

“Is All Our Company Here?”: Shakespeare Festivals as Fields of Cultural Production

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Abstract

I have traveled to and enjoyed the productions at seven Shakespeare festivals in the following states: Nebraska, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas. And over these years I have concluded that we miss something valuable in our understanding of the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries by investing our academic, scholarly interest in performances by the elite theater groups rather than considering the totality of Shakespeare's material influence and cache. Whether culturally inculcated or universally absolute or a multifaceted mixture of both of these factors, Shakespeare as a material good enjoys the remarkable status of high art while also circulating within both large-scale and restricted cultural investment. Simply, as a marketing tool, Shakespeare is entrepreneurially ubiquitous. And as I traveled to these Shakespeare festivals, I found myself wrestling with this question about these productions: Is this “small-time” Shakespeare less than the “big-time” Shakespeare of London, Toronto and New York? In general, we have good reason to maintain a hierarchy of power for dramatic performances. How do we justify our critical approaches to theatrical performance, and how do we justify “star quality,” the establishment of elite theater status, and economic investment if we include “small-time” Shakespeare as fodder for critical engagement and academic interest? Durant, Oklahoma or London, England? Predictably, if one were to plan a trip to see Shakespeare anywhere in the world, that person would probably NOT look to Nebraska or Oklahoma as the vacationing hub of Shakespearean live drama. I intend, though, to have readers rethink such decisions.

Keywords: Shakespeare, festivals, cultural production, drama, market

1. Introduction

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when Peter Quince calls forth “every man's name which is thought fit through all Athens to play” before the Duke and Duchess for their wedding day celebration, he does more than introduce to us the comical characters who want to produce a “very good piece of work” (Shakespeare, 1997, 1.2.4-5 and 11) (Note 1). As performers readying themselves for festive entertainment, they appear before us as representatives of the local community, the brash and most ambitious among them being Bottom. One way to view these characters and their theatrical production is to point to their origin in the history of medieval, mystery drama, which emerges from out of guild and community production. Another source of inspiration for Shakespeare could have come from other forms of entertainments, like civic pageants which often engaged in a full-range of civic activities and citizen participation for its city-wide festivity (Note 2). And other influences on the creation of these community players could have originated from specific events occurring in the region of Shakespeare's childhood. In *Will in the World*, Stephen Greenblatt (2006) suggests that Shakespeare's source of inspiration might have come from the 1575 royal progress at Kenilworth where Harry Goldingham, unable to find his voice, tears off his disguise as Arion, breaks the fourth wall, and proclaims his true identity (p. 49). Some four hundred years later, Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard in *Shakespeare in Love* playfully suggest that Shakespeare's encounters with the ambitious but talentless might have come from those who were mulling about in the taverns and looking for work on the stage. With the professional actors' troupe out of town, Henslowe must audition those who want to be actors for a part in Will's new play. We then see a series of would-be actors try their best to recite Marlowe. As products of the community, they perform at their best for the stage.

For the past ten years, I have traveled to and enjoyed the productions at seven Shakespeare festivals in the following states: Nebraska, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas. And over these years I have concluded that

we—academics and theatre reviewers—miss something about the value of Shakespeare festivals by investing our studied, scholarly interest in performances by the elite theater groups rather than considering the gestalt of Shakespeare’s material influence and cache. Having both local and global appeal and power, Shakespeare as a material good enjoys the remarkable status of high art while also circulating within both large-scale and restricted, elite cultural production. Simply, as a marketing tool, Shakespeare is entrepreneurially ubiquitous. Yet our lens of understanding suffers from a kind of tunnel vision on theatrical performance.

