RACE, SHAKESPEARE, AND A THEATER'S FIGHT TO SURVIVE

ABRUPT EXIT
Oregon Shakespeare Festival artistic director Nataki Garrett, the first person of color to lead the company, departed after a tenure marred by donor backlash and racial tension.

MICHAEL SULLIVAN

By DREW LINDSAY

ASHLAND, ORE.

RAIN AND GLOOM clung to this mountain town one night in late March, but the mood was light as the cast of "Romeo and Juliet" rehearsed in the Angus Bowmer Theatre, one of three Oregon Shakespeare Festival venues stacked on a hillside off Main Street. During idle moments, Friar Lawrence and Romeo jostled playfully. Balthasar strummed an electric guitar. Juliet danced on her balcony.

Nataki Garrett, the organization's sixth artistic director in its 88-year history, sat in the third row of the darkened seats, sipping tea from a mug. Light from the stage caught the big, infectious smile that broke across her face when her cast cut up. On occasion, she stepped forward to huddle with an actor, talking as two longtime friends might. Having arrived at the festival just before the pandemic shuttered it for 17 months, she was, after nearly 30 years in theater, directing a play by Shakespeare for the first time — indeed, the very play that inspired her career.

Yet a little more than a month after that rehearsal, the festival, known as OSF, announced that Garrett was leaving at the end of May. Official statements praised her leadership of the organization during the pandemic. "I am leaving with an eye on the future of the field," Garrett said in a statement provided by OSF to the *Chronicle*, although she did not offer details about her career plans.

Garrett's exit is abrupt; "Romeo and Juliet" just opened in April and is scheduled to run through mid-October. Many things might explain the move, including a bleak fiscal outlook. Ticket sales last year did not reach even half what they were before the pandemic. The board in the fall approved a $40 million budget with a $16 million deficit. The festival, one of the country's oldest and largest nonprofit theaters, could run out of money before the season's close. Given all that, any nonprofit leader — or any board — might decide it was time for a change.

Garrett's tenure was also marred by an ugly battle between OSF supporters and the organization as the festival expanded efforts to make its art, staff, and culture more diverse and more inclusive. From almost her first day on the job, it was clear that those efforts would collide with traditional philanthropy, with financial repercussions.

Garrett, who is Black, was celebrated as a historic choice when she was named artistic director in 2019, the first person of color to lead the company and only the second woman. Through her art, she aims to lift up the lives and voices seldom seen or heard in theater, those of Black women like herself but also of other people of color and LGBTQ and nonbinary individuals.

Garrett, 51, also wants to end the American theater's reliance on white, older audiences, whose numbers are dwindling. That means work in the back offices to, among other things, erase decades-old fundraising conventions and flip the script on how groups market themselves and to whom. American theater, she argues, will survive only if it changes its art, practices, and culture to make younger generations and new audiences feel welcome.

"There are very few artists in the United States who have the vision and the practical skill set that Nataki has," said Travis Preston, dean of the school of theater at the California Institute of the Arts, where Garrett trained. "Her vision for the American theater is crucial at this time."

Garrett's critics disagree. They blame her for the festival's potential demise, saying her productions and her plan to save the American theater drove away donors and theatergoers. Their argument in slogan form, as one critic put it to her: "Go woke, go broke."

This dispute simmered with racial tension. Garrett said she received emails criticizing her choice of plays from a group that called itself the "old white guard." In early 2022, Garrett received death threats. From then on, a security detail followed her as she moved about Ashland. Garrett and her supporters say bias undermined her leadership with the board and community — a not uncommon experience for leaders of color who moved into leadership roles following 2020's racial reckoning.

"I've got a lot of friends who are in these positions right now, and they're catching hell," said Michael McAfee, head of PolicyLink, an equity research and advocacy organization. "You'll start

Continued on Page 22

GREG VAUGHN, VWPICS, NEWSCOM

THEATER PARADISE
Once a farming and lumber industry hub, Ashland morphed with the festival's growth into a popular vacation spot and retirement destination. Declining audiences threaten the town's economy.

