



RIVER PLAYS: Oregon's Rogue River offers tickets to everything from blissful float trips to wave-tossed adrenaline rushes.

Ashland's Curtain Call

The home of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival stages natural drama

By Paul Hodgins

When normal people find themselves in a dire situation—say, stuck on a rock in a raging river in a kayak that's quickly filling with water—they either panic or take bold action. But when a theater critic is placed in the same circumstances, this is his first thought: *Well, I'm finally meeting a fate that countless actors and directors have wished, dreamed, and prayed for.*

Serves me right, I mused, as I pondered my predicament on the Rogue River in Oregon one hot August afternoon. My wife, Anne, and our trusty guide, Nicco, were quickly receding into the distance on their big, safe rubber raft. My decision to go for the frisson of the kayak was seeming more and more like a badly mismatched bit of casting: nerdy writer as rugged outdoorsman.

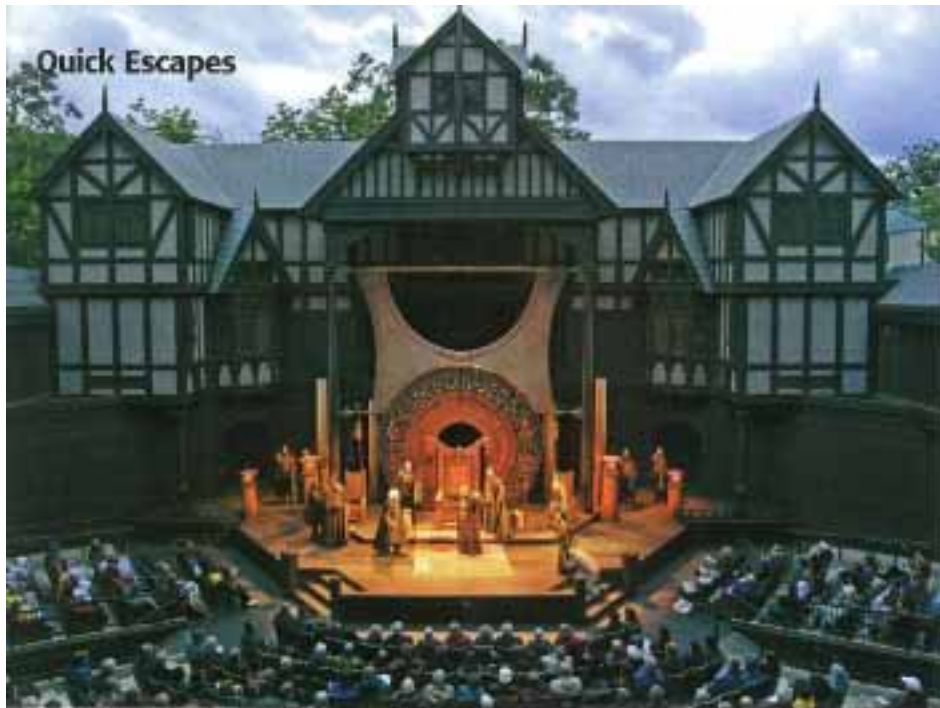


HISTORIC SETS: Ashland's downtown frames the history and heritage of the southwestern Oregon community.

Fortunately, I followed Nicco's shouted directions, wriggling my hips to and fro and flailing madly with the paddle. My kayak finally freed itself, but the process was as slow, as clumsy, and as painful as a community college production of *Death of a Salesman*.

Theatergoing is the principal reason to travel to Ashland, Oregon. The picturesque town, nestled in the Rogue River Valley just 14 miles north of the California border, is the home of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, one of the oldest and biggest professional nonprofit theater companies in the country. During a nine-month season of 11 plays by Shakespeare and others, the festival presents more than 780 performances, which draw some 120,000 theater lovers.

