

Seminar 52: Voluntary Sector Shakespeare (Convener: Michael Dobson, Shakespeare Institute)

Amy Scott-Douglass (Marymount):

“I’ll do the service of a younger man”: Shakespeare Outreach to the Elderly

Amateur Shakespeare performances at any institution—whether that institution be the military, school, prison, or nursing homes—share similar characteristics across the board. Typically, venues are secure-setting or restricted access, and performances are non-commercial by nature and, sometimes, by law—even those eighteenth- and nineteenth-century military officers who charged audiences promoted their Shakespeare performances as charity fundraising events. But in spite of the commonalities that Shakespeare programs share across institutional type, the objectives of Shakespeare programs vary significantly depending on the institution’s population. In schools and in prisons, Shakespeare is represented as having the ability to improve, correct, and rehabilitate—Shakespeare is promoted as a tool for helping program participants become smart, successful, and principled. But when it comes to military personnel and nursing home residents, Shakespeare tends to be represented as both an escape from the trials of life and a reward for a life well lived. In short, the rhetoric in both schools and prisons is that Shakespeare can help to make a person good whereas on military bases and in nursing homes Shakespeare is a reward for a person having been good already.

On the face of it, these two populations—soldiers and seniors—could not be more different. The first population is expected to be at the height of strength and health, able to defend and protect others. The second is expected to be in mental and physical decline, dependent on assistance from others in order to survive. But both populations share several commonalities, not least of which is that both soldiers and seniors live their lives isolated from their families and loved ones and separated from mainstream society. When it comes to Shakespeare outreach programs, both soldiers and seniors are perceived by program administrators as being highly deserving and meritorious, and yet, nevertheless, underserved by arts programmers and undervalued by society. This paper is based upon my observations of Shakespeare classes taught by Educational Theatre Company’s Creative Age program at The Jefferson nursing home in Arlington, Virginia, and performances of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at Lillian Booth Home for Actors in Englewood, New Jersey. It includes interviews with the directors of these programs.

Jonathan Burton (Whittier College):

Hamlet in Peoria

Even before Groucho Marx asked, in *A Night at the Opera* (1935), “Will it play in Peoria?” the central Illinois city was notorious in American theatrical culture as the quintessential site of mainstream taste. If it will play in Peoria, it was suggested, it will play anywhere, since residents of Peoria are alleged to lack the cosmopolitanism and worldliness of the denizens of larger cities. My essay may not restore the reputation of maligned Peorians, but in exploring one extraordinary “Shakespearean” production that took place on the Smith family farm in Peoria in 1902, it suggests that our histories of Shakespeare might be enriched by scholarship that looks beyond academic criticism and professional theater history. *The new Hamlet*, credited to William Hawley Smith and The

Smith Family Farmers, suggests that rather than being the site of strutting, bellowing hams, out-Heroding Herod, amateur and peripheral performance could be a testing ground and herald of interpretations too inventive—dare I say too *avant garde*?—for the professional sector.

Clara Calvo (University of Murcia):

Shakespeare in Khaki: Amateur Shakespeare Abroad after the Armistice

In *The Invasion Handbook*, Tom Paulin suggests that in order to discuss the First World War today one has to begin with Clemenceau and Versailles. With a shuddering image of the well-known Compiègne railway car in which the Armistice was signed taking pride of place inside the Hall of Mirrors, Paulin reminds us that in June 1919 peace brought destruction. For Paulin, the Versailles Peace Treaty, the official ending of the First World War, is also the beginning of the Second World War, as it failed to root out conflict in Europe. Today, the Treaty seems to have been partly designed to humiliate Germany, which was deprived of military control over the Rhineland. A considerable amount of German territory was effectively occupied by US troops and the British Rhineland Army. A year later, at a time when Europe's borders had just been redrawn, an amateur company of British soldiers in Cologne chose *The Merchant of Venice* to commemorate a year of English-language drama performances in occupied Germany. This instance of Shakespeare in khaki raises several questions that this paper aims to explore and which involve not only the nature of amateur and 'expatriate Shakespeare' but also the use of Shakespeare in modern practices of commemoration. At the same time, this pre-holocaust performance of *The Merchant of Venice* in Cologne invites questions about how post-Armistice sensibilities altered the ways in which this Shakespearean comedy, so transformed later by the Holocaust, could be read.

