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Paul Vincent O'Connor (left) is the Duke of Exeter and Marco Barricelli plays King Henry V in Oregon Shakespeare Festival's production of "Henry V." (Photo/Christopher Briscoe)

Starry Ashland Nights

Oregon Shakespeare Festival

The regulars were prepared.

When the first drops fell on Friday's opening-night crowd at the outdoor Elizabethan Theater, many donned caps and covered their children with Hefty bags. Luckily the light sprinkle ended quickly, the evening stayed fairly warm, and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's rendition of "A Comedy of Errors" was a sheer delight.

Sacramentans who make an annual five-hour trek to Ashland for the summer season won't be disappointed. They can choose from a wide range of Shakespeare: a history ("Henry V"), a romance ("The Winter's Tale") and a comedy ("Comedy of Errors"). As can be expected from the professional troupe, staging and performances were near-perfect, and the material was virtually beyond criticism.

The outdoor Elizabethan stage is one of three at the festival. The intimate Black Swan features the witty "The Second Man," John Olive's nostalgic "Voice of the Prairie" and the irreverent "At Long Last Leo."

Five shows are running in the 600-seat Angus Bowmer Theatre this season: the three-and-a-half-hour "Peer Gynt," John Guare's black farce "The House of Blue Leaves," the Shakespeare comedy "The Merry Wives of Windsor," the moral exploration "God's Country," and Brian Friel's eloquent "Aristocrats."

All shows open and close at various points in the season, which ends October 28.

"The Comedy of Errors" is one of Shakespeare's more simplistic and accessible plays centering around two sets of long-lost twins; the orthodox mistaken-identity plot is taken to extremes. Let in on the playwright's practical joke—obviously, the characters don't comprehend their predicaments—the audi-

ence forgives all improbabilities for the sake of humor.

Yet "Comedy" touches upon serious human themes—appearance and reality, order and chaos, love and jealousy—taking it past the simplicity of basic farce and bringing a great deal of warmth and satisfaction. Reunited at plays end, the twins (and audience) are genuinely touched.

Director Tom Ramirez made the decision to play some scenes as camp (which works to the production's advantage) while characters who take themselves seriously are always funnier and more believable an acknowledgment of the plot's inconsistencies and far-too-tidy ending works a la Marx Brothers.

Those who caught Kenneth Branagh's marvelous film *Henry V* will recognize elements in OSF's performance.

Memorable lines and scenes fill "Henry V," the story of the young English king's invasion of France and accompanying self-discovery. Ashland's fifth production of the historical drama is presented conventionally, with ramparts, flags and fog. As Henry, Marco Barricelli (delightful as Christian in last year's *Cyrano de Bergerac*) dominates the show with all requisite charisma—he is valorous, loyal to God, inspiring to his men and hugely heroic in the climactic battle scene.

Two comic scenes divide "Henry V," providing welcome relief; the concluding dialogue, in which a lost-for-words-in-any-language Henry proposes to French princess Katherine, who knows virtually no English, is one of the funniest scenes in all theater.

Even those familiar with Branagh and Olivier's film versions will find new aspects of the

play in the OSF production.

Shakespeare's four romances are problematic; with the exception of "The Tempest," today's audiences don't find them particularly effective. This summer's OSF production of "The Winter's Tale," while certainly better than 1989's awful "Pericles," is a mixed bag of entertainment.

Act One tells a moral story of jealousy and accusation, in which a king falsely charges his wife with adultery and sees his life ruined as she and their son die and a newborn daughter is left to perish on a distant beach.

The weekend's only two staging flaws surface in this act, and both are whoppers: The "infant," on-stage a good deal, is conspicuously and hilariously inanimate, and a threatening bear is represented by an unbelievably cheesy tapestry painting that leaves the audience halfway between gasps and guffaws.

"The Winter's Tale" falls completely apart in the second half, with the passage of 16 years and the introduction of unrelated, distracting characters and plots. Performances are predictably excellent and pacing stays lively, but the play simply isn't as interesting or relevant as the rest of Shakespeare's canon.

In the name of free expression, the festival's board of directors voted last Friday to reject a \$49,500 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, which recently added restrictions to grants. Before ticket prices begin to reflect the loss, anyone even vaguely interested in theater should make an effort to venture to Ashland.

Call (503) 482-4331 for tickets.

—MATTHEW BUDMAN