As I traveled to these Shakespeare festivals, I found myself wrestling with this question about these productions: Is this “small-time” Shakespeare less than the “big-time” Shakespeare of London, Toronto and New York? In general, we have good reason to maintain a hierarchy of power for dramatic performances. How do we justify our critical approaches to different theatrical performances—amateur versus professional? How do we justify an emphasis on “star quality” for the professional theaters? How do we justify our academic investment in the study of elite theater while viewing “small-time” Shakespeare as unworthy fodder for critical engagement and academic interest? Durant, Oklahoma or London, England? Predictably, if one were to plan a trip to see Shakespeare anywhere in the world, that person would probably NOT look to Nebraska or Oklahoma as the vacationing hub of Shakespearean live drama. I intend, though, to have readers rethink such decisions.

2. Literature Review

What if we studied theatrical performances with a broad cultural net of understanding? What if we took a less elitist approach? What if we studied the significance of theater within its local context? Then, how does that local production resonate with some global understanding of theatre, especially Shakespeare theatre? If we take this local and global approach, then we can explore theater for what Thomas L. Friedman (2000) calls healthy globalization:

. . . the ability of a culture, when it encounters other strong cultures, to absorb influences that naturally fit into and can enrich that culture, to resist those things that are truly alien and to compartmentalize those things that, while different, can nevertheless be enjoyed and celebrated as different. (p. 295)

Anyone travelling to Shakespeare festivals in the US will discover not only the local flavor of Shakespeare at these venues but will also experience the global effect of Shakespeare on that community. A Shakespeare festival is greater than the performance; it is a glocal field of cultural production that provides social capital for the community and an opportunity to understand the full effect of Shakespeare as a theatrical investment with global appeal.

What do we know about the actual performances on the early modern English stage? We know that great actors—or actors who captivated audience members’ attention—reached a celebrity-like status—Edward Alleyn and Richard Burbage, for example. But did Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences experience evenly performed productions by the actors throughout the cast? We know that only “one troupe, the Lord Chamberlain’s-King’s company, had a continuous existence throughout the period” (Bentley, 1984, p. 12). Given that some twenty commercial companies and well over one hundred troupes toured the provinces of England at this time (Note 3), might audience members typically have experienced uneven theatrical performances, with some great actors and some less-than-successful actors? After all, contemporary jocularly exists concerning Shakespeare’s own mediocre—or less than mediocre—acting talent. Even though early modern England enjoyed a rich culture of entertainers who could sing, juggle, and perform acrobatics, the actual pool of quality actors might have needed time to develop. Bentley (1984) comments on the immense commercial ambitions of the drama enterprise at this time, explaining that truly “the rage for theatrical entertainment was astounding, though most of these companies could never have been very profitable” (p. 13) (Note 4). The need for profit compelled an astounding level of theatrical production. Andrew Gurr (1997) offers an impressive estimate of the performance schedule of these repertory theater groups:

Each afternoon, the same team of fifteen or so players would stage a different play. With only two companies operating in London, the demand was for constant change. . . . A new play would be introduced roughly every three weeks—after three weeks of transcribing and learning the new parts; preparing the promptbook, costumes, and properties; and rehearsing in the mornings—while each afternoon, whichever of the established plays had been advertised around town on the playbills would be put on. The leading players had to memorize on average as many as eight hundred lines for each afternoon. (pp. 3296-97)

The motive for profits probably compelled the investment in energy for these dramatic productions, but this ambitious and hectic schedule introduces the possibility that the stage performances, for even the elite King’s Men, might have produced less than stellar productions from time to time. Even though those who participated in the production of theater in this period would have been well-practiced in the routine of this rigorous agenda, we

can imagine that the rush for production and the need for actors might have combined to create performances in which leading actors performed at a noticeably stellar level than the rest of the cast. And yet the tremendous amount of commercial and artistic energy circulating in the cultural market at the time exceeded what we can concretely study since the scant or non-existent records of these marginal productions do not allow for concentrated investigation.

