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Cal Shakes - The Inside Scoop John Steinbeck's The Pastures of Heaven

By Lou Fancher

You get a lot of bang for your buck when you attend Inside Scoop, Cal Shakes' free, energetic gathering held prior to the opening of each of its four productions.

On May 17th, at Santa Maria Church, an enthusiastic audience enjoyed Peet's coffee, Loard's ice cream, and the opportunity to hear Artistic Director Jonathan Moscone, Dramaturg Dr. Laura Hope, and cast members Amy Kossow and Richard Thieriot speak about John Steinbeck's *The Pastures of Heaven*.

Moscone dove in head first, promising to stand tall and speak loudly to the packed room. But Inside Scoop isn't a dry, academic lecture; a point made instantly evident when a gentleman in the audience shouted out the first question. Moscone, his intro peppered with occasional comments from the crowd, described the theater's ongoing renovations in tantalizing detail, (pistachio trees and undulating rooftops!) managing to entertain and to inform.

The discussion next turned to the first play, a world-premiere adaptation written by Octavio Solis and developed in collaboration with San Francisco's Word for Word Performing Arts Company. Kossow, representing both the cast and Word for Word, explained the play's focus, making it personal by sharing a honeymoon memory of listening to her husband read-and falling in love with-the eight stories at the center of Steinbeck's novel. Thieriot, quickly moving the audience from tender to traumatic, spoke of the multiple characters each actor portrays. "I'm onstage from the beginning to the end," he said, "I play 4 characters without names, and 8 more with." Including Grass, a "character" that provided plenty of laughs and physical humor when Moscone demonstrated the role.

A model of the set and a period costume were on display. Moscone described the set as "a hyper specific world," and, "a three story home in which all the rooms are different." Theater is a uniquely collaborative activity; a point made obvious when Moscone spoke of his original ideas and how set designer Annie Smart altered that vision.

Without suffering a pedantic lecture, the audience learned a vital lesson about theater productions: they require a mountain of planning and a Mississippi-size river of flexibility to achieve their purpose.

The panel completed the presentation with fine details: the workshop process used to develop the script-Moscone: "[We had to] keep Steinbeck in the blood and still tell the story in a theatrical way."-and the student outreach activities held in Salinas.

With time for remaining questions, the audience was told to read, then, not to read the book before seeing the play. Both positions received opinionated support from those attending. Many wanted to know about the play's length, (2.5 hours,) and whether their favorite actors were in the cast. (Yes, with just 11 actors playing the 60-some parts.) Inside Scoop allows anyone who likes to laugh and eat ice cream to climb inside the mind of Moscone and the makings of each Cal Shakes' production. You are bound to emerge, satisfied and impressed with a local treasure. *The Pastures of Heaven* runs June 2-27 at the Bruns Ampitheater in Orinda.

Tickets are available through the California Shakespeare Theater Box Office, 701 Heinz Avenue, Berkeley CA, 510.548.9666, or online at www.calshakes.org.

Inside Scoop
2010 Schedule

Mrs. Warren's Profession, 6/21

Macbeth , 8/2

Much Ado About Nothing, 9/13

Upcoming Inside Scoop events will be held at the Orinda Library, 24 Orinda Way. Seating is limited; please arrive early. Free tickets are handed out at the door beginning at 6:30 p.m., and the event itself begins at 7:00 p.m. Complimentary ice cream and Peet's coffee and tea will be served.

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