickly renders inconsequential as she assumes the mantle with a laser-like sense of purpose and a no-nonsense approach to the text.

Throughout American history, Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* has often been relegated to classroom discussions, rhetorical analysis or mandatory productions by theatres or directors somnambulant seeking to complete the Bard’s entire canon of plays. Happily, *Julius Caesar* is back! The revolutionary parallels between feuding factions, warring politicians, angry citizens and bloody conflict are just too ripe for exploring in the 21st century and Caesar is certainly back in fashion in America’s 200+ Shakespeare Festivals.

In Ms. Dehnert and the OSF company’s hands, this small cast *Caesar* delves into the sometimes unfathomable motives and dark psyches of a mob mentality. The fast-paced, in-your-face production takes full advantage of OSF’s intimate New Theatre that’s set up as a mini-Arena—perfect for the rabble rousing efforts of the Senate and the subsequent anguished crowd reactions to Mark Antony’s famous funeral oration. Gregory Linington is convincing as Cassius, Jonathan Haugen fills Brutus’s shoes with a sense of confusion, despair, desperation and dread and Danforth Comins is a loyal, true and steady Mark Anthony. What really helps propel this stripped down Caesar forward however is the wonderfully staged ensemble. Seven actors (Anthony Heald, Kenajuan Bentley, Kevin Kenerly, Ako, Brooke Parks, Gina Daniels and

Frankie J. Alvarez) play the two dozen other roles in the show and director Dehnert meshes the overall cast in clever, oftentimes bloody, generally frantic and occasionally poetic ways.

Scene designer Richard L. Hay (227th OSF production over 54 seasons) pulls you into the piece before the audience even enters the theatre as assassination, bloody death, and dictator banners line the outside and inside entranceways into the theatre. Everyone from Czar Nicholas II to Martin Luther King are chronicled in ways that suggests the tragic history of the post-Caesar world as if to ask—Will we never learn the lessons of history?

Linda Roethke’s costume designs range from a pure white to blood spattered “raincoat” for the slaughtered Caesar to earth-tone t-shirts for Brutus and quilted vests and militaristically inspired hats, bags, coats and boots for most everyone else. It’s simple, clean and helps distinguish Caesar’s stylish garb from the citizens and senators. The New Theatre in constant motion is a difficult space to light and Robert Peterson excels in helping the audience focus attention without being conspicuous or obtrusive.

It’s the seventh time OSF has tackled *Julius Caesar* (the first was in 1952) and this compelling version will be long remembered for mirroring the madness of America and the world in the “new” millennium. For many audience members, it’s the surprise hit of the Shakespeare season—smacking a home run for timely poignance and risk-taking directorial touches without the easy sensationalism of crass contemporary imagery or blatant 21st century cleverness.

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