

# After the fires

**Oregon Shakespeare Festival bounces back from summer of smoke**

**T**he Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland is coming off a tough year. Wildfire smoke bedeviled the 2018 festival, costing it some \$2 million in lost revenue due to canceled outdoor performances. In 2019, however, it's bouncing right back.

It opened its new season with a diverse mix of four productions, beginning with a lively staging of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. That

by  
**Robert Speer**  
robertspeer@  
newsreview.com

**Review:**  
OSF presents *As You Like It*, *Hairspray: the Broadway Musical*, *Mother Road* and *Cambodian Rock Band*, now showing through October. Visit site for details.

**Oregon Shakespeare Festival**  
15 S. Pioneer St.,  
Ashland, Ore.  
(800) 219-8161  
osfashland.org

When I saw them last weekend (March 15-17), all four productions earned standing

ovations, which speaks to their consistent quality. Here's my take on them:  
**Cambodian Rock Band:** The six actors in this impressive production do double duty as members of a terrific on-stage rock band who, as the play—directed by Chay Yew—begins in 1975, are threatened by the imminent takeover by the murderous Khmer Rouge. Subsequent scenes are set in 1978, by which time the Khmer Rouge has murdered some 2 million people, and 30 years later,



Tony Sancho (center, as Martín Jodes) in *Mother Road*.

PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM

as a father who escaped the killing fields seeks to reconcile with his American daughter, who is part of a legal team seeking to convict a Khmer Rouge leader charged with war crimes. This merging of a painful history, both personal and collective, with the music of the Cambodian-American band Dengue Fever is an inspired collaboration. (Thomas Theatre)

**As You Like It:** This is one of Shakespeare's most familiar comedies, but its plot is also one of his most complicated, so you might want to read an online précis before arriving at the theater. OSF has staged it in two acts, with the first providing the expository setup and the second the denouement that brings the several plot threads together into a romantically—and politically—satisfying end. Among the many superb performances, those of Jessica Ko as Rosalind, Román Zaragoza as Orlando and Rex Young as the fool Touchstone stand out. (Bowmer Theatre)

**Hairspray: the Broadway Musical:** As both play and movie, John Waters' most commercially successful creation has taken on a cult status not unlike that of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The story of a plus-size girl, Tracy Turnblad, who in 1962 earns a spot on Baltimore's popular *Corny Collins Dance Show* and proceeds to try to integrate it has evolved into being Waters' most subversive work. Of the many fine performances, Katy Geraghty's as Tracy steals the show by illustrating that heavy people can dance as well as anyone. The production also features a terrific stage

set and delightful choreography. (Bowmer Theatre)

**Mother Road:** In John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Mother Road down which Tom Joad and his family travel from Oklahoma to California is Highway 66. In Octavio Solis' play (directed by Bill Rauch in his last season as OSF artistic director), the road is the same but the direction is reversed. William Joad (Mark Murphey), Tom's cousin, is dying of cancer and has come to California to find his last living "blood kin," to whom he wishes to give his 2,000-acre Oklahoma ranch. To his surprise, that relative turns out to be Martín Jodes (Tony Sancho), a long-lost cousin from the Mexican side of the family. The pair encounter many obstacles on their journey to the ranch, some of their own making. The big question is: Can they get there before William dies? Solis is a poet as well as a playwright, and he infuses this play with a poetic sensibility that elevates it well above melodrama. (Bowmer Theatre)

Upcoming productions include: *Between Two Knees*, an imaginative take on Native American history (opens April 3 in the Thomas Theatre); the summer series in the Allen Elizabethan Theater (with *Macbeth*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *All's Well That Ends Well*) begins May 29; *Indecent* in the Angus Bowmer Theatre (opens July 3); and *How to Catch Creation* opening July 23 in the Thomas Theatre. □



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