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Shakespeare on American Stages

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“THE BRITISH ARE COMING!”: SHAKESPEARE REVERED

Theatres in mid-nineteenth-century America served much the same function as the Internet today. They were places where audiences drawn from different socio-economic groups could gather to be entertained, to argue about social and political issues, and to express opposition to the tastes and values of one another. Lawrence W. Levine writes:

How closely the theater registered societal dissonance can be seen in [working-class] audiences’ volatile reaction to anything they considered condescending behavior, out of keeping with the unique nature of American society. Anything even bordering on unpatriotic or aristocratic behavior was anathema.

(Levine 1988: 60)

This jingoistic attitude posed a particular problem for English actors, whose tours had dominated Shakespearean performances in America since the eighteenth century and who were widely recognized as the most skilled interpreters of a playwright whom Americans were in the process of claiming as their own. These actors increasingly were viewed as representatives of a culture not only effete and elitist, but fundamentally at odds with the rugged individualism and democratic self-determination that Americans prized.

The riot outside the Astor Place Opera House on 10 May 1849 brought to a head the perceived rivalry between British and American actors over the ownership of Shakespeare on the American stage. The Opera House had been built as a venue for the upper echelons of New York society to exclude, through location and ticket prices, working-class audiences that had grown aggressively demonstrative at performances they disliked. Performing at the Opera House that week was William Macready, an English tragedian on his third American tour, celebrated by Anglophile audiences for an acting style both cerebral and refined, his verse-speaking richly nuanced and his capacity to inhabit a character subtly convincing (Shattuck 1976: 67–70). Performing
at the more populist Broadway Theatre that week was his rival Edwin Forrest, America’s first native-born Shakespearean star, a handsome man of “the muscular school,” according to one critic, who practised “the brawny art; the biceps aesthetics . . . [and] the bovine drama; rant, roar, and rigmarole” at odds with the more disciplined style of Macready (Curtis 1863, quoted in Levine 1988: 57). Forrest’s histrionic acting and outspoken egalitarian views endeared him to those fans who saw Macready’s affinity for New York’s aristocracy as an affront to their own true American values.

Fans, of course, can get out of control. On the evening of 7 May, Macready and Forrest both performed Macbeth. Forrest, perhaps owing to jealousy, had a habit of shadowing Macready on his American tours, following him from city to city and at times performing the same role on a subsequent night (Shattuck 1976: 70–87). Thus, although Forrest’s decision to play Macbeth on the same night as Macready in New York may not have been meant as a deliberate provocation, his fans certainly took it that way. They bought tickets in the galleries for Macready’s performance, interrupted it with boos and insults, and hurled fruit, old shoes, rotten eggs, and even chairs onto the stage, forcing Macready to abandon the performance during the third act (Shattuck 1976: 82). Although Macready wished to leave the country to avoid further violence, he was persuaded by a letter signed by forty-seven persons of “highest respectability” (Levine 1988: 64) not to succumb to tyranny of the mob. Three nights later, when he again performed Macbeth at Astor Place, Forrest’s fans, joined by others who shared their anti-British sentiments, rioted outside the theatre, their numbers swelling to at least 10,000; and armed militia were able to disperse the crowd only after opening fire, killing twenty-two and injuring more than 150 (Figure 3.1). As Nigel Cliff reports:

the victory in Astor Place went to the elite, but it was not a victory for Shakespeare. The segregation of audiences by class and taste which had provoked the riot was hastened by it.

(Cliff 2007: 263)

After the Civil War, more cities built so-called legitimate theatres for affluent audiences where Shakespeare was “performed with due deference to his genius” (Cliff 2007: 264). Stripped of the lowbrow entertainment that had accompanied performances of the plays for much of the century, Shakespeare was dropped from the repertory of popular theatres; and by the late nineteenth century his plays had come to be owned by the educated élite as serious fare – or, as the word came to be defined, as culture.

Not much has changed in the past century and a half. American Shakespeare is still deeply rooted in British theatrical practices, yet populist traditions persist on stages across the country. Furthermore, the emergence of Shakespeare as a player in public education has refashioned Shakespearean performance in subtle ways and altered the contest between highbrow and lowbrow cultures from what it was at the time of the Astor Place Riot. In the following pages, I offer two unfolding narratives to account for the evolution of Shakespeare on American stages since the period following the Civil War. The first addresses the abiding influence of British teachers, actors, and directors on Americans’ view of how Shakespeare should be performed. The second traces how the emergence of Shakespeare as a Protestant moral voice in public
education since the late nineteenth century has led to a flowering of Shakespeare festivals around the country and seeded the growth of festival culture as an educational force. These two narratives alone, of course, cannot encompass the myriad influences that have shaped how Shakespeare is performed today. Nevertheless, the separate but intersecting claims that British theatre practitioners and American educators have staked to Shakespeare on American stages are worth exploring.

**RIVAL MACBETHS REDUX**

Persistent Anglophilia has ensured that in urban centres of culture the British are still regarded as the ultimate arbiters of Shakespeare. American actors are often derided as less skilled and less nuanced, and American directors as more willing to pander to popular tastes than their British counterparts. Let me illustrate. Within one year, from spring 2013 to spring 2014, four major productions of *Macbeth* were running in New York, three of them British and one American. Their reception reveals how deeply American theatre critics and educated audiences have absorbed a sense of cultural inferiority, and how readily they have embraced the idea that the British set the standard for performing Shakespeare. The three British productions show a range of imaginative responses to the play and a level of professionalism that American theatre, in the view of critics, seems unable to equal.