As the theater critic for the *Orange County Register*, I'd attended the festival



OPENING SCENE: Actors at Ashland's Oregon Shakespeare Festival perform outdoors on the Elizabethan Stage, one of the complex's three theaters.

many times. During this trip last August, I caught Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost*, Christopher Marlowe's dark and seldom-performed *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, and Octavio Solis's provocative new play, *Gibraltar*—three enjoyable evenings of theater. But once a theater buff has seen a play—or two or three—what then?

Of course, Ashlanders have been coping with that familiar tourist query since the Shakespeare Festival began in 1935. The popularity of the surrounding valley and hills predates the festival by many decades. This corner of Oregon, more Mediterranean than soggy Pacific

Northwest, has advertised itself as a distinctive destination ever since the waning of the gold fever that swept the region beginning in 1852. "The Italy of Oregon!" proclaimed *West Shore* magazine in 1883. So on this trip, in between plays, we decided to sample some of the region's nontheatrical attractions.

We began our visit at the Ashland Springs Hotel in the heart of town. Built in 1925 as the Lithia Hotel, a spa where one could sample the mineral-rich waters of Lithia Springs, the cream-colored nine-story art deco dowager remains the tallest building in Ashland. It's adjacent to the Shakespeare Festival's complex, which

includes the Elizabethan Stage, Angus Bowmer Theatre, and New Theatre.

We studied tourist brochures as we enjoyed some of Oregon's viticultural bounty at the hotel's coolly elegant restaurant, Larks Home Kitchen Cuisine. A glass of King Estate pinot gris clarified our plans for the next few days. Inspired by our Larks experience to sample local wineries, we decided to spend our first day exploring the countryside.

We began at the Rogue Creamery in Central Point, the perfect place to stock the picnic basket. Sicilian cheesemaker Tom Vella founded the creamery in 1935. He and his sons were among the first to bring the secrets of European artisanal cheese to the United States.

The creamery's small storefront is a veritable Eden for cheese worshippers: several kinds of blue cheese (a Rogue Creamery specialty) and cheddars flavored with chipotle, pesto, garlic, and other delights, along with staples such as canned crab, salmon, and oysters. Many cheeses are available to sample. We especially enjoyed the dreamy blue-veined Oregonzola.

Many of southern Oregon's best wineries line Route 238, a sinuous byway that passes through undulating hills and the Applegate River Valley as it meanders from Medford to Grants Pass.

Valley View Winery, founded by Oregon wine pioneer Frank Wisnovsky, features popular varietals such as

Ashland's Perennial Productions

What Food These Morsels Be

Chateaulin: Locals and theatergoers are drawn to this landmark's belle époque dining room by the old-school French menu. It's loaded with classics such as escargot, pâté, and crepes, along with some contemporary dishes that feature fresh local foods such as pan-seared sturgeon. Entrées: \$19–\$31. (541) 482-2264.

Peerless: With an emphasis on fresh regional ingredients, the menu features dishes such as halibut topped with tiny breast of quail, savory corn quinoa cheesecake, and a trio of sorbets with unorthodox yet memorable flavors. Entrées: \$22–\$32. (541) 488-6067.

Ashland Bakery Café: Diners can dig into stacks of whole grain blueberry pancakes, thick slabs of locally smoked Canadian bacon, and biscuits better than Mom made. Entrées: \$5–\$13. (541) 482-2117.

Good Night, Sweet Prince

Ashland Springs Hotel: Many of the rooms in this art deco building have sweeping views of the valley. The hotel is located next to the festival grounds. Rates: \$129–\$209 in summer. (541) 488-1700.

The Coolidge House: Sitting rooms and well-appointed baths are featured in many of the suites in this Victorian bed-and-breakfast, which is two blocks from theaters. Rates: \$95–\$205. (800) 655-5522.

The Palm: With Cape Cod-style bungalows, attractive gardens, and a small pool, this budget-priced motor court is a charming throwback. It's about a mile from the Shakespeare Festival. Rates: \$72–\$145. (877) 482-2635. —PH