


Sunset

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SEPTEMBER 2005

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TRAVEL

AND RECREATION



SMALL TOWN

Ashland onstage

The West's most famous theater town will still surprise you

BY BONNIE HENDERSON

It's a late-summer night's dream: Dancers whirl to music that's part Renaissance and part rock and roll, while an audience gathers, delighted with the show before them, anticipating the more formal theater to come. This is the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Green Show, which runs each night before the festival's evening performances. It's one of the spectacles that make experiencing theater here better than just about anywhere else in the country.

"Here" is Ashland—the West's Stratford-upon-Avon moved to the Siskiyou Mountains of southwestern Oregon. Even if you've attended theater in Ashland often, even if you think you know the town well, visit this year and you will probably be surprised. Increasingly diverse and sophisticated, Ashland in 2005 has a lot of secrets up its ruffled Elizabethan sleeves.

The Green Show has its charms, but it was Shakespeare—specifically, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*—that clinched it for Kimberley Barry. She was a 19-year-old English major

Dancers perform at the Green Show, Oregon Shakespeare Festival's pretheater entertainment.

Stage strategies

These days there's a lot more to theater in Ashland than the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. And there's a lot more to the festival than just Shakespeare. How do you make the most of your Ashland stay?

■ **Personalize your festival experience.** Depending on the month, OSF puts on four to nine classic and contemporary plays for you to choose among. They're staged in three very different venues—the outdoor 1,190-seat Elizabethan Stage/Allen Pavilion (open mid-Jun to Oct 9), the indoor 601-seat Angus Bowmer Theatre, and the indoor New Theatre, seating 270 to 360. Treat yourself to at least one play in each setting.

■ **Think timing.** Tickets and lodging are cheaper in spring and late fall. In any case, get tickets as early as possible for best seats.

■ **Don't be afraid of Bill.** Sure, Shakespeare's language is archaic, but the stories are timeless. Order this year's copy of *Illuminations* (\$11 plus postage) from the festival box office (see "Touring Ashland," page 42). The deep background the guide provides for each play is essential reading for Shakespeare neophytes.

■ **Branch out.** Productions at Oregon Cabaret Theatre and Oregon Stage Works will add to your experience.

■ **Making it a long weekend?** Remember that the Oregon Shakespeare Festival offers plays every day except Monday, but other companies stage plays then.



when she first visited Ashland 31 years ago to see some plays. "I know this sounds corny," she says from her sun-colored nook of an office overlooking Lithia Park, "but it changed my life. To see and hear the language—it was just transforming."

Today Barry is production stage manager of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the most famous of Ashland's growing roster of theater companies.

Ashland does seem to have the power to change people's lives. But the town, too, has changed. Not so long ago, it was a quaint-hip college town.

Today it's less quaint and more glamorous. Some 120,000 people come here every year specifically to attend plays. Downtown holds 30 art galleries. And Ashland restaurants like *Amuse pique* the attention of food critics nationwide.

"Ashland used to have this rustic feel to it," Barry reminisces. "I don't think anyone would call it rustic anymore."

Cabaret in church

It's the Oregon Shakespeare Festival—which celebrates its 70th birthday this year with productions of Shakespeare and August Wilson, among others—



Ashland days, (from top): Artisans' market across from Lithia Park; a quiet bridge stroll in the park; flag is unfurled at the Elizabethan Stage.

that put Ashland on the map. But one sign of the new Ashland is that theater options now extend beyond OSF. Drawn by the town's rep, other actors and crews perform in small venues around town. OSF alumni start new projects on their own. As a result, upstart theater companies have brought in an even greater richness—and year-round performance opportunities. Oregon Cabaret Theatre stages musicals, revues, and comedies in a nightclub-style theater crafted from a former Baptist church. Founded in 2002, Oregon Stage Works has its home in the reviving Railroad District; it focuses on works by American playwrights.

Still, for all the newfound sophistication, it's not hard to find places where the earlier character shines through. Ashland's lithium-infused springwaters were prized by Native Americans and, later, white vacationers for their purported medicinal qualities: The sulphuric water still bubbles out of a fountain in the town's central square, Lithia Plaza. Nearby, the Lithia Artisans Market, open weekends through October, preserves Ashland's counterculture spirit with vendors selling art, clothing, jewelry, and items for the home.