The first of them to open, and still running as I write this chapter, was a site-specific work created by British theatre company Punchdrunk that “replay[s] *Macbeth* as an ‘immersive’ event” (Worthen 2012: 96) in which scenes are mimed throughout
a six-storey warehouse rechristened the McKittick Hotel in homage to Alfred Hitchcock, whose film aesthetic deeply influenced the production design. *Sleep No More*, as the performance is called, requires spectators to don Venetian masks and leads them “on a merry, macabre chase up and down stairs and through minimally illuminated, furniture-cluttered rooms and corridors” (Ben Brantley, *New York Times*, 4/13/11) where they glimpse fragments of the play out of sequence until they are ushered at the end into a banqueting hall where Macbeth is hanged. Apart from one line muttered by Lady Macbeth – “Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” (5.1.36–8) – the performers do not speak Shakespeare’s text at all. Rather, they dance the play, their choreographed movements timed to a musical score that loops three times, giving spectators ample opportunity to choose where to go and what to watch, much as players do in an interactive video game, and occasionally to interact with performers who single them out for intimate one-on-one encounters. *Sleep No More* was praised by critics as “thrilling, mind-bending” and “unlike any *Macbeth* you’ve ever seen” (Elisabeth Vincentelli, *New York Post*, 4/14/11), and “a sensational interactive theater piece” (J.D. Ziemianowicz, *New York Daily News*, 4/14/11) that “encourages you to rethink the themes and motifs in *Macbeth* as well as the nature of theater itself” (Luke Murphy, *Entertainment Weekly*, 4/13/11).

The second *Macbeth* to open, directed by John Tiffany for the National Theatre of Scotland, was “a radical one-man reimagining” of the play (Mark Fisher, *Variety*, 4/21/13) in which Alan Cumming, playing a psychotic isolated in a mental ward who has obviously experienced or perpetrated a violent crime, enacts all the roles in *Macbeth* as a way to exorcise his personal demons. “One by one the characters take possession of this disturbed fellow, who flits manically around the green-tiled room as he snaps from one person to the next” (Charles Isherwood, *New York Times*, 4/21/13), using subtle shifts in vocal register, gait, and dress to mark the changes. “It is as if only Shakespeare’s characters . . . can articulate the mental trauma he is suffering” (Mark Fisher, *Variety*, 4/21/13). The result is “mesmerizing theater” (Thom Geier, *Entertainment Weekly*, 4/21/13), remarkably inventive in its compression of the play. It provides “a dark, visceral, altogether lucid bravura showcase” for Cumming, whose performance reveals “intensity,” “fierce discipline,” and extraordinary “range” (Linda Winer, *Newsday*, 4/21/13). Cumming’s verse-speaking is “outstanding,” wrote Jesse Green; “he’s tireless and brave” (*New York Magazine*, 4/21/13). Although this interpretation emphasizes psychopathology “at the expense of the play’s political and social qualities, yet such are Cumming’s gifts as an actor, we also get an uncommonly rich reading of the play” (Mark Fisher, *Variety*, 4/21/13).

The most eagerly anticipated *Macbeth* to open during the 2013/14 theatre season originated at the Manchester International Festival and featured Kenneth Branagh in his New York debut. This was a violent *Macbeth*, performed across a huge traverse set in the Drill Hall of the Park Avenue Armory that was full of dirt which turned to mud in the rain of battle. Set pieces at either end represented the polar cultures that pulled at the play’s characters: a Christian altar for spiritual enlightenment at one end; at the other, pagan stones resembling those at Stonehenge, home to the witches and to primal urges. Performances embodied this view of medieval Scotland as a place where the dark urges of the flesh struggled against the forces of light, and such urgency was manifested best in the visceral performance of Branagh himself. “It’s not hyperbole to say that Branagh was born to play Macbeth,” wrote Marilyn Stasio.
(Variety, 6/6/14). Linda Winer concurred: the performance provided a “harrowing and surprisingly straightforward experience” in which “Branagh . . . speaks the familiar lines with enormous depth and a splendid lack of self-consciousness” (Newsday, 6/5/14). Ben Brantley’s praise for the acting was unalloyed: this “thrilling” production, he wrote, directed with immense “care and intelligence,” “saturates everyone in its adrenaline. . . . There’s not a line spoken that doesn’t seem to have grown organically from the wicked hurly-burly on the stage” (New York Times, 6/5/14). Unsurprisingly, this action-packed thriller, played to the hilt by one of Britain’s great Shakespeareans, proved to be the most sought-after Shakespeare of the season, with tickets going for up to $350.

In contrast, the Macbeth directed by Jack O’Brien at Lincoln Center was condemned for pandering to the lowest common denominator of American tastes. It had lavish sets, impressive special effects, but forgettable performances. “The atmosphere is populist and adventurous,” asserted Chris Jones in his largely negative review (Chicago Tribune, 11/21/13); “a certain ‘Game of Thrones’ hotness juices up this play for Broadway.” But television-inspired Shakespeare seldom wins critical plaudits. “The play’s not quite the thing in this high-concept revival, and it sure isn’t the acting,” complained Marilyn Stasio; “but there’s much lowbrow fun to be had from the spectacular visual and acoustic effects of . . . Thunder! Lightning! Blood! Gore! Witches! Shiny weapons!” (Variety, 11/22/13). In the tradition of populist Shakespeare productions in the nineteenth century, O’Brien, long a director of the Old Globe in San Diego and now noted more for his productions of popular musicals than of Shakespeare, emphasized showy entertainment at the expense of the text. His biggest gimmick was to cast the witches as seasoned actors in drag and to expand their role as omnipotent agents who deprived Macbeth of any autonomy or responsibility, thus eviscerating the psychological dimension of the tragedy that Cumming and Branagh took pains to foreground.