Several longtime top-end donors stepped back soon after Garrett arrived, she says. One rescinded a $4.5 million gift.

Continued from Page 21

hearing soon about some staff changes where these leaders have just said, 'I'm done.'"

Local Pride

The *Chronicle* visited Ashland in late March, about a month before the announcement of Garrett's departure. Most interviews — with Garrett as well as town residents, board members, and others — took place when few people, if any, knew she would be leaving.

The festival is a big name in nonprofit theater, a Tony Award winner acclaimed for outstanding new works as well as first-rate productions from the Shakespeare canon. Its success is something of a miracle. Ashland, population 22,000, sits in a rural expanse nearly 300 miles from Portland, the nearest major city. Yet the festival draws hundreds of thousands each year, many who make annual pilgrimages.

Residents have nurtured the festival's growth since it launched in 1935 as part of the town's July 4 celebrations. Alfred Carpenter, an orchard farmer, and his wife, Helen, were early mainstay benefactors. Locals packed the board and watched matters closely. In 1952, volunteers came together as the Tudor Guild, which over the years raised funds to support actors and the crew, managed a gift store, and even brought cookies.

Once a farming and lumber industry hub, Ashland morphed with OSF's growth into a popular vacation spot and retirement destination. A local vitamin shop goes by the name All's Well. The store As You Like It sells sex toys. In the run-up to this festival season, the guest Wi-Fi password at the Bard's Inn was "RomeoRomeo."

Out-of-town patrons developed a close attachment to the festival and the town itself. A repertory company, OSF runs multiple productions concurrently, and fans stay for days or even weeks to see the full rotation of plays, some more than once. Regulars develop a fondness for certain actors or a particular bed and breakfast. Bert Etling, executive editor of *Ashland.news*, routinely sees obituaries in newspapers nationally that cite the deceased's devotion to OSF. "It's astounding," he said.

In OSF's heyday, Ashland was a theater Shangri-La. Pam Hammond, who was on the board from 2009 to 2016, owns three stores on Main Street, including one she's run since 1993. "The crowd would come down the hill and pour into the store," Hammond said. "And we would have lively discussions about what they'd just seen for the matinee and how they were so excited to head back in the evening."

Introduction by Shakespeare

Garrett first encountered literary drama through "Romeo and Juliet" in seventh-grade English. She fell in love with Shakespeare's rhyme and rhythm, which sounded to her like the soul and jazz that filled her childhood home in Oakland.

Garrett's family gave her a deep appreciation of art. Her uncle was a musician, her aunt a prima ballerina in the Oakland Ballet. Her grandmother took her to opera, symphony, theater. At age 4, Garrett saw her first ballet performance, "Swan Lake," at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. "The seats were so high up in the back that they might as well have been across the Potomac in Virginia," she said. Yet the little girl, fascinated by the twirling dots on the stage, leaned so far forward that her mother, worried she would fall into the next row, pulled her back time and again.

By high school, Garrett was pointed to a career in theater. After graduating from Virginia Union University, she enrolled at CalArts to get a master's in directing. For her thesis, she directed a performance of "The Duchess of Malfi," a 17th-century tragedy by John Webster, a Shakespeare contemporary. It was an unconventional choice at a school known for training in new and experimental works. Garrett, the child of civil-rights activists, said she felt compelled to do it. "I knew that nobody in the outside world would ever ask me to direct a classical text because I'm a Black woman."

'An Elitist Fortress'

Before coming to OSF, Garrett spent more than a year at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, initially as associate artistic director. The artistic director had left days after her arrival, and she had stepped in on an interim basis. It was her first time in a top job.

Garrett almost didn't apply for the OSF post. "I actually said to my husband that there's no way in hell they're going to give me this job," she said. "This is the seat of the American theater, the theater that represents white mainstream culture and white dominance in a way that no other theater does."

Yet Garrett got the nod over Tim Bond, who had been an OSF associate artistic director from 1996 to 2007. Bond, who's now artistic director of TheatreWorks in Silicon Valley, is also Black.

