

PLAYING IN ASHLAND

A mother-daughter road trip reveals why this Oregon town makes a perfect summer destination **BY LESLIE FORSBERG**

“Look ... We’re in a forest!” I tell my teenage daughter, Kirsten, entranced by the backstage magic that can transform an ordinary room into a leafy bower through lighting effects.

Magic? She brings me gently back to earth: “Mom, it’s just a gobo. I know all about those from my tech theater class.”

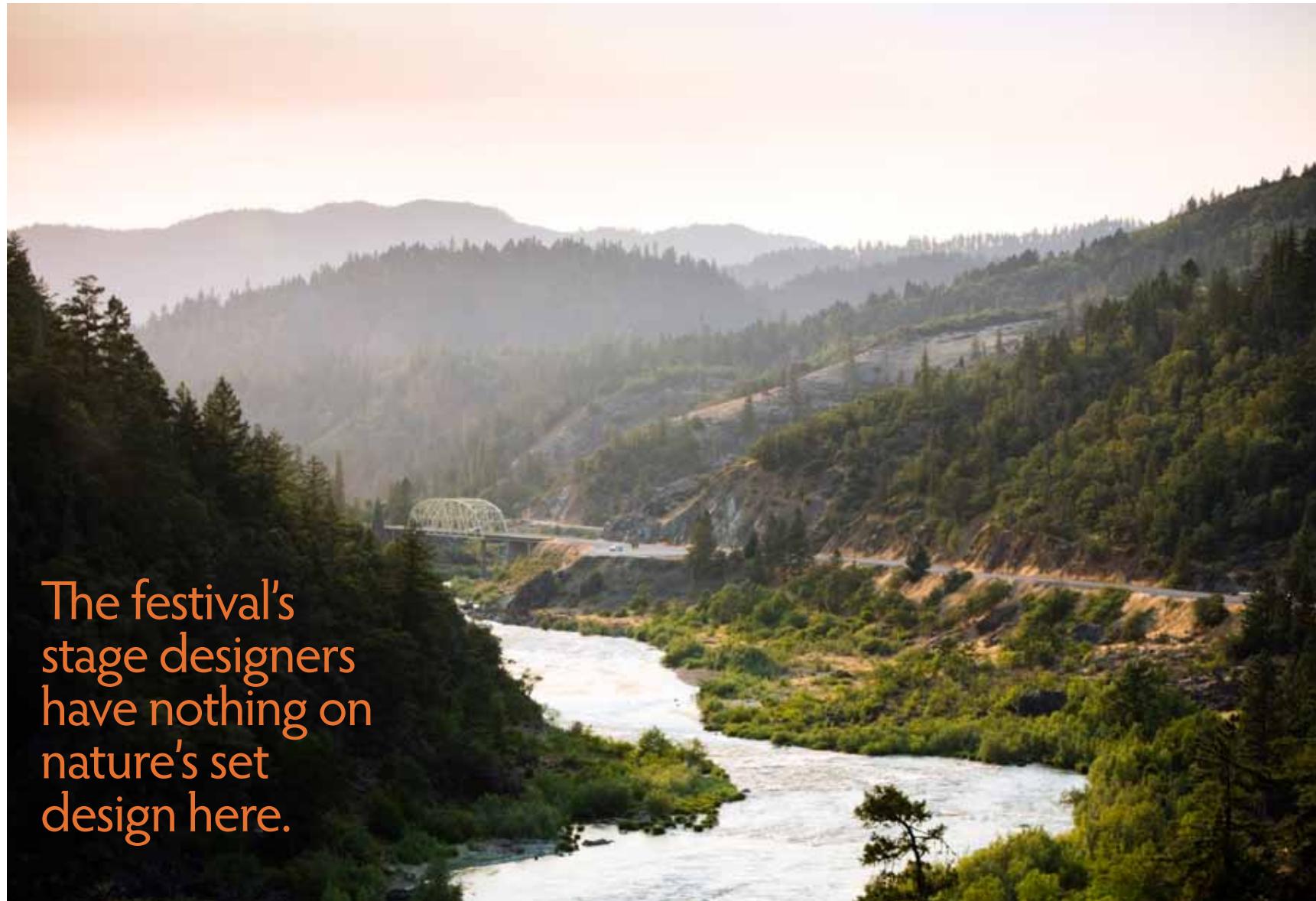
I wouldn’t know a gobo from a gazebo (the former is a template attached to a lighting source), but on our backstage tour at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, I’m learning, though perhaps not fast enough for my theater-loving progeny. I’m here to savor this experience with my 15-year-old. As we follow our guide into the Elizabethan Stage, patterned after Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, I’m tempted to quote the Bard himself. Perhaps something along the lines of, “Come ... sit by my side, and let the world slip, we shall ne’er be younger.”