As a result, the performances, especially Ethan Hawke’s Macbeth, seemed to lack purpose. Hawke “is a tragic hero without drive; a protagonist who forgets whose name is on the marquee; a reactive, overly inactive Macbeth” (Chris Jones, Chicago Tribune, 11/21/13); a “phlegmatic Macbeth, too apathetic to convey the ferocious ambition driving this tragic hero’s murderous deeds. And his muffled diction makes hash of Shakespeare’s poetry” (Marilyn Stasio, Variety, 11/22/13). Diction was clearly an issue for reviewers of this production. “Hawke . . . swallows many of his lines,” lamented Ben Brantley (New York Times, 11/21/13). “His is a mumblecore Macbeth, an heir to the petulant Hamlet he played on screen years ago . . . hooded in impenetrable sullenness, he never gives us entry to an interior life with which we might identify.” And without an interior life, this Macbeth was dramatically inert. In the view of Jesse Green, this was the fault of casting a naturalistic screen actor in a role requiring different acting skills: “much of the text is garbled . . . [Hawke’s] technique is simply not stage technique. He makes the film actor’s mistake of thinking between the lines instead of during them. . . . And the verse [is] thus emptied of thought” (New York Magazine, 11/21/13). Yet Hawke was not alone in seeming devoid of thought: “few of the performers . . . give you a clue as to why their characters act as they do” (Ben Brantley, New York Times, 11/21/13). The exception was the Lady Macbeth of British actress Anne-Marie Duff, who “does most of the heavy lifting. . . . She’s fierce enough for both of them. And when she opens her mouth, a trained voice comes out”
(Marilyn Stasio, *Variety*, 11/22/13). This last remark cuts to the heart of the matter: in the judgement of educated American audiences, British actors are still regarded as better trained to understand – and therefore to speak – Shakespeare’s language than American actors are.

**ROYAL WELCOMES**

The critical reception of these productions attests to the persistence of Americans’ preference for British actors and directors in performances of Shakespeare, and to the clash between high and low culture that such productions ostensibly represent. Although America by now has a home-grown Shakespeare firmly in place – witness the myriad summer Shakespeare festivals that dot the country, about which I shall say more later – a residual Anglophilia continues to affect how educated Americans view Shakespeare. Just as, in the nineteenth century, British actors dominated American stages with their performances of Shakespeare’s greatest roles, so British theatre companies, directors, and actors continue to hold fascination for American audiences today. The following paragraphs will provide evidence of this cultural bias.

First, major British companies regularly bring Shakespeare to North America on tours. The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) has been doing so almost since its formation in 1961, sometimes playing in multiple cities and at other times in only one, as in 2011, when New York’s Park Avenue Armory was reconfigured with a replica of the RSC’s Stratford stage for a six-week residency of the five plays currently in its repertory. Furthermore, since 2001 the University of Michigan has provided generous sponsorship of the RSC to do residencies in Ann Arbor. Since 1997, productions from Shakespeare’s Globe have been brought to America to great acclaim: witness the two productions that sold out on Broadway in the same season that Jack O’Brien’s *Macbeth* played at Lincoln Center. Ben Brantley could not resist drawing an unfavourable comparison: “The triumphantly straightforward Shakespeare’s Globe productions of *Twelfth Night* and *Richard III* now on Broadway, which trust so completely in the original words, make [O’Brien’s] *Macbeth* seem ponderous and gaudy” (*New York Times*, 11/21/13).

British actors and directors, too, are regularly invited to direct American Shakespeare productions in major cities such as Boston, New York, and Washington, DC. Old Vic director Michael Benthall, for example, staged a number of acclaimed Shakespeare productions on Broadway in the 1950s. Avant-garde director Steven Berkoff staged controversial productions of *Coriolanus* in 1988 and *Richard II* in 1994 at the Public Theater. More recently, director David Leveaux staged a *Romeo and Juliet* starring British actor Orlando Bloom on Broadway in the same season as the *Macbeths* discussed above. The Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington has been particularly receptive to employing British talent to strengthen its offerings. In 1997, for example, the company invited Jude Kelly, one of Britain’s foremost female directors, to stage what came to be called the “photo negative” *Othello*, which turned the play’s racism inside out by casting British actor Patrick Stewart in the lead role, the only white actor in an otherwise African-American cast. RSC director Bill Alexander’s production of the two parts of *Henry IV* (in which the King was played by Keith Baxter, a British actor who had played Hal in Orson Welles’s *Chimes at Midnight* more than forty years earlier) garnered enthusiastic press for the Shakespeare Theatre...
Company during its 2004 season; and in 2014, the company’s production of *As You Like It* was staged by another RSC director, Michael Attenborough, who brought his own Rosalind with him in the person of Zoë Wanke, who acted rings around her American cast-mates. In the words of one reviewer surprised by the intelligence of Wanke’s delivery, “Her understanding of how to express emotion through the thick vernacular of the Bard’s dated language is exceptional” (Amanda Gunther, TheatreBloom.com, 11/4/14). The same praise was not accorded to Wanke’s fellow actors.

During the past half century, the RSC has been increasingly looked to as the model for how Shakespeare should be performed. In 1975 Homer Swander – a Shakespeare scholar at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who had led frequent trips to the UK since the mid-1960s for students and teachers to attend RSC productions – worked with Patrick Stewart to launch an initiative called “Actors from the RSC,” whose goal was to bring groups of five actors to America each year to tour colleges and universities, offering week-long residencies with workshops in voice, movement, and verse-speaking. The highlight of each residency was a fast-paced performance of a full Shakespeare play, typically without scenery, with minimal costumes, and with stunningly inventive use of doubling. The fact that five actors could manage to play as many as forty roles in one performance demonstrated the ingenuity, versatility, and expert training that RSC actors brought to American shores.

