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New Artistic Director Highlights Diversity, Authenticity for 2016's Cal Shakes Season

By Lou Fancher



Eric Ting Photo provided

Commitment, authenticity, consistency and excitement. "Much Ado About Nothing," "Fences," "You Never Can Tell," "Othello." William Shakespeare, August Wilson, George Bernard Shaw and...Ting.

Cal Shakes audiences will this season experience the four named qualities in four productions coming from three playwriting masterminds and the company's new Artistic Director, Eric Ting.

The 2016 season of outdoor theater in the Bruns Amphitheater marks a new journey set into motion when former artistic director Jonathan Moscone departed after 15 years to become chief of civic engagement with Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. His final act in 2015 was to select three of this season's four works. Ting chose Shakespeare's classic "outsider" play, "Othello," to cap the Main Stage season.

In an interview, the recent Bay Area transplant and Obie-winning director says that he's "dazzled by the depth of artistry" in the Bay Area. Arriving with his wife, Meiyin Wang and their young daughter, Frankie Ting, he anticipates finding family.

"I talk a lot about the family you're born into and the family you make. Theater is an act of making family. And not just at the Bruns where audiences forge community through the shared experience of an evening under the stars, but everywhere that Cal Shakes reaches: we seek to build bridges, we seek to make family."

The anticipation of working with artists familiar to Cal Shakes audiences leaves him "giddy," he claims. But new faces are greeted with equal enthusiasm as he observes director Jackson Gay's rehearsals of a streamlined, contemporary version of "Much Ado." Ting arrives after 11 years with the Long Wharf Theatre and a reputation for brave forays into the classical theater canon. His Obie Award-winning play, "We Are Proud to Present a Presentation..." examines African genocide; a spirited "Macbeth" set in the Vietnam era challenges and champions new perspectives.

Even so, Ting seeks to reassure people coming to Cal Shakes that his commitment is to presenting classical plays "in a vital urgent, human way." He's learned that the entire experience - shared food, wine and theater under the stars - is as potent to audiences as are the quality of the acting and the productions. "There's something about the act of exposing ourselves to the natural world like that: to me, it suggests a unique willingness to engage with the irreducible human experience. I have such admiration for our audiences and can't wait to meet them this season," Ting says.

"Comforting" is an apt but odd word to apply to Ting, a theater maverick. And while the word is true of his personality and his dedication to maintaining the company's high standards are striking, genuine and welcome, he expresses restlessness when given a chance to speak on diversity.

"I'm proud of the work that I'm seeing across the Bay Area and on Cal Shakes' stage in terms of representing a plurality of perspectives - though even here issues arise like the recent controversy surrounding 'The Mikado' that suggest we still have our own complicated challenges to navigate - but diversity on stage is only half the battle. I think our greatest challenge as a field is what I see when I look out at our audiences."

Ting says theater will be richest when the audience reflects the same diversity theater companies strive to present onstage. "And to that end, we all have far to go. Our very society has been built upon the idea that a collision of different points of view creates a space for meaningful discourse; those opportunities have been slowly eroding away (be it by technology, or rising costs of living, or the surfacing of long suppressed fears) and we find ourselves once more in polarizing times. The theater is one of the last public forums in our world, and we pursue diversity in our audiences not because we want to share theater with more people, but because diversity enriches our lives, enlarges us, makes us more whole."

This, more than any play selected or actor cast, might be Ting's legacy at Cal Shakes. And if it is, the much-admired company will shine brighter than the full moon that at times illuminates actors onstage in the Orinda hills.

Following "House of Cards" writer Kenneth Lin's and Gay's take on "Much Ado" (May 25-June 19), director Raelle Myrick-Hodges brings to life Wilson's Pulitzer prize-winning "Fences," the story of Troy Maxson, a former Negro League baseball player whose family is pulled into his downward spiral (July 6-July 31). Shaw's wit and women challenging society's constraints are unleashed by the return of Lisa Peterson (Peterson helmed "King Lear" (2007) and "The Winter's Tale" (2002), among others) to direct "You Never Can Tell" (Aug. 10-Sept. 4). The season wraps with "Othello," last seen at Cal Shakes in 2005.

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