I propose these stage-performance possibilities because I want to suggest a different approach to the study of our own contemporary live theater, one that focuses on the field of cultural production of live theater rather than the dramatic performance alone. On the whole, early modern English scholarship in peer-reviewed journals focuses its attention on the *elite* dramatists connected with the *elite* theatrical company: both in the past and in the present. Although attention, from time to time, diverts to other forms of entertainments and other writers contemporary to Shakespeare (Middleton, Marston, Beaumont and Fletcher), the premier academic energy continues to surge toward the culturally sanctioned or recognized “top shelf” drama: Shakespeare—past and present—and Shakespeare-associated theatrical venues, Lord Chamberlain’s Men to the Royal Shakespeare Company. And despite post-modern scholarships’ move away from modernists’ beliefs in the existence of ideals and absolute Truths, scholarship on theater relies upon a set of ideals about what a theater performance *should be* rather than allow for the field of cultural possibilities for dramatic production. I believe that we need to broaden critical theatrical scholarship to its local possibilities by looking at theater within its field of cultural production. The community-based habitat of a Shakespeare festival, for example, exists within a site of struggle in which participants seek to maintain or alter the social market of distribution of the forms of capital identified with “Shakespeare” and their culture (Note 5). In other words, a Shakespeare festival engages in a cultural gestalt, in which the cultural production greatly exceeds the theatrical performance. In other words, the performance is only a small part of the greater cultural production.

Due to the precedent placed on quality acting, one can understand why traveling to a major, elite production would be preferred over an amateur or mixed student and equity actor production. In a recent essay on “small-time” Shakespeare, Jeremy Lopez (2004) expresses one possible reason for the little attention academic criticism pays to these types of productions: “such productions have limited resources, and acting is not always very good” (p. 200). Even though Lopez admits later in his essay that the acting in “big-time” productions does not always reach a high level of artistic quality, he makes an argumentative leap here concerning the availability of resources and quality of productions. As my investigation of these festivals has discovered, these production companies have a tremendous amount of resources available: equity actors, theater space, costumes, stage equipment, and community-based financial support. I want to suggest an additional point about these productions by asking this question: How much easier is it to produce Shakespeare in London or New York than it is to produce Shakespeare in Durant, Oklahoma or Kilgore, Texas? The question is probably a moot one, for the way to approach answering that question would be to look at the relative cultural context. Expectations will be higher for the Royal Shakespeare Company than for the Texas Shakespeare Festival; yet the relatively high cultural capital of the RSC performance “sells” the show in ways that other “small-time” performances cannot. So cultural context is precisely what this essay addresses. And I believe that the comic and dramatic power behind the mechanicals’ production of “Piramus and Thisbe” provides for us a point that Shakespeare emphasizes in one of his most meta-dramatic of plays: context determines audience engagement.

I do not want to “attack” Lopez’s point of view and intentions in his essay, so much as add to his work, complimenting and supplementing it. Even though he makes assumptions about live theater that the *homo academicus* on a whole makes, Lopez (2004) provides significant headway in the direction that calls into question these assumptions. However, my own populist approach wants to take this direction further than Lopez’s thesis which intends to focus on the “relationship between actors and audience” (p. 200). Frankly, his essay does not focus on this relationship between actors and audience; it focuses on the performance itself and the audience. Yet one can read his use of the word “actors” as a metonymic substitution for the performance. And his subsequent focus on the performances themselves reinforces his emphasis and his worthy scholarly direction. In addition, without focusing on established Shakespeare festivals themselves, Lopez writes his response to Shakespeare festivals that are largely student productions held at one large festival, The Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The Shakespeare festivals I attended range from large-scale economic and cultural productions—like the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival and the St. Louis Shakespeare Festival—to the contained, community-based festivals—like the Oklahoma Shakespeare Festival. Therefore, most of these drama-centered events have tremendous resources and quality actors in their repertoire. But why, I ask, is so little academic attention paid to these festivals? Produced in nearly every state in the United States, Shakespeare

festivals can teach us much about the field of cultural production of Shakespeare in America and, possibly, in his own time.

