

Juneteenth crowd repudiates racism in Ashland

By Julie Akins / For the Tidings

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Its idealistic goals given extra impact after an ugly incident Friday, the Juneteenth commemoration on Monday in Ashland drew an enthusiastic, highly engaged overflow audience surrounding the Courtyard Stage on the Bricks at the hub of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival campus.

Part revival, part activism and fully OSF, the observance of the end of slavery in the U.S. played to hundreds who clapped, rose to their feet and shouted in agreement as actors and dancers performed and shared the theme, “What was then is now.”

Juneteenth marks the arrival in 1865 on June 19 of Union soldiers into Galveston, Texas, where troops informed slaves they were now free. OSF has hosted a Juneteenth observance since 1998 to celebrate African-American freedom, education and achievement. Proceeds support the Juneteenth Scholarship Fund.

The commemoration comes just days after OSF actor Christiana Clark, who hosted the performance, was shouted at by a presumed racist who yelled at her as she walked on A street between 5th and 6th in Ashland’s Railroad District.

“In Oregon I can kill you and be out in a day and a half,” Clark reported a bicyclist said to her in an incident witnessed by closeby residents. “Look it up. The KKK is alive and well here.”

Less than three days later at the long-planned Juneteenth event, performers used current quotes and incidents as well as past testimony to illustrate that race relations remain strained. OSF Community Producer Claudia Alick told the audience her history of growing up in Missoula, Montana, and receiving racist remarks daily. “It’s still happening daily to people. But not everyone is beautiful and articulate and can talk about it.”

Clark took to social media and described the incident. The video had more than 65,000 views in 24 hours and had climbed to 149,000 views on Monday afternoon. In it, in part, she urged people to attend Juneteenth and show community support. Southern Oregon University officials also encouraged the SOU community to come out and show support for Clark and all people in Ashland.

“We have to do this publicly and regularly. It is necessary regularly,” said Alick, referring to what happened to Clark this year and a shooting in a black church in Charleston, South Carolina, in which nine people were killed the day before Juneteenth last year. “Last year a white man went into a black church and shot people. There is a reason every year and every day.”

Ashland Police Chief Tighe O’Meara looked on Monday as the names of every black person killed, many in police violence, was read out loud. A song was sung as each name was read and the phrase, “I could be next” stated. Many in the audience appeared visibly shaken and stood, crying, in silence.

“I’m glad for the turnout and the support in this community,” said O’Meara. The police department earlier issued a statement on its Facebook page about Friday’s incident, saying in part: “A member of our community was subjected to some awful hate speech while walking her dog in Ashland. Please know that the entire Ashland Police Department stands with you and all members of the African American community in decrying this vile encounter. At the same time we applaud and praise your response-love. A heartwarming response to a an ugly and sad encounter.”

Members of the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, several City Council members, Mayor John Stromberg and a variety of community groups attended to show their support.

They heard Clark repeat a phrase which became an anthem to roaring cheers. “I should not be here. Oregon law made it clear,” she said, referring to 19th century “whites only laws” once prevalent in Oregon, and then she repeated. “I shouldn’t be here — Oh, but I am!”

Before ending her talk with the admonition to “live the idea of what you have in your hearts,” she asked for donations for summer seminar scholarships for children of color so that a cycle of fewer non-white actors receiving strong roles can be broken. Lines wrapped around the stage as people dropped money in a barrel.

After the commemoration ended with upbeat dance and song, Clark was rushed by children who drew her pictures, people wanting to hug her and many committing to help in some way. “Thank you for your rage. Rage converts to action. We need allies to join us in battle,” Clark said. She said she wants the momentum to continue with open dialogue. “We need a place where people can be safe. We need to point out businesses which are actively inclusive. It’s about action, action, action.”

Her co-workers agreed. Tricia Patrick who works in the OSF Community Education Department, said many people, mostly white, told her they had no idea this was happening. She suggested that it’s important for people to tell their stories to everyone so that the community can work together to solve it. “How can you identify until you come close to it?”

Monisa Victrum, also in the OSF Community Education Department, said it’s additionally important for people of color to come to the community and stay. “A lot of people receive racism and just take it. They don’t feel like dealing with it and they just leave.” But Victrum says she’s going to stay, adding that, “If it wasn’t for OSF I wouldn’t be here.” Victrum says she lives in Medford and hears more racist remarks in Ashland than Medford. “It’s easier to be there, to blend in.”

Patrick says there’s a plan to create more social media outreach about these issues and she says OSF wants to keep the discussion going so more people have the opportunity to be involved. OSF plans to announce a larger community initiative in response to the incident later in the week.

At the event, Chief O’Meara said it’s unlikely any charges will be filed since the words were not a specific threat, but more of an indirect statement which the person believed to be true. “There’s probably not going to be a crime since it was not an immediate threat,” he said.

Confirmation of that came later Monday afternoon when the department issued a statement saying that “While the Jackson County District Attorney joins the APD and the entire Ashland community in decrying this hateful speech, the determination has been made that there was no crime committed.”

The release also said the incident was reported to the department on Saturday morning, and APD believes it knows the man responsible.

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