Ashland is a playground for theater lovers and for the young-at-heart. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival, celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, produces 11 plays on four stages, including the royal dowager Elizabethan Stage—where a blanket of sunshine enrobes audiences during summer days and starry skies add to the drama at night—and the cocky young New Theatre, which spices new productions with high-tech stage wizardry.

No amount of wizardry could do what our tour guide is suggesting, though. Much more than a guide, Jeffrey King is also a leading actor.



Open to the sky, the 1,200-seat Elizabethan Stage is where you’ll delight in *Twelfth Night*, *Henry IV, Part One* and *The Merchant of Venice*.



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Nearby Ashland, the Rogue River is known for its whitewater, salmon runs and beautiful scenery.

“When we’re backstage we pay close attention to the monitor, which shows everything going on onstage,” he says. “I sometimes run offstage to see myself in the monitor, but I’ve never been fast enough . . . yet,” he deadpans. His quip draws groans, but a delighted smile from Kirsten, who is still in the anything’s-possible stage of life.

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival is just one of many Ashland area attractions that draw visitors from the Northwest and beyond. The burgeoning theater scene—which extends beyond OSF to several regional theaters—brings both arts patrons and artists, who display their works in the town’s boutiques. Gingerbread-trimmed Victorian B&Bs and a handful of historic buildings housing restaurants add to the artsy atmosphere.

The festival’s stage designers have nothing on nature’s set design here: The town is embraced in a tight valley in the velvety Siskiyou Mountains just north of the California border, with Ashland Creek in the lead role. The

stream burbles through the 93-acre Lithia Park, alongside forested glades, a Japanese garden and a fragrant rose garden, before glinting past streamside restaurants. For all its sylvan charms, the stream is just a character actor compared to the nearby Rogue River, one of the most exciting Western rivers for whitewater rafting.

Kirsten and I have already experienced the Rogue’s thrills on an earlier trip, clutching the edges of our rubber raft as it bounced through churning maelstroms. This time around we saddle up our sedan and plot a more sedate westward course into the nearby Applegate Valley, once a pioneer trail route. Along the way, the 1850s Gold Rush town of Jacksonville is a fun stop, with historic brick buildings, shops and galleries to explore. Jacksonville is also the home of the Britt Festivals—major performing-arts concerts held in the summer on a hillside estate ringed with ponderosa pines.

The road through the 50-mile-long Applegate Valley rambles past weathered barns and farms where cattle and horses graze on lush fields backed by pine and fir forests. This region still has plenty of ranches, but we can see its future as we drive farther west, where vineyards comb the hillsides. Applegate Valley—Oregon’s newest wine appellation—is sheltered from coastal weather, and its climate is warmer and drier than most of Oregon, offering just the right conditions for growing; there are more than a dozen wineries in the valley, with more opening all the time.

Yet the tug of history is strong here, and we feel as though we’ve stepped back in time at Pennington Farms’ Country Bakery, where we sample just-made rhubarb jam and buy pastries. At Butte Creek Mill in Eagle Point, north of Medford, Kirsten and I are delighted with the whirring, thumping Rube Goldberg–like contraption that grinds grain into flour for sale in the adjacent old-fashioned country store. “Look! There must be a bazillion things to buy,” Kirsten says, perusing old-time wares such as lanterns and licorice, tinned coffee and maple syrup stacked to the ceiling.

The store looks like it would be right at home on the set of *The Music Man*, OSF’s first-ever musical (in 2009), which we attend that evening. OSF’s musicals lend a frothy playfulness to the heavyweight Shakespearean dramas on the playbill. This year’s offering, *She Loves Me*, is based on the same play that inspired the film *You’ve Got Mail!*

Our awareness heightened by our backstage tour, we’re just as fascinated by the technical magic of the theater—the subtle visual creep of colors into the formerly gray town as the librarian succumbs to the charms of the roguish band leader. It’s much like the way we’re succumbing to the charms of Ashland—and how traveling with a teenage daughter colors the world for both explorers. **■**

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2010 SEASON AT OSF

American Night

June 29–Oct. 31/New Theatre

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

Through July 4/Angus Bowmer Theatre

Hamlet

Through Oct. 30/Angus Bowmer Theatre

Henry IV, Part One

June 2–Oct. 9/
Elizabethan Stage | Allen Pavilion

Pride and Prejudice

Through Oct. 31/Angus Bowmer Theatre

Ruined

Through Oct. 31/New Theatre

She Loves Me

Through Oct. 30/Angus Bowmer Theatre

The Merchant of Venice

June 3–Oct. 10/
Elizabethan Stage | Allen Pavilion

Throne of Blood (World Premiere)

July 21–Oct. 31/Angus Bowmer Theatre

Twelfth Night

June 1–Oct. 8/
Elizabethan Stage | Allen Pavilion

Well

Through June 18/New Theatre

For more information and ticket availability, visit www.osfashland.org or call (800) 219-8161.