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Cal Shakes Turns 40

By Lou Fancher



From left: Ryan Nicole Peters as Ruth, Zion Richardson as Travis, Marcus Henderson as Walter, and Margo Hall as Lena in Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun," directed by Patricia McGregor, playing at Cal Shakes May 21-June 15. Photo Kevin Berne

occasional airplanes passing overhead or cattle on the venue's golden hill backdrop - parade their consistent artistic depth. An array of technical skills has endeared the actors to the Bay Area's knowledgeable, opinionated theater-goers. Crisp, highly-individual directors and rarely-praised-enough costume, set, lighting and sound designers, complete the package. And yet, there's more: Philippa Kelly, Cal Shake's terrific resident dramaturg, Susie Falk, managing director and inspiring "Peet's Coffee & Tea!" prompter, Clive Worsley, director of artistic learning and former Town Hall Theatre director, and a staff one must resort to a cliché to describe, by using the term "crackerjack."

If not every production is a bell-ringer, it's more a matter of personal taste than timid direction or lack of talent, which is exactly as professional theater should be.

"Every year, as we figure out a new season of work up at the Bruns, I want to provide as surprising and dynamic a roster of works of theater for as many people as possible," Moscone said, in a season announcement. "I'm thrilled to present this eclectic and varied slate of plays as we move forward with our commitment to making theater that resonates with the broad community of diverse audiences throughout the Bay Area."

Starting off the season, Patricia McGregor returns to direct "A Raisin in the Sun," after recent stints directing the company's "A Winter's Tale" (2013) and "Spunk" (2012). The play, a rigorous exploration of prejudice, poverty and racism set in 1950's Chicago, opened at Broadway's Ethel Barrymore Theatre on March 11, 1959, and ran for 350 performances over 19 months. Marking the first time a play written by an African American woman was produced on Broadway, Hansberry's contribution to playwriting offers indisputable evidence of the enduring themes - many of them troubling - in America's history.

"Slapstick" is a word frequently applied to The Comedy of Errors, one of Shakespeare's earliest comedies about twins separated at birth. Director Aaron Posner has proven he's unafraid of strong choices (his 2009 "A Midsummer Night's Dream" spiraled in unexpected fashion) and adept at discovering new ways to tell oft-told stories. With program notes and casting to come, it's all fingers

Cal Shakes is getting ready to prove that turning 40 is glorious.

Orinda's outdoor Bruns Amphitheater will bristle during California Shakespeare Theater's 40th anniversary season, running May 21 to September 28. Artistic Director Jonathan Moscone recently announced the season: Lorraine Hansberry's American classic, "A Raisin in the Sun;" William Shakespeare's "The Comedy of Errors;" George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion;" and The Bard's "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

Why bristle? Because audiences who've sipped Sauvignon Blanc while fanning themselves in July's heat, or bundled into a blanket on a late September evening, know that true temperature-testing occurs onstage, as much as in the seats. Led by Moscone's boisterous charge towards theater that engages, enriches and even agonizes or enrages human imagination, the atmosphere isn't just "outdoor theater," it's fearlessly so.

In classic and contemporary masterworks, the acting company - adept avoiders (or swallows) of bugs and overcomers of auditory conflicts with

crossed that associate artists (Danny Scheie, Dan Hiatt, L. Peter Callender, Catherine Castellanos, to name just four) will be on the playbill.

In July, Moscone goes musical with "Pygmalion," George Bernard Shaw's most famous comedy - and the basis for the play and subsequent film, "My Fair Lady." Attending pre-show "Grove Talks" prior to any performance is a fantastic way to get a foothold on the productions. But this year's "Inside Tech" rehearsal (the familiar "Inside Scoop" talk normally held in the Orinda Library), with Moscone and the entire cast (hearts beat for associate artists Stacey Ross, James Carpenter, Julie Eccles and more) and the crew for "Pygmalion," on Friday, July 25, from 7 to 9 p.m. at the amphitheater, is the summer's best free - yes, that's no typo: free and it comes with ice cream - ticket.

The company will conclude the season with director Shana Cooper and choreographer Erika Chong Shuch joining forces to spin out "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Cooper and Shuch have both worked with the company before and the promise of their partnership turns the bitter thought of the season's end into sweet reward.

In addition to the usual ticketing and calendar information, the website offers useful tips about amenities, special events, age-appropriate productions (children under age four are not permitted) and even how to access up-to-date weather tweets. For information, visit www.calshakes.org.

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