Debate over Garrett versus Bond was contentious, according to several individuals involved. Garrett was viewed as more progressive, which won her both support and opposition. In a speech the previous year at the national conference of StateraArts, which supports women's advancement in the arts, she had cheered the "sea change" represented by a growing number of women leaders in the field — "women warriors," she called them.

"The theater has been and mostly remains an elitist, entitled fortress reserved for those who reside at the top of the status quo," she said.

Displeasure with Garrett's selection didn't end with her hire. Several longtime top-end donors stepped back soon after she arrived, according to Garrett. One rescinded a $4.5 million gift.

During the *Chronicle* visit to Ashland, Garrett hinted that the donor would like to see her gone. "They are still seeking that kind of influence," she said. "And because of who they are, they stand a great chance of being able to influence things."

The 'Bread Basket'

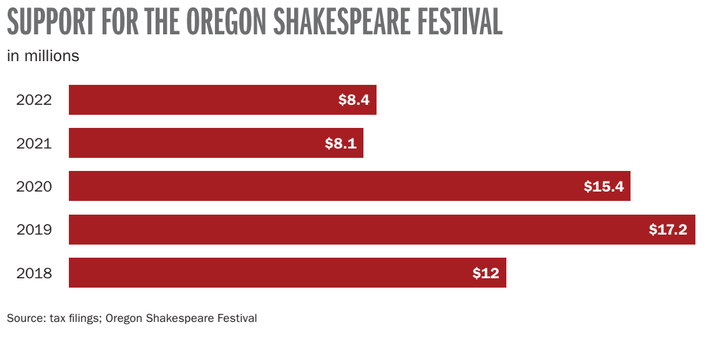
Garrett's inaugural season opened March 6, 2020. Six days later, the organization shuttered as Covid-19 advanced. OSF's stages remained dark until August 2021.

OSF used the time to revamp operations. The festival had invested heavily in art and production, Garrett said, but had neglected its "bread basket" — finance, fundraising, technology. The organization also overhauled its marketing. Previously, promotions aimed almost exclusively at die-hard theater lovers, said Javier Dubon, director of marketing and sales: "The messaging was largely, 'We're making the best art. We have the best actors, the best musicians, the highest production values.'"

Analysis of ticket sales, however, showed that half of patrons were casual theatergoers who came to just one play a year, according to Dubon. OSF began to segment its marketing and fold in campaigns aimed at such ticket buyers — the 35-year-old lawyer planning a trip to celebrate making partner, say, or new college grads on a road trip. A recent OSF email campaign promoted Ashland's spas, a *New York Times*-touted restaurant, and nearby wineries. The town's tourism board could have written the copy, Dubon noted.

Even as it courted younger wealth, OSF moved to make its art more accessible to all. It set ticket prices at $35 to $75, down from the $50 to $120 typical previously. The company introduced a weekend each month in which sign-language translation, captioning, and other accessibility services are offered.

OSF also took aim at what Garrett saw as transactional philanthropy. It eliminated a list of insider perks offered as enticement to join the Artistic Director's Circle, including access to the cast and the director.



Source: tax filings; Oregon Shakespeare Festival

These donors also could choose a play to sponsor by name. Garrett found this practice led to competition between donors eager to back the best play and ensure their production had the highest production values. Also, those same donors often didn't show up on the annual fund rolls. They wanted to invest in their play of choice but were neglecting the organization.

That mind-set had to change, said Anyania Muse, who arrived in 2021 to lead the organization's diversity, equity, inclusion, and access efforts and became interim chief operating officer in January. Otherwise, there was a danger that support from a narrow set of the wealthiest donors could influence play selection and shape the art itself. "There's a model where donorship is ownership, and that's one of the No. 1 things I wanted to infiltrate."

Even as the festival moved to change its relationship with current donors, OSF knew it had to find new supporters excited by the chance to expand access to the theater, Garrett said. "The point of a nonprofit theater is to serve the public good. The focus has to be the public good."

