OSF’s ‘Antony and Cleopatra’ have an affair to remember

The legendary play by The Bard that opens and ignites the Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s 2015 (and 80th) Outdoor Season in the Allen Elizabethan Theatre is the fiery, romantic, history drama, “Antony and Cleopatra.”

Directed by OSF’s artistic director, Bill Rauch, he considers it Shakespeare’s “most cinematic” creation. Accordingly, Rauch has chosen an approach to the action (in the play’s many “exotic locations”) that’s inspired by the playwright’s original “anachronistic” style of bending historical accuracy to suit his artistic purpose.

Therefore, OSF audiences can expect to see unexpected, interwoven mixtures of design elements that the director describes as “contemporary to our own era and timelessly iconic.”

However, the endlessly charismatic, heedlessly passionate couple at the center of the personal and political storms that swirl about them, still have the power to fascinate us all with their doomed love affair.

And never will you ever experience such a sensually graphic introduction of the infamous pair as the one that visually opens this production, whirling together (initially unseen, but definitely heard) under the sheets in Cleopatra’s ornate, Egyptian bedchamber.

When they literally explode into view from beneath the covers, there’s no doubt that they are mutually-trapped in an obsessive, insatiable sexual relationship that no logic can ever sever. Although Miriam Loeb’s brazenly bashful queen obviously (if not to lover, Derrick Lee Weeden’s hopelessly enamored Mark Antony) has the “upper hand” overall, the give and take between the two continues until the tragic, final curtain falls.

Of course, there’s more to it than the “romantic” connection. There’s power to be had and territories to be ruled together — an increasingly dangerous “game” they’re playing with Antony’s commander-in-chief.

That would be young, determined Octavius (Raffi Barsoumian), head of Rome’s Trimmerate — who will eventually convert the republic into an empire as its first emperor, Agustus Caesar.

Although the now middle-aged Antony was revered after his stirring speech immediately following the assassination of Julius Caesar — and had gone on to earn praise and admiration from both soldiers and citizens of Rome — his shameless, adulterous affair with Cleopatra went on and on, during his existing marriage and after his wife’s death.

Even when he “agreed” for political reasons to remarry Octavius’ lovely, widowed sister, Octavia (Jennie Greenberry), the lure to return to Egypt and the arms of its mesmerizing queen was completely irresistible — and doomed to fail, just like his reputation and career.

Without going into the intricacies of the interwoven series of inevitable, tragic events that ensnared the lovers in an inescapable spider web with no way out but an endgame of despair and death for both, let’s just say that most of you already know what to expect when you see this overall intriguing production.

Along with the vivid, believable portrayals by all the actors in the title and featured roles, there are also many strong performances given by supporting characters throughout the production, particularly one delivered by Jeffrey King as Antony’s loyal follower, Domitius Enobarbus.

Further praise (in various, well-drawn roles) goes to Christina Clark, Brooke Parks, Rex Young, Joseph Anthony Foronda, Michael Hume, Sara Bruner, John Tufts, and Wayne T. Carr.

The remaining, effective ensemble is made up of Armando McClain, Cedric Lamar, Allison Buck, Erica Sullivan, Will Dao, Scott Ripley, Leo Decker, Zlato Rizzioli, and Brent Hinkle

(whose otherwise solid characters’ portrayal is definitely too over-the-top and out-of-place as the “dumb rustic” delivering the deadly snake basket to Cleopatra).

The basically simple scenic design (with some stunning accent pieces) is by Richard L. Hay; lighting design by Jane Cox; music and sound design by Paul James Prendergast; and colorful, decidedly anachronistic costume design by David C. Woollard.

Although OSF’s “Antony and Cleopatra” starts out much stronger than it ends as far as really nailing all aspects of the emotional challenges it faces, the show is still well worth seeing before it ends its run on Oct. 9.

For information and reservations, call (800) 219-8161; or go to osfashland.org

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Antony (Derrick Lee Weeden) seeks refuge in Cleopatra’s (Mirian A. Laube) monument.