It's the mix of old and new, home-spun and sophisticated, that makes the place work—for residents and visitors too. "I love living here," says Jim Giancarlo, who first came to Ashland to dance at the Shakespeare festival, then left the festival to help launch Oregon Cabaret Theatre. "I feel safe, unhassled. It has all the charm and ease of a small town, but it's much more sophisticated than other small towns."

Meanwhile, back at the OSF courtyard, the Terra Nova Consort and Dance Kaleidoscope are wrapping up the night's Green Show. It's time for *Twelfth Night* or *Room Service*, or maybe time to head over to see cabaret and, later, mingle with actors offstage at Martino's Lounge. There are almost too many ways to have a great night. But that's Ashland. ●

Touring Ashland

Ashland is off Interstate 5 about 14 miles southeast of Medford. For more information, contact the Ashland Chamber of Commerce (www.ashlandchamber.com or 541/482-3486).

Theater

Oregon Cabaret Theatre. Musicals, revues, and comedies are staged in a nightclub-style theater. This fall: *Five Course Love* (Sep 14–Nov 6), *SantaLand Diaries* (Nov 16–Dec 31); both plays from \$17. First and Hargadine Streets; www.oregoncabaret.com or 541/488-2902.

Oregon Shakespeare Festival. The Tony Award-winning festival is one of the oldest and largest professional regional repertory theater companies in the U.S.; its outdoor stage is the oldest existing full-scale Elizabethan stage in the Western Hemisphere. Fall's lineup includes *Richard III* (through Oct 30), *Mo'Nai's Black Bottom* (through Oct 30), and *Room Service* (through Oct 29); all three plays from \$22. 15 S. Pioneer St.; www.osfashland.org or 541/482-4331.

Oregon Stage Works. Concentrates on contemporary American playwrights. Among the plays this fall and winter: *Copenhagen* (Sep 15–Oct 9) and *Ebenezer, Who?* (Nov 25–Jan 1); both plays from \$17. A Street Marketplace, 185 A St.; www.oregonstageworks.org or 541/482-2334.

Shopping

Lithia Artisans Market. 10–6 Sat, 11–5 Sun, through Oct. Calle Guanajuata Way, across from Lithia Park; 541/858-7187.



Mt. Ashland Inn

Dining

Amuse. Locally procured foods, elegantly prepared and served in the bite-size spirit of the French *amuse-bouche*. \$\$\$; dinner Tue–Sun. 15 N. First St.; 541/488-9000.

Chateaulin Restaurant. Intimate French restaurant has long been a local favorite for before- or after-theater dining or drinks. \$\$\$\$; dinner daily. 50 E. Main St.; 541/482-2264.

Macaroni's Ristorante & Martino's Lounge. Festival cast and crew often gather at Martino's Lounge—upstairs from the restaurant, which is right off the festival courtyard—for light late-night meals and drinks. \$\$; lunch and dinner daily. 58 E. Main; 541/488-4420.

Standing Stone Brewing Co. Good microbrews and pub food. \$\$; lunch and dinner daily. 101 Oak St.; 541/482-2448.

Lodging

Ashland Springs Hotel. The 70 guest rooms in this restored landmark hotel have a 1920s elegance with the requisite modern amenities, from data ports to mini fridges. From \$109.

212 E. Main; www.ashland-springshotel.com or 888/795-4545.

Country Willows Bed & Breakfast Inn. This comfortable country home offers rural restfulness, as well as a swimming pool and hot tub, barely 10 minutes from the theaters downtown. 5 rooms, 3 suites, and 1 cottage from \$115. 1313 Clay St.; www.countrywillowsinn.com, 800/945-5697, or 541/488-1590.

Mt. Ashland Inn. A woody retreat in the mountains about 25 minutes south of downtown Ashland. 5 suites from \$160 (full breakfast included). 550 Mt. Ashland Rd.; www.mtashlandinn.com, 800/830-8707, or 541/482-8707.

The Peerless Hotel and Restaurant. High ceilings and antique furnishings lend vintage charm to 4 rooms and 2 suites in this comfy restored hotel in the historic Railroad District. From \$143. 243 Fourth St.; www.peerlessrestaurant.com, 800/460-8758, or 541/488-1082.