

# THE REAL STAR OF OSF FINALLY MAKES HIS ENTRANCE

**ASHLAND, ORE.:** Over the centuries, Shakespeare's politics have proven harder to pin down than his biography. Do his histories favor the Tudors because he was a sincere royalist or because he knew where his bread was buttered? Can we read between his lines for veiled protests against the powers and principalities of his age?

Scholars have long recognized *Macbeth* as a response to the infamous Gunpowder Plot, a purported Catholic conspiracy to blow up Parliament and King James I's family in one fell swoop in 1605. King James, after all, was among Banquo's heirs, and Macbeth's doom could be read as a warning to would-be assassins. What's more, the "equivocator" of the drunken Porter's speech, who "could swear in both the scales against either scale," has long been seen as a reference to the alleged doublespeak of Father Henry Garnet, a Jesuit priest tried and executed for his supposed role in the plot.

**Bill Cain's** *Equivocation*—debuting at Ashland's **Oregon Shakespeare Festival** through October and slated for L.A.'s **Geffen Playhouse** in November and **Manhattan Theatre Club** next February—meets these implications about the Bard's integrity head-on.

"In a time when men and women of conscience were routinely executed, Shakespeare did very well for himself," notes Cain, a Jesuit priest who ran the **Boston Shakespeare Company** for seven years before creating the short-lived TV series "Nothing Sacred" and the play *Stand-Up Tragedy*. "He wrote in support of a corrupt regime, which used torture for its political purposes—and he prospered."

Such an irreverent peek behind the curtain is a definite departure for Oregon Shakes, where this season's productions of *Henry VIII* and *All's Well That Ends Well* capped the 38-play canon for a

generation of festival regulars. In fact, *Equivocation* marks the first time in OSF's 74-year history that the Bard himself has been a character on stage.

"It's an enormous burden," confesses **Anthony Heald**, who duly grew a goatee for the part. "Playing Shakespeare at the Shakespeare Festival—I've just had to put it out of my head."

OSF artistic director **Bill Rauch**, who directed *Equivocation*, had no such qualms.

"I was actually really excited about having Shakespeare as a character here," says Rauch, mentioning a few similarly conceived plays—**Amy Freed's** *The Beard of Avon*, **Robert Brustein's** *The English Channel*—that had crossed his desk. The urgency and relevance of Cain's piece set it apart.

"We are formed by Shakespeare," says Cain. "When we base so much of our culture on his work, are we getting the subliminal message, 'Disguise yourself, hide your convictions, become invisible?'"

Shakespeare's elusiveness isn't just the animating theme of *Equivocation*; it has also been its central challenge. Says Heald, "He was very good at keeping himself in the background, so it's really fruitless to try to read from the plays who Shakespeare was or what he believed." —*Rob Weinert-Kendt*



JENNY GRAHAM

Anthony Heald, left, and Jonathan Haugen in *Equivocation*.