Lost in Translation

Developing a new philanthropic paradigm isn't painless. "It is important to reach out to new audiences and to expand our base and widen it and deepen it," said OSF board chair Diane Yu. "And it's also important for us to remember those who have been so dedicated, so loyal, and so supportive in the past. And it's not easy to touch the bases exactly as you'd like."

Nor does it happen overnight, particularly in a pandemic. "There's a long transition period," said Zannie Voss, director of SMU DataArts at the Texas university. "It just so happens that that transition is happening at a time when there are lingering pandemic effects and inflation and an underperforming stock market. How do you manage all that at the same time?"

If Garrett spelled out her strategy to supporters, it appears to have been lost in translation. Longtime patrons considered it foolish to reduce ticket prices in the face of a fiscal crisis; the move would mean little for out-of-town patrons already paying for hotels and travel. Some were furious when the organization's announcement of new "Change Makers" donation circles indicated that it was doing away with its membership program. As members, they said, they felt a sense of belonging to the festival. Now, OSF seemed only interested in their money.

Supporters increasingly felt shut out. Few locals

Continued on Page 24

Continued from Page 23
remain on the board, as additions to its roster over the years have favored artists and longtime OSF patrons from Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and even New York. The organization's annual report hasn't been produced since 2018. Promised coffees and meetings to discuss the festival's direction didn't materialize.

Paul Barnes, who has lived in Ashland for 40 years, is a freelance director, a co-founder of the Great River Shakespeare Festival in Minnesota, and director of OSF's education program in the 1980s. He said the pandemic's closure of OSF deprived Garrett of a chance to see the organization operate outside of a crisis, learn about destination theater, and recognize the special relationship with the town. "She's from Denver and Berkeley," he said. "Ashland's a different animal."

Worse, Barnes said, Garrett and her team rebuffed offers of help with a high hand. "The underlying message is: You don't count. We don't care. We know what we're doing. And we have nothing to learn from you."

The festival has described itself as an "anti-racist social justice organization," which roiled some supporters.

'She's Not Afraid'

Contributing to the tension was reaction to work that Garrett put on the stage. The slate of eight live plays in 2022, her first full season, included two Shakespeare productions and a Christmas show. Each of the five remaining plays featured themes of racial or gender identity.

"She's not afraid, like all the great writers, of allowing her audiences to sit with discomfort," said Marissa Chibás, a Cuban American writer, actor, and filmmaker who recently joined the OSF board.

Garrett said she hadn't actually changed much at OSF, thanks to the pandemic. She was simply continuing a tradition of progressive innovation. "I'm just pulling the threads of evolution that I inherited," she said.

The festival has long been viewed as a diversity and equity pioneer. Under Bill Rauch, Garrett's predecessor as artistic director, OSF's acting corps became much more racially and ethnically diverse. Also, Rauch launched what became the award-winning "American Revolutions" project in which OSF commissioned new works about crucial moments of change in U.S. history. Productions have included plays about the *Roe* Supreme Court decision, immigration, and oppression of Native Americans.

Garrett's critics, however, found much to dislike. The Shakespeare productions didn't match the quality of the past, they said. Some saw an agenda in her selection of shows. "They were didactic, like medieval morality plays," posted one theatergoer on an Ashland online message board. "Past OSF plays had a message, sure, but were packaged in a highly entertaining delivery. These just felt grim. [They] seemed to feel that we needed to be educated."

"Revenge Song," a raucous musical by Vietnamese-American writer Qui Nguyen about the subjugation of women, drew the most ire. It features a protagonist who is a queer 17th-century French sword fighter and opera singer. The performance's profanity, violence, and sexualized lyrics shocked some audiences.

"Do they want to rub it in my face that they're doing modern and edgy?" said Sulyn Nicholas, a longtime patron and former teacher who lives in Anaheim, Calif. Nicholas recently canceled the season subscription she'd had for more than 40 years, calling it a "trial separation." She says the quality of performances has slipped, and donors are no longer appreciated.