In its early years, the touring programme featured a roster of actors that included many of the best the RSC had to offer: Stewart himself, Tony Church, Lisa Harrow, Ben Kingsley, Estelle Kohler, Barbara Leigh-Hunt, Richard Pasco, Ian Richardson, and David Suchet. When the touring programme became financially independent in 1985, however, its name was altered to “Actors from the London Stage” (AFTLS) because it began using non-affiliated actors. Although the current programme claims that actors come “from such prestigious companies as the Royal Shakespeare Company; the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain; and Shakespeare’s Globe,” a survey of recent tours reveals that not all the actors have such credentials. Nevertheless, most of them have degrees from prestigious British drama schools – The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA), and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama foremost among them – and thus can boast of training in Shakespearean acting that many American actors envy. The AFTLS website advertises that the one-week residence programme is “an actor driven tour-de-force” in which “our classically trained actors devote a large part of their time to student interaction” and “can handle any English text with equal aplomb” (http://shakespeare.nd.edu/actors-from-the-london-stage/history). For forty years, dozens of American colleges and universities have been willing to pay large sums of money to bring these actors to their campuses for a week. The assumption is that the British know how to perform Shakespeare with an ease and a command that Americans lack, and that British actors are better trained in verse-speaking and in classical repertory than American actors are.

Indeed, American Shakespeare would not be what it is today without British initiative and expertise. The most prestigious Shakespeare festival in North America—the Stratford Festival in Ontario, Canada—was, in effect, a British import. Tyrone Guthrie, director of the Old Vic, was asked by local businessman Tom Patterson to found a Shakespeare repertory company in Stratford, Ontario, in 1952, modelled on the festival in Stratford-upon-Avon. He enlisted English set designer Tanya Moiseiwitsch,
with whom he had worked at the Old Vic, to design an amphitheatre with a five-
sided thrust stage that would allow him to produce Shakespeare in the manner of
Elizabethan playhouses. That revolutionary theatre, covered by a tent, was ready
for the first season in 1953; in 1956, a permanent structure was built to encase it.
Guthrie remained artistic director of the Festival until 1956, when he was succeeded
by fellow Englishman Michael Langham. Its first seasons drew a host of well-known
British acting talent. Alec Guinness, who played Richard III in the Festival’s inaugu-
ral production, was soon followed by such actors as Maggie Smith, Alan Bates, Paul
Scofield, James Mason, Peter Ustinov, John Neville, and Brian Bedford. These names
drew crowds to the Festival and within a decade helped establish it as one of Cana-
da’s biggest cultural attractions.

British theatre professionals also founded Shakespeare companies in the US. Tina
Packer and Kristin Linklater, both of whom emigrated to America in the 1970s, together
founded Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, Massachusetts, in 1978, “with the idea
of creating and running a theatre company that merged the power suits of British
actors and American actors: the spoken word and the physical body” (http://www.
The hierarchy in such a statement is clear: to do justice to Shakespeare, American
actors need to be trained by British teachers steeped in the arts of classical theatre
and verse-speaking. Securing a performance venue and teaching spaces at the former
estate of novelist Edith Wharton in the Berkshires, Packer and Linklater succeeded
in launching “one of the most unique and extensive actor training programs by a
regional theatre in the country,” grounded in Linklater’s unique approach to freeing
the “natural voice,” an approach influenced by her training at LAMDA and by her
study of the Alexander Technique (http://www.shakespeare.org/about/company-his-
tory). Shakespeare & Company productions now draw more than 75,000 patrons
annually, and its education programme reaches more than 50,000 students with per-
formances, workshops, and residencies.

A few years later, on the West Coast, Audrey Stanley founded Shakespeare Santa
Cruz. Her teaching methods, like those of Packer and Linklater, foregrounded
verse-speaking and primacy of the text. Stanley, who had studied drama at the Uni-
versity of Bristol and acting at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, had moved to
California in the 1960s to do a PhD in Dramatic Art at the University of California,
Berkeley. Hired to teach at the University of California, Santa Cruz, she soon was
directing Shakespeare productions not only on campus but also at the Colorado and
Oregon Shakespeare festivals. When asked by her dean, eminent Shakespearean C.L.
Barber, to found a Shakespeare festival on campus, she persuaded the five RSC actors
recruited by Homer Swander for his “Actors from the RSC” programme to perform at
a fundraiser, at which she secured a commitment from Tony Church to perform King
Lear for her festival’s inaugural season in 1982. For that production, Stanley used
not a conflation of the play’s Quarto and First Folio texts, as had been the common
practice for two centuries, but the complete First Folio edition of the play prepared
by pioneering scholar Michael Warren, who had recently been hired away from the
UK by the English Department at Santa Cruz. “Our festival should link the very lat-
est in scholarship with the best and most adventurous theater practitioners we could
assemble,” averred Stanley, by which she in effect meant the best in British scholar-
ship and theatre practices. For the festival’s first season, she recalled, “the Royal
Shakespeare Company actors only had two weeks of rehearsal before performing for only two weeks,” at which point they were replaced by local actors. “So as a director, I had to use great ingenuity and flexibility. But having actors like Tony Church and Julian Curry really lifted the whole level of performance” (http://www.donrothman.com/audrey-stanley-and-karen-sinsheimer-the-readiness-is-all). Indeed, it never hurts to enlist the services of RSC actors to help get a new Shakespeare festival off the ground.