Lezlie Cross (University of Washington):

Go West Young Bard: Shakespearean Pioneers in the American West

When the first adventurous pioneers headed west in search of gold in the hills of California, Nevada and Colorado, they took Shakespeare with them. The performances that they constructed out of barrels, boards and confidence boosted by whiskey might not even be considered "Shakespeare" by today's standards. While some attempted full productions, dramatic readings of speeches, monologues and famous scenes interspersed with songs, vaudeville and burlesque acts, or dog fights were far more common. As the roads to the mining towns improved, professional actors made their way into these (lucrative) performance venues and raised the bar of amateur performance. With the advent of the transcontinental railroad, many mining towns played host to the greatest Shakespeareans of the age, including Edwin Booth, Helena Modjeska, John McCullough, Tom Keene and Lawrence Barrett. This paper will look at a selection of pioneer communities in the early American West and the dramatic conversation that occurred between the rough-and-tumble amateur Shakespeareans and the professionals whom they emulated.

Ton Hoenselaars (University of Utrecht):

‘A tongue in every wound of Caesar’: Performing *Julius Caesar* in World War II

This paper looks at productions of *Julius Caesar* put on during and around the time of World War II. These include professional productions of *Julius Caesar* in Stratford, London, Berlin, and New York, as well as amateur productions of the play mounted by civilian internees and P.O.W.’s in southern France and on the Isle of Man. This paper contextualizes these productions and pursues a comparison between them across the amateur/professional divide. The comparison reveals that with its historical focus on professional theatre productions, our academic discipline’s perception of the cultural and political relevance of *Julius Caesar* during the war years is seriously distorted. This paper argues that in order to achieve greater professionalism in Shakespeare and Theatre Studies, we can no longer ignore the contribution made by the amateur theatricals.

Michael Jensen (Shakespeare Newsletter):

“You speak all your part at once, cues and all”: Reading Shakespeare with Alzheimer’s Disease

“We did Shakespeare!”

This was said by at least a half-dozen dementia patients to their caregivers after the meeting of an early stage Alzheimer’s support group.¹ This paper tells the story of how these patients came to read an abridgement of one of Shakespeare’s plays and why they spoke of their reading with such enthusiasm, and then concludes by asking if literature might be used as a therapy to improve the lives of people with Alzheimer’s disease.

Jeffrey Kahan (University Of La Verne):

G. Wilson Knight: Man of the Theatre

It is fair to say that G. Wilson Knight occupies a unique position in Shakespeare Studies. On the face of it, his career is orderly, even enviable. After earning a Master’s degree from Oxford, Knight taught at the Dean Close School in Cheltenham then accepted a job as a lecturer of World Drama at the University of Toronto. He returned to England during the Second World War and put on a variety of Shakespeare plays, which, he hoped, would bolster the war effort; from 1941-1945, he taught at Stowe School before landing, in 1946, a more appropriate academic position as a reader at Leeds. Knight gained professor rank in 1956; he retired in 1962. His publishing output is astonishing: 53 books, including the classics *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy* (1930), *The Imperial Theme* (1931), and *The Starlit Dome: Studies in the Poetry of Vision* (1941).

A re-assessment of Knight’s literary work is already underway—pace Hugh Grady and others—but his theatrical work continues to be neglected. Emma Smith, for example, describes Wilson Knight’s approach as purely “linguistic and rhetorical”—i.e., nontheatrical. This short essay will explore some of Knight’s theatrical productions and writings during the Second World War, specifically: *This Sceptred Isle: Shakespeare’s Message for England at War* (Oxford, B. Blackwell, 1940), “Four Pillars of Wisdom,” published in *The Wind and the Rain*, Winter 1941-42; and *Chariot of Wrath: The Message of John Milton to Democracy At War* (London: Faber and Faber [1942]). My

overall argument is that some of Knight's dramatic productions and war writings may collectively serve as a plinth to our own political and postmodern engagements.