Nicholas had never been to the theater before she happened upon an OSF advertisement in *Sunset* magazine and made her first visit, when she was 30. Before this year, she had seen every production since 1980, often spending parts of the summer in Ashland. Each year, she donated $1,250 almost as a tithe. "Ashland was my religion," she said. The donation also qualified her to buy tickets early — "I wanted to be in the first five rows" — and attend coffees with the cast and management.

"This is my home theater," Nicholas said. "This is my child; I gave birth to this child. It's my money that went into it. And to see the standards go down — it's hurtful."

Lost Faith, Lost Donations

Any new leader introducing change might face such criticism. But at least some of Garrett's critics believe it is her push for equity and inclusion that has triggered a collapse in ticket sales and donations. Supporters have lost either faith in OSF or interest in its plays, they say.

Other theaters are trying to make their work more inclusive without losing their audience, Paul Barnes said. In a letter to OSF board members, he wrote of an alienation among supporters "derived from a real or perceived political agenda and the way in which audiences are made to feel unwelcome, guilty, or racist."

"Moderation," he added, "is essential to helping OSF stay alive."

To some, it appeared that diversity, equity, and inclusion had supplanted great theater as OSF's mission. After George Floyd's murder, Garrett backed a "We See You, White American Theater" letter written by more than 300 Black, Indigenous, and other people of color in the nonprofit and commercial theater. Signed by thousands, including stars such as Lin-Manuel Miranda, it indicts the industry for racism and includes 29 demands for change in casting, funding, leadership, and programming.

OSF wrote a response in which it committed to "becoming an anti-racist organization actively working to eliminate anti-Blackness."

Gary Herman, an Ashland resident who has stopped giving to the theater, pointed to an OSF filing in a National Labor Relations Board case in which the theater describes itself as "a not-for-profit anti-racist social justice organization … that presents plays in repertory."

"Oregon Shakespeare Festival board: You asked me for money, so tell me — what is OSF's mission?" Herman wrote to the *Ashland.news*. "What is OSF's purpose in Ashland going forward?"

War Over Words

Other equity efforts launched nationally since the protests after George Floyd's murder in 2020 have stumbled amid turbulence. Advocates' rhetoric in debates over how to make organizations more inclusive sometimes touches off a war over words that derails the work, said McAfee, the PolicyLink equity advocate. Language "is killing us. That's what it becomes all about."

It's frustrating for Black people to self-censor, but "that's the hand you're dealt," added McAfee, who is Black. "If you do not know how to respect legacy and move on from it, it'll take you out every time," he added.

McAfee said problems often stem from the mutual seduction that happens when leaders of color are hired. Excited by the potential of their partnership, the nonprofit and the job candidate fail to map out the specifics of the change the leader will bring about.

There's also evidence that bias is to blame. People of color who take over historically white institutions often find their abilities and decisions questioned, according to surveys by the Building Movement Project, a social-justice research and support organization. Board relationships appear particularly problematic — 77 percent of people of color who succeeded white leaders said they felt their boards trusted them. Among white executives who take over from white leaders, that number was 93 percent.

Women artists of color are familiar with Garrett's OSF experience, said Chibás, the Cuban American artist and OSF board member. "There's a whole other standard for us — a different kind of scrutiny. The ways in which we have to prove ourselves over and over again — it's just different standards. I have witnessed it, and I have experienced it."

"It's as American as hot dogs and apple pie to blame a brown person or a woman for something that's not going right," says Robert Barry Fleming, executive artistic director at Actors Theatre in Louisville, Ky.

Fleming, who is Black and queer, assumed his post in 2019 within months of Garrett's OSF appointment. Like Garrett, he has lost donors who balk at his vision and performances. "Is all the programming going to be Black and gay?" one donor asked. "Don't forget about the rest of us," another urged.

Regional theaters typically rely heavily on a handful of donors, and those supporters have wielded enormous influence on what stories get told on stage, by whom, and in what way, Fleming said. Ultimately, if the theater's going to engage new audiences and survive, he added, they will have to give up control.

"We just simply don't have agreement about what the theater is for or who has ownership of it," he said. "I don't own Actors Theatre any more than they do. It's a public good."