SHAKESPEAREAN POEL DANCING

The academic goals of these women – Tina Packer, Kristin Linklater, and Audrey Stanley – were shaped by a movement in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to pare back the pictorial opulence of Victorian stagings in order to allow Shakespeare’s text to determine the pace and rhythms of staging, an aesthetic most notable in the work of William Poel (pronounced poel). Founding the Elizabethan Stage Society in 1895, Poel attempted to re-create Elizabethan performance practices by using uncut texts, a unified acting ensemble without star actors, an open stage, and a swift pace of performance unencumbered by scenery and special effects. His work deeply influenced the Shakespeare productions mounted by Harley Granville-Barker at the Savoy Theatre in 1912 and 1914, which sought to capture the Elizabethan spirit of the plays by having actors speak the text with speed and clarity; by eschewing elaborate, historically accurate scenery in favour of curtains which could be swiftly moved into place, consequently reducing the length of each performance; and by extending the stage into the first few rows of the stalls to bring the actors closer to the audience.

A disciple of Poel, Ben Iden Payne, came to the US as an academic in 1913 and soon introduced Poel’s principles into the teaching of Renaissance drama at the School of Drama at Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon, Pittsburgh). In his first year as chair, he directed a production of Hamlet using the technique he came to describe as “modified Elizabethan staging” (Payne 1977: 157–73). Although he left Carnegie Tech in 1928, he returned every year – with the exception of the eight years he spent in England as director of the Stratford Memorial Theatre – to direct a Shakespeare play, twenty-six in all, until 1951. His emphasis on simplified staging, on foregrounding actors over scenery, and on the pace of their delivery made his productions more immediately accessible to audiences than traditional stagings of Shakespeare had ever done and quickly won adherents in the world of academic theatre. In 1934, during the second year of the Chicago World’s Fair, Payne and his predecessor at Carnegie Tech, Thomas Woods Stevens, produced radically cut, hour-long productions of seven Shakespeare plays that were staged in a crude reconstruction of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre. These productions were so successful, especially among schoolchildren (Kegl 2011), that they inspired the building of a replica of the Globe for the California Pacific International Exposition in San Diego in 1935, at which the seven abridged Shakespeares were remounted. Their popularity ensured that the replica of the Globe would be preserved following the Exposition, and Payne returned to the Old Globe Theatre (as it came to be called) to direct its first Summer Shakespeare Festival in 1949.

From the 1940s to the 1960s, as guest director, Payne took his staging practices to universities across North America, including, among others, Colorado, Iowa, Michigan, Missouri, Texas, and Washington. At each of these places he demonstrated the
viability of performing Shakespeare as it was believed Elizabethans might have done; and at Texas, where he became department chair, he directed twenty-four Shakespeare plays before he retired. Of perhaps more lasting importance, however, was his residency at the University of Washington in the summer of 1930, when he directed Cymbeline and Love’s Labour’s Lost on a temporary Elizabethan-style thrust stage. For those productions, he employed as his stage manager a graduate student named Angus Bowmer, who five years later, as a young faculty member at Southern Oregon Normal School, was inspired to found his own Shakespeare festival based on Payne’s principles for Elizabethan staging. It became the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

THEATRICAL SPINACH

Away from urban centres of culture, another story has unfolded which makes sense only if one looks into the role that Shakespeare has played in the deep cultural history of American life. As Alden and Virginia Vaughan document in their book Shakespeare in America, Shakespeare became central to American education following the Civil War. Sections of his plays were reprinted in the McGuffey Reader, a collection of extracts from “the best American and English writers” which generations of children in upper-school grades were made to study, recite, and even memorize in the interest of learning “industriousness, honesty, and moral probity” (Vaughan and Vaughan 2012: 82; see also Burton 2011). As early as 1848 Henry Norman Hudson declared that Shakespeare’s plays provided “a far better school of virtuous discipline than half the moral and religious books which are now put into the hands of youth” (1848: 1.79); and as literature gradually replaced the Bible as required reading, successive editions of McGuffey included more Shakespeare passages for the “special purpose” of “influenc[ing] the heart by sound moral and religious instruction” (Vaughan and Vaughan 2012: 83).

By 1920, sales of the Reader were estimated to have exceeded 122 million (Simon 1932: 26), thus ensuring that many American children had a common secondary school experience. Simultaneously, while colleges and universities had been slow to develop literature curricula beyond Greek and Latin, in the final decades of the century they reduced their emphasis on the classics in order to make room for teaching practical sciences; and into the void left by the classics came modern languages and English. Two editors, Henry Norman Hudson and William J. Rolfe, prepared series of individual Shakespeare plays for college use so that “instructors could finally ask their students to read whole Shakespeare plays in affordable editions”; and by 1906, “twenty-five of America’s thirty liberal arts colleges offered at least one course” devoted exclusively to Shakespeare (Vaughan and Vaughan 2012: 86–87; see also Albanese 2011).

In a parallel development, educated men and women, but mostly women, were forming Shakespeare clubs all across the country to read the plays aloud, discuss them, and attend performances, both amateur and professional, for purposes of cultural self-betterment (Scheil 2012). Now firmly in “the possession of the educated portions of society,” Shakespeare had become the country’s moral and cultural arbiter; his plays were disseminated with the conviction that they would enlighten “average folk who were to swallow him not for their entertainment but for their education” (Levine 1988: 31). In the more colloquial words of columnist Gerald Nachman, recalling
how he had been force-fed Shakespeare in school, “Shakespeare becomes theatrical spinach: He’s good for you. If you digest enough of his plays, you’ll grow up big and strong intellectually like teacher” (San Francisco Chronicle, 11/30/79).