Siobhan C Keenan (University of Leicester):

Amateur Shakespeare in Jacobean Yorkshire: Or, Shoemakers' Shakespeare

The tradition of amateur performances of Shakespeare can be traced back to Shakespeare's own time, as is revealed by the story of a group of artisan players in Jacobean Yorkshire, led by recusant shoemakers Robert and Christopher Simpson. In 1611 the troupe found itself caught up in a Star Chamber case against one of its theatrical hosts, Sir John Yorke of Nidderdale, North Yorkshire. A statement made by the company's 'fool', William Harrison, is especially intriguing for Shakespeare scholars, alluding to the performance of two other plays at Gowthwaite in 1609-10: 'Perocles, prince of Tire, And [...] King Lere' (NA, STAC 8/19/10, mb. 30). Although the *Lere* the Simpsons allegedly performed could be either the anonymous *King Leir* (printed 1605) or Shakespeare's *Lear* (printed 1608),ⁱⁱ *Pericles* is almost certainly Shakespeare's play, co-written with George Wilkins (printed 1609). Another company member mentions that their repertory also included *The Three Shirleys* (NA, STAC 8/19/10, mb. 6) – probably another name for *The Travels of the Three English Brothers*, by John Day, William Rowley, and George Wilkins (printed 1607).

To find an apparently amateur company in the north of England staging plays only recently published and derived from the London theatre – including those of Shakespeare – is noteworthy. Theatre historians have long suspected that provincial acting companies used printed play texts as prompt-books in this way but direct evidence of the practice has proved limited. The case of the Simpsons not only confirms that provincial acting troupes did sometimes adapt published plays for performance in the early modern era, but it suggests that at least some were familiar with metropolitan theatrical fashions and keen to imitate them, actively seeking out newly published texts. With such issues in mind, this paper will explore the question of how and why the Simpson players came to perform Shakespeare in Jacobean Yorkshire and what their performance of his play(s) may reveal about early modern amateur and provincial theatrical traditions and the place of the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries within them.

Elizabeth Klett (University Of Houston, Clear Lake):

Shakespeare in the Public Domain

This paper will explore the process of recording Shakespeare's plays for LibriVox.org, a website that releases free public domain audio recordings. LibriVox is a volunteer-driven site that prioritizes an open-access and welcoming community: "We're all volunteers, and we've flipped traditional hierarchy upside down. The most important people in LibriVox are the readers." Most contributors to the site are amateurs, although there is a very small minority made up of professional audiobook readers, voiceover artists, and actors. Since the goal of LibriVox is "to record all the books in the public domain" (that is, published before 1923), the plays and poems of Shakespeare are naturally included. As of this writing, almost all of Shakespeare's plays have been released by LibriVox; *Pericles*, *Coriolanus*, and *Timon of Athens* are currently in process, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Edward III* are the only texts that have not been started as projects.

In this paper I will draw on my own experiences as a volunteer for LibriVox; I have been recording books of various kinds for the site since 2007, and have been on the administrative team since 2009. My concern in this paper is to analyze the effect of the voluntary nature of the project on the production of Shakespearean texts, particularly as compared with other forms of audio Shakespeare. The evidence will be drawn from the wide array of Shakespeare projects on which I have worked, particularly my current project that is attempting to record *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a consistent and coherent interpretation.

Kiki Lindell (Lund University):

The Importance of Being Idéfix: Helping Amateur Actors Get in Character and Stay In Character

During the last few years, I have been teaching a university course which I call 'Drama in Practice – Shakespeare on Stage'. The course combines the academic study of one of Shakespeare's comedies (through continuous lectures and papers – choosing a deliberately low-key term, I call them diaries – to be handed in), with a more hands-on approach: the students are given a part, rehearse (with me as their director) and finally perform the play, in costume, before an audience. The performance constitutes their 'oral exam', although the grading is based on their written work. So far, I have worked with six plays, with two or three consecutive groups: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Taming of the Shrew* (henceforth referred to as *AMND*, *LLL*, *TN*, *AYLI*, *MAAN* and *TS*).

This is a brief account of some of the difficulties encountered and approaches and methods adopted in the course to help these students, who are mostly girls (there is usually a ratio of one boy to three girls in the groups), mostly in the same age bracket (early twenties), mostly absolute beginners (ranging from talented amateurs to students who have bravely applied to the course in order to learn to battle lifelong shyness and stage-fright) put on a Shakespeare play, and do it better than they ever believed they could.