'Existential Moment'

OSF had anticipated pushback. "You're going to lose donors when you start talking about equity and inclusion," interim COO Muse said. "You're going to lose patrons."

Contributions in 2021 and 2022 reached only about $8 million each year, less than half of the 2019 total and the lowest in a decade. Some of those lost donations were clearly a rejection of Garrett's leadership and art.

But "go woke, go broke" is too simple a narrative, if only because a host of factors have contributed to the decline. Performing-arts groups nationwide are struggling to recover from the pandemic. The Covid crisis sparked some reliable big arts donors to shift their giving to social-service organizations. Audiences, which have been in decline for many years, are staying home in bigger numbers, having grown accustomed to home entertainment. Theaters have closed in Atlanta, Charlotte, and San Diego, among other cities, and many more could follow, according to Teresa Eyring, head of the Theatre Communications Group, a national membership organization. "It's an existential moment," she said.

In Ashland, the pandemic's lingering effects likely kept some OSF theatergoers away during the 2022 season. The festival opened ticket sales in the winter of 2021, a time when Covid cases spiked because of the Omicron variant. Even after the season opened in April, the festival continued

Continued on Page 27

JENNY GRAHAM

STORIES SELDOM HEARD
Before Garrett became artistic director, she directed the festival's production of "How to Catch Creation," by Black playwright Christina Anderson. OSF was considered a pioneer in equity and inclusion before Garrett arrived. "I'm just pulling the threads of evolution that I inherited," she said.

JOE SOFRANKO

A DEBUT CUT SHORT
Garrett leads the first rehearsal of "Romeo and Juliet," which kicked off the festival's 2023 season. It was her first time directing a Shakespeare play in a nearly 30-year career in theater.

Continued from Page 25
to require audiences to wear masks and provide proof of Covid vaccination, which likely discouraged some theatergoers yearning for freedom from pandemic restrictions.

Audiences may be returning for 2023. OSF reports that ticket sales are up, with group sales forecast to eclipse 2019 numbers. Better still, more than 3,000 people have donated to an emergency "Save Our Season" fundraising campaign. Launched just a few weeks ago, it has already netted about $1.5 million, more than half of the $2.5 million needed to finish the season.

Since the campaign's launch, some donors say they have noticed new efforts from OSF to connect with them. "We've got to find ways to rebuild together," said board chair Yu.

Several big donors, however, remain on the sideline, according to Garrett. There were rumors, she said, that some wanted the organization to go broke and rebuild from the ashes.

Garrett was not without supporters in Ashland and on the board. Last fall, the foundation of the Hitz family, longtime OSF supporters, made a five-year, $10 million commitment to help revamp the festival's operations. "I am passionate about Nataki's vision to center artists and art-making in all OSF does," Dave Hitz, an OSF board member and Silicon Valley tech entrepreneur, said in a statement at the time. (He declined a *Chronicle* interview request.)

In conversations with the *Chronicle* in the weeks before her departure, Garrett said she was puzzled by the criticism lobbed at her. The organization perhaps moved too quickly to change some things during the pandemic, she said. The rollout of the Change Makers circles could have been better. The pandemic limited face-to-face conversations, which likely added to the sense of estrangement.

But bias, she said, explains a lot. Culture, politics, and media have depicted Black women for so long in powerless roles — as welfare queens, maids, nannies — that donors and patrons sometimes did not see her as a smart and capable leader, she said.

"Society has said you can't trust me with money," she said. It doesn't matter that Ashland is a progressive town and that some of her critics are die-hard liberals and residents with a history of civil-rights activism, she added. Bias is everywhere and ever-present.

If OSF's future was uncertain, it was clear at that moment that hers was as well. "I'm here at the behest of the board of directors of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival," she said. "I'm prepared to do whatever this organization needs me to do. Stay. Go. Whatever it is. I'm just doing everything I can to help the board find clarity about what that is." ▪

"We just simply don't have agreement about what the theater is for or who has ownership of it."