It was with just such conviction that Angus Bowmer launched the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) in 1935, the first such festival in North America. Bowmer saw an opportunity for a festival to spring from his work with students at Southern Oregon Normal School; and indeed, his first productions, largely amateur affairs – two performances of Twelfth Night and one of The Merchant of Venice – featured students and townpeople in key roles, Twelfth Night being a revival of a student production he had directed during the academic year. Thus the OSF sprang in part from a sense of educational mission; and it has retained its affiliation with what is now Southern Oregon University to this day, employing students in minor roles and, through the theatre programme, training them to be apprentices and eventually company actors.

Bowmer’s inspiration to build an outdoor amphitheatre within the shell of what had been a huge domed structure built for the Circuit Chautauqua educational movement has achieved the status of myth. Touring Chautauqua shows had gone into rapid decline during the Depression, for towns in rural American could no longer sustain them; and Ashland’s dome had been dismantled in 1933, leaving only its circular perimeter wall within which to create an Elizabethan-style theatre. What has not been discussed is the richly symbolic passing of a cultural mantle from Circuit Chautauqua to festival Shakespeare, which served much the same function, bringing a blend of entertainment and moral education to middle-class Americans in rural areas. Having begun in upstate New York as a Methodist summer camp for preachers, Chautauqua had grown into an industry that brought travelling speakers, preachers, musicians, and eventually plays to the hinterland. By the 1910s, there were Chautauquas in every state in the nation; and while church-going audiences tended to frown upon theatrical performance as a frivolous temptation to do the devil’s work, Shakespeare was allowed as an exception: his plays were thought to promote the same values as those in Scripture, and thus to be consistent with Chautauqua’s educational mission.

The road to acceptance of Shakespearean performance was paved by Ben Greet, an English impresario who produced Shakespeare in the spare manner of William Poel, with whom he had once worked. His company, the Ben Greet Players, toured American college campuses with open-air productions from 1902 to 1914, including a celebrated stop at the White House to perform for Theodore Roosevelt. Armed with Poel’s legacy of a simplified stagecraft that struck “a note of adult education and sober self-improvement” (Speaight 1954: 74), and claiming to have done “important missionary work for the stage for some years” (The Ben Greet Players publicity brochure c. 1911; cited by Canning 2005: 195), Greet was the ideal person to introduce theatre to audiences on the Circuit. Eschewing the elaborate scenery, costumes, make-up, and other distractions that God-fearing Christians objected to, his productions were warmly received on the Circuit Chautauqua in 1913–14; they seemed to be a logical progression from those dramatic orators who for years had inculcated in Chautauqua audiences lessons of civic virtue and moral probity by quoting Shakespeare. “Greet’s approach promised to improve their understanding of an author they already revered; consequently, uplift and entertainment would be served”
Owing to Greet’s success, theatre became a mainstay of the Circuit Chautauquas until they closed.

Bowmer’s project to offer a summer festival of Shakespeare’s plays in a simplified outdoor Elizabethan theatre thus took up where Chautauqua left off: indeed, in his autobiography, *As I Remember, Adam* (1975), he explicitly acknowledged that the walls of the old Chautauqua dome “stimulated the germinal idea of a Shakespearean festival” that would “revive the tradition of Chautauqua’s summer festival” (quoted in Leary and Richard 2009: 8–9) and in early years served much the same regional middle-class audiences, offering them what Dennis Kennedy has called “edutainment” (1998: 182). When the Festival resumed with a pledge of support from the Ashland Chamber of Commerce, following a six-year hiatus during which Bowmer fought in World War II, the length of the season grew and the number of plays expanded. In the 1950s, Bowmer began to employ professional actors; the Elizabethan theatre was rebuilt and enlarged in 1959, modelled on London’s 1599 Fortune Theatre; a new indoor theatre named after Bowmer was completed in 1972; a smaller space was carved out of an existing store-front in 1977 (to be replaced by a new flexible-space theatre in 2002); and inevitably, as the OSF was promoted as a tourist destination, more modern plays and musicals were added to its repertory, so that now the Festival typically includes only four Shakespeare plays in a season of a dozen productions. But Shakespeare remains the cornerstone of the repertory, as it does at those other festivals which have similarly broadened their theatre base; and the audiences who make the trek to Ashland – still overwhelmingly affluent, educated, and white – do so with the expectation, similar to that of audiences who flocked to Chautauqua entertainments a century ago, that Shakespeare will satisfy their quest for cultural and moral enlightenment.

Cultural tourism has become big business, as the OSF can attest. With a budget of over $30 million, an economic impact of $250 million on the Ashland area, and 400,000 tickets sold annually, the OSF is now the largest theatre company in the US. It also has spawned numerous offspring. In the decades following the war, the success of the OSF led to the founding of similar “destination” festivals in different regions of the United States, many of them with university affiliations (see Bennett 2005 on festivals as vacation destinations). The popularity of such festivals reveals that Shakespeare continues to satisfy the hunger of audiences for entertainment that will educate them. These festivals share many characteristics.

Like the OSF, they appeal to an educated audience – largely white, middle class, and prosperous enough to afford a theatre vacation – intent on bettering themselves through edutainment. Thus their productions tend to be theatrically conservative, unadventurous, and broadly accessible. Little is inventive or discomfiting to an audience: directors stay within the limits of orthodoxy in order to keep audiences flocking to the festivals and business coming into the towns that promote them. The entertainment that often precedes performances – Elizabethan dancing, music, juggling, and comedy acts – has its roots in American populism.