Dr. Jami Rogers (Stratford):

Shakespeare's Women: Innovation and the Voluntary Sector

Despite the apparent low regard for the amateur stage by the guardians of contemporary Shakespearean culture, historically there has been a tradition in British theatre in which non-professional groups have been the agents of change and innovation for the Shakespearean stage. This essay seeks to consider this trait of innovation within the training sector of non-professional theatre through examining two trans-gendered Shakespeare productions. One – *Titus Andronicus* – took place in the early 1990s at one of the prestigious drama schools (which is incidentally classed as "amateur" on the University of Birmingham's Touchstone production listings). The second example – *Troilus and Cressida* – was staged at a company that seeks to provide training and experience for young performers, many of whom had recently completed their conservatoire training. This essay will investigate both their innovation and the potential impact of amateur stagings such as these for the professional Shakespearean stage.

Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine (Universite de Caen):

Amateurs and Professionals Hand In Hand

In March 2011 three performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a French version entitled *Le Songe d'une nuit de mai* were given in the auditorium of a Centre devoted to Amateur Practices right in the middle of the fashionable district of Saint-Germain des Prés in Paris. So far, there is nothing extraordinary as this comedy is the one which is performed most frequently on the French stage, and also one of the few plays by Shakespeare chosen by amateur companies. But this particular staging attracted my attention because it was performed as part of a conference on Amateur Creation, and presented very unusual characteristics. This staging had been given before. After a period of rehearsal (from January to May 2010), it was premiered from May 6th to 9th 2010 in the Theatre of the Mairie (Town Hall) of Nanterre (a suburb north-west of Paris), and again on May 25th within the framework of a Festival (the Festival of Theatre & Companies) in the same town. But this staging took its source well in the previous decade, through the exploration of some particular themes conducted in various amateur workshops.

After a survey of some of the components taking part in this particular venture involving twenty-five actors on stage, I will examine certain principles of the functioning of several grouping of actors/characters, and I will argue that, far from being just yet another amateur staging, or a social charity, it opens up space for a different exploration of the Shakespearean text, adding a valuable contribution to the already very rich understanding of the play that these amateurs can be very proud of.

Monika Smialkowska (Northumbria):

DIY Shakespeare: Community involvement in the American celebrations of the 1916 Shakespeare Tercentenary

This paper investigates the 1916 Shakespeare Tercentenary celebrations within the context of contemporaneous debates surrounding the problems of leisure and culture in early twentieth-century America. At that time, Progressivist activists were denouncing entertainment available to the American masses as rowdy and uncouth. Among the objects of their criticism was mainstream commercial theatre. Through the work of such voluntary organisations as the Drama League of America, cultural reformers promoted an alternative dramatic tradition, one which they saw as intellectually stimulating, morally wholesome, and beneficial to the American public. They hoped that the staging and appreciation of serious, high-brow plays would replace the vulgar delights of commercial entertainment. The Shakespeare Tercentenary of 1916 seemed to offer a perfect opportunity to spread the gospel of high culture across the nation.

In this context it is perhaps surprising that a large proportion of the American Shakespeare Tercentenary tributes consisted not of traditional dramatic pieces, but of miscellaneous events of a heterogeneous nature: festivals, recitations, tree-plantings, dances, pageants, masques, *tableaux*, and exhibitions. One of the organisers' key

considerations seemed to be community involvement: the active, voluntary participation of wide sections of the local population. Combining high-brow cultural aims with a populist appeal, however, produced some tensions. Some commentators were not convinced of the artistic value of the resulting events. Others felt that the celebrations were too commercial, as demonstrated by the campaign against the plans to use New York's Central Park for the staging of Percy MacKaye's 'community masque' *Caliban by the Yellow Sands*. The protestors objected to this 'invasion' of a public space by a fee-charging entertainment, and succeeded in having the masque moved to the Lewisohn Stadium. This paper charts the ways in which the Shakespeare Tercentenary in the US negotiated and problematised distinctions between 'high' and 'popular' culture, creating a uniquely dynamic, participatory model of 'doing' Shakespeare.
