



Q&A with Bill Rauch (August 2006)

What attracted you to this position?

When I first directed *Handler* at OSF in 2002, I sensed that I had found a new artistic home. Each successive artistic adventure in Ashland has continued to deepen that conviction. I've taken risks in every project that I've undertaken at the Festival, and those risks have been rewarded by the response of a literate and passionate audience. I am moved by the sheer eclecticism of the programming—Shakespeare and other classics, contemporary work, and brand new plays commissioned for our company. I am energized by the scale of the operation: the largest audience and acting company in the country, eleven plays, three stunningly different theater spaces, a wide range of educational programs. There is invaluable legacy and history, including individuals with 20, 30, even 50 years of organizational history, and every year new artists and staff members bring fresh perspectives. It's an immense and immensely difficult job, and I love a challenge. Let's face it: it's one of the most exciting opportunities in the American theater. I'm a very lucky man.

What is your vision for OSF in the next five years?

As a language-based theater, the spoken word must continue to take priority at OSF. I want to continue and also expand the aesthetic diversity of our work, from nuanced traditional productions to bold reinterpretations of classics. The best work in world drama has come out of company settings: Shakespeare, Moliere and Lorca, to name just a handful. OSF's acting company is our single greatest asset. As I nourish its continued artistic growth, the acting company will serve as inspiration for at least one more new play on average per season. Our education programs are crucial. I want audiences to have not only pre-show learning experiences, but also the rare opportunity to reflect on and debate issues of civic urgency that are raised by our work. I also want to launch a major cycle of new plays that explore United States history. As the company that has tackled the entire canon of Shakespeare's history plays (almost three times!), we are in a unique position to create vibrant snapshots of our own country's glorious and troubled history over the last 200-plus years.

Briefly describe your artistic aesthetic.

I love telling stories, and I believe in using all the tools at our disposal to tell those stories in ways that are vibrant, clear and joyously theatrical. As an audience member, I enjoy being transported to another time and place, and no one creates those magical worlds more beautifully than OSF's designers and artisans. I am especially interested in making direct connections between the world of a classic play and the audience's own world. As we together explore what we mean by the word "traditional," I take inspiration from the fact that Shakespeare's plays were originally produced in what were at the time contemporary and local clothing, even for a play set in ancient Rome. Especially with new work, I am interested not only in our shared humanity, but also in the cultural borders that separate us and that lead to sometimes hilarious, sometimes tragic conflicts.

What changes at OSF will audiences see under your leadership?

We will continue to bring cutting-edge directors and designers to Ashland so that our productions of Shakespeare and other classics will be world-class, but audiences can also expect to see an occasional epic text from outside the Western canon: for instance, a Sanskrit, African or Japanese classic. I hope that as a language-based theater, we'll sometimes connect to contemporary youth movements that celebrate language: hip-hop and spoken word, for instance. An increasingly diverse staff and audience base will match the way in which the acting company culturally reflects the United States of the 21st century. The Green Show will evolve, probably offering more eclectic programming, perhaps some of it showcasing the talents of community-based artists from throughout the Western states.

What do you see as the biggest challenges for the organization in the next five years?

We need to continue to attract audiences of all ages, but especially focus on those between 18 and 44. As a destination theater, we must also cultivate multiple generations of families to travel together to Ashland. OSF has state-of-the-art technology, but we must use it judiciously so that the technology supports rather than dominates the spoken word. Most importantly, we need to continue to attract world-class artists as directors, designers and actors to join our ranks. Our location and the long rehearsal periods and runs demanded by the rotating rep pose special challenges for guest artists, so we need to be creative about how we spread the good news that some of the most innovative and vital theater in America is happening in Ashland, Oregon.