Moreover, Shakespeare festivals typically use a mix of Equity and non-Equity actors to form a single company: some are amateurs, drawn from theatre programmes at the universities that house the festivals; big names seldom appear on these stages; actors are overwhelmingly American in nationality and training; and many of them move from one festival to another, building Shakespearean credentials.
as they go. Furthermore, plays run in repertory. This system helps to ensure that a festival can offer a variety of plays over a short period, and thus appeal to tourists who use festival attendance as the purpose of their summer vacation. The motto adopted by the OSF in the late 1940s encouraged visitors to “Stay Four Days, See Four Plays” and provided a model for all of the OSF’s progeny to sell themselves as tourist destinations.

In addition, these festivals are often located on university campuses – in theatres purpose-built for Shakespearean performance, often Elizabethan-style amphitheatres – and get some of their financial and managerial support from the host institution as well. Understandably, festivals with such affiliations share an educational mission with the host university. Productions frequently are linked to academic seminars and workshops; and theatre groups, rather like the enthusiastic members of those Shakespeare clubs that sprung up a century ago, are encouraged to attend festivals for a few days of play-going, lectures, discussions, and meetings with actors.

Finally, in line with their educational mission, festivals have increasingly promoted outreach programmes to regional secondary schools and educators, whether by bringing students to campus for special matinees, by sending actors into schools to perform scenes and offer workshops, or by hosting seminars for teachers. Again, the OSF pioneered such activities, with educational outreach extending as far as southern California: currently nearly a half of OSF audiences are student groups. Such outreach has become a mainstay of Shakespeare festivals, a feature they publicize to demonstrate their seriousness of purpose to ensure the public of their commitment to promoting cultural literacy in schoolchildren and (although unspoken) to groom future audiences in order to guarantee their own economic viability.

A brief survey of three of the most notable festivals will serve to demonstrate these shared characteristics. The Colorado Shakespeare Festival (CSF) performs plays in the Mary Rippon outdoor theatre at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Although the theatre was completed in 1939 specifically for Shakespeare productions, the brain-child of Professor George F. Reynolds, the Festival was not founded until 1958. It currently runs four or five plays in repertory during the summer, primarily but not exclusively Shakespearean, at both the outdoor theatre and the indoor university theatre. Its finances are linked to those of the university, and it employs both professional actors and student interns drawn from colleges across the country. Crucially, the CSF website boasts that “the festival’s education programs reach tens of thousands of school children each year through camps, classes, and outreach performances that connect them with the continuing tradition and importance of Shakespeare” (http://www.coloradoshakes.org/about).

The Utah Shakespeare Festival (USF), on the campus of Southern Utah University, was founded three years later, in 1961, by Fred C. Adams, for whom Angus Bowmer served as a mentor through the early stages of planning. In many ways, this festival is modelled on the successful formula of the OSF. Its first season offered three plays performed by “a small company of college students and townspeople . . . on an outdoor platform backed by a partial replica of an Elizabethan stagehouse” (http://www.bard.org/about/history.html). It has grown considerably in fifty years. Currently, an eight-play season runs from June to October, and plays – a mixture of Shakespeare and modern fare – are performed, as at Ashland, in an outdoor replica of the Globe and in a smaller indoor theatre. A new studio theatre is under construction. Ticket sales
now number 130,000 each season; the budget has increased from $1,000 in 1961 to $7 million today; and in 2012, the economic impact of the USF on the area was estimated to exceed $35 million annually. With a mission statement that promises “life-affirming classic and contemporary plays ... enhanced by interactive festival experiences which entertain, enrich, and educate” (http://www.bard.org/about/mission.html), the company offers summer camps in acting and technical theatre, and hosts various events for schoolchildren. As the USF is near several national parks, it also trades on tourism.

The New Jersey Shakespeare Festival has had signal success on the East Coast. Founded as a small summer-stock company in Cape May in 1963, and led by veteran actor and director Paul Barry, this festival moved in 1972 to Drew University, where a gymnasium had been converted into a performance space a few years earlier. In 1998 a state-of-the-art theatre was built for the festival on campus, allowing its productions to run from May to December; an outdoor stage located on a nearby campus was added in 2002 for summer performances. By the time the company was renamed the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey in 2003, it had won numerous awards and grown into a big commercial enterprise, with 300 staff and artists annually and a budget of over $4 million. Like other successful Shakespeare festivals, its repertory has expanded to include non-Shakespearean plays, although, as at the OSF, the three or four Shakespeare plays performed each year remain the cornerstone of its repertory. With New York City just an hour away, the company can draw on a rich pool of professional talent, so the quality of productions is unusually high. The company’s success may also have been enhanced by the fact that, apart from the free Shakespeare in the Park during the summer, New York City has no major Shakespeare company; and the American Shakespeare Theatre – founded in Stratford, Connecticut, in 1955 as the US answer to the Stratford-upon-Avon and Stratford, Ontario, festivals – was beset with financial and artistic problems from the outset, and closed its doors in 1982 (Cooper 1986). The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey thus has little competition for audiences in an area of huge population density.

Moreover, Shakespeare LIVE!, the company’s flagship education project launched in 1997, has become the mid-Atlantic region’s largest Shakespeare touring company to target junior and senior high school students: by 2012, fully half a million students had benefited from the theatre’s education programmes. With these programmes so central to its project, it is not surprising that the company’s mission statement sounds like that of a Chautauqua lecturer intent on inculcating civilized values and cultural literacy in frontier Americans a century ago:

The artists and trustees of The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey bring dramatic masterpieces of the past to dynamic new life in order to inspire present lives as well as future visions for the world. We are a teaching theatre, fervently dedicated to providing transformative experiences through our live performance of the classics. We integrate education and learning into all our endeavors, while promoting literacy, a culture of enlightenment, a dedication to excellence, and a keen awareness of how the arts are a necessity to the health of the collective mind and soul of any great civilization.

(http://www.shakespearenj.org/AboutUs/mission.html)

Ben Greet himself could not have put it better. Shakespeare is good for you.
In focusing on the intersecting influences of British theatrical practice and Protestant educational imperatives on the evolution of American festival culture, I have ignored other Shakespearean stages that have likewise been shaped by such influences. There is not enough space in one chapter to cover the plurality of stages on which Shakespeare is performed in America today. Major commercial and non-profit companies such as the Chicago Shakespeare Theater, the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, DC, and the Old Globe in San Diego deserve an essay unto themselves, as does the movement begun by Joseph Papp when he launched his free New York Shakespeare Festival in 1954, which shortly thereafter moved to Central Park and since 2002 has been called Shakespeare in the Park. Hundreds of such summer festivals now populate North America, in large cities and small towns, in urban parks and village greens and forest glens – most of them free, many of them under the aegis of colleges and universities. All of them offer audiences a chance to spend an evening al-fresco, enjoying the efforts of actors, both amateur and professional, who share their belief that Shakespeare is an indispensable part of American culture.

While American Shakespeare festivals do not compete – either for audiences or artistically – with those British Shakespeare companies that visit American shores, they have developed a home-grown aesthetic and sense of mission that set them apart from what many Anglophile Americans view as the greater depth and skill of British actors, directors, and technicians. Although the British may have won the laurels for the superior productions they export and for the influence of pioneers such as Ben Greet, Ben Payne, Tyrone Guthrie, Audrey Stanley, Tina Packer, and Kristin Linklater on the development of Shakespearean stagecraft in North America, they do not dominate American Shakespeare production as they once did; and American festivals have evolved into a popular staple of cultural tourism and a significant force in public education.

Yet one visionary academic has sought to build bridges between British theatre training and American populism. In much the same way that Homer Swander formed a touring company of five RSC actors after taking his students to Stratford-upon-Avon to see how Shakespeare “should” be done, Professor Ralph Alan Cohen was inspired by frequent trips to Stratford-upon-Avon with his students to launch a touring company of young actors who would perform plays using what have come to be called “original practices”: playing in an empty space, in universal lighting, with a focus on telling the story clearly, simply, and swiftly. This company, founded in 1988 by Cohen and his former student Jim Warren and modelled on the popular AFTLS, was called the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express after their home at James Madison University in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley. They began by doing residencies at colleges and universities throughout the eastern US, offering workshops in acting and movement and performing plays in big auditoriums, small theatres, dining halls, chapels, lobbies, and lecture rooms – wherever they found a space large enough to surround themselves with an audience. Furthermore, they charged only a fraction of what AFTLS was commanding for the same services. These actors, many of them fresh out of college, were often raw and unskilled; but their youth and exuberance made them popular among student audiences. As they gained skill and confidence, the company was invited to perform at the Folger Shakespeare Library’s Elizabethan theatre, the Shakespeare

In 1999, Cohen and Warren moved the company a short distance to Staunton, Virginia, where they partnered with Mary Baldwin College to create a unique master’s degree programme in the teaching, acting, and directing of Shakespeare, and where, with great entrepreneurial skill, Cohen raised the money to build a replica of the Blackfriars, the indoor theatre used by Shakespeare’s company starting in 1608. Staunton’s Blackfriars Playhouse, a magnificent venue which opened in 2001 for intimate productions of plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, has a deep thrust stage with audience surrounding it on three sides. Plays are performed in universal lighting to ensure an immediate connection between actors and spectators; audience members are recruited to sit on the stage, where they are incorporated into the performance; and there is virtually no scenery.

In 2002 Cohen and Warren cast a company of resident actors to perform at the Blackfriars while the younger company toured. This resident company has matured into a resource – the only one in North America – for performing Renaissance drama throughout the year. With an audacious spirit of invention, in 2005 the company debuted its Actors’ Renaissance Season – now an annual event which attempts to replicate Elizabethan rehearsal practices by having actors prepare plays for performance with no directors, no designers, and few group rehearsals: just actors figuring out their parts on a bare stage with only two weeks to mount a production. This fusion of a British “original practices” aesthetic and training with an American spirit of exploration is producing noteworthy results.

And yet the American Shakespeare Center, as it was renamed in 2005, is not a rival to the RSC or Shakespeare’s Globe. It works with a budget miniscule compared with those of British state-subsidized companies, draws its actors from an American pool (including recent graduates from the Mary Baldwin programme), casts no big names, and performs with more exuberance than subtlety. But, under Cohen’s and Warren’s direction, the actors’ comfort in speaking Shakespearean English, their crisp articulation, their speed and clarity of delivery – goals of paramount importance in British actor training, but seldom achieved by American actors – have begun to rival those of the best British companies. At the same time, performances preserve the spirit of American populism and festive occasion by beginning with light entertainment – Elizabethan dancing, mime, clowning, games – and continuing them during intermissions, recalling how Shakespeare was performed in America through much of the nineteenth century. The company thus achieves an easy blend of high and low culture which is right at home in American Shakespeare, but with which British Shakespeare companies, in so many ways more technically accomplished, would not wish to compete.

REFERENCES


**FURTHER READING**