The pervasive influence of Shakespeare as a material good astounds American and global culture beyond containment. Cultural marketability from the sales of pizza, books, music, film, academic programs, and live performance makes his works ripe for mass production (Note 6). As a field of cultural production, Shakespeare festivals are major local cultural events and community-service activities. Often providing the social capital of “high art” to the community, these festivals also juxtapose their productions within the *habitus* of the community’s identity and the community’s conceptions of Shakespeare: “. . . *habitus* is what enables the institution to attain full realization: it is through the capacity for incorporation, which exploits the body’s readiness to take seriously the performative magic of the social, that the king, the banker, or the priest are hereditary monarchy, financial capitalism or the Church made flesh” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 57) (Note 7). Obviously, one could argue that all theatrical companies situate their performances within a community’s *habitus*; after all, one wants audience members. But theater criticism has a tendency to disregard a community’s *habitus*, placing priority on the performance rather than the performance within its field of cultural production. As a result of placing the performance within its cultural context, we can see how these festivals engage in Shakespeare in ways that not only aid us in understanding Shakespeare’s place in America but provide us a keen method of identifying the power of Shakespeare’s adaptability, the “Local habitation and a name,” (Note 8) that makes his works invested with the cultural capital that ensures his elite status and populist appeal (Shakespeare, 1997, 5.1.17).

Attempts to categorize American Shakespeare festivals probably have proved to be challenging when applying a mere classification system. The editors, Ron Engle, Felicia Hardison Londré, and Daniel J. Watermeier (1995), of the exhaustive *Shakespeare Companies and Festivals: An International Guide* have separated these entertainments into two broad categories: “‘destination’ festivals and ‘community’ festivals” (pp. xvi-xvii). Destination festivals fall under the large, full-scale professional productions and include the prominent theatrical organizations like the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and the Utah Shakespearean Festival. Typically, these types of festivals have a history of several decades in existence and employ “several hundred artistic, managerial, and technical personnel,” operating nearly year-round (p. xvii). Community festivals comprise the “bulk of festivals in North America,” having an identity connected to a specific locale (p. xvii). The size of these community festivals can range from large, well-funded productions to amateur operated organizations. Based on these definitions, none of the festivals I travelled to would fit in the destination category. However, urban festivals, like the ones in Omaha, Nebraska, Kansas City, Missouri, and Dallas, Texas, continue to emerge into the “destination” category given their growth in size, year-round activity, and accumulating social capital and history. Such festivals, as I will suggest later in this essay, are transitioning into the large, full-scale professional productions as their year-round activities increase their production.

Published nearly two decades ago, Engle, Londré, and Watermeier’s (1995) guide provides a valuable cultural text on these festivals, outlining the origins and history, the missions and purposes, and the production and support for these theatrical events. In fact, I am urging scholars of Shakespeare to pursue a scholarship of cultural engagement that might revolutionize the way we come to understand theater. Based on my observations of these festival rather than categorize them by size, fixed venue, and availability of professional actors, I suggest using the three categories I outline below. One of the most attractive aspects of these festivals involves their social, communal place in their respective localities. Perhaps, this aspect makes the “festival” in their organization’s name an actual *festival*, an event that celebrates the community. In other words, the “local habitation and a name” Shakespeare reflects upon in Theseus’s speech before the mechanicals’ performance comes to life through a sense of communal ownership of a particular cultural brand of production. What makes the Dallas Shakespeare Festival identify with Dallas—or an image of Dallas? And so on. Culturally, the place of these festivals and the social activities that surround them help to understand their primary significance and tremendous appeal. And the physical settings for these festivals can be broken into three categories:

- 1) Urban pastoral: a civic green world of social distinction like an old city park that belongs (or belonged) to an upper middle class or elite neighborhood.
- 2) Festival Theater: an actual theatrical place constructed and established for the purpose of Shakespeare production. The established festivals in Boulder, Colorado and Ashland, Oregon fit in this category.
- 3) Community Theater: an auditorium typically at a university that serves as the venue for a festival.

As invited, hospitable spaces of entertainment, each of these venues shapes the experience of the participants and delivers its own sense of community. As with all theater, the production begins as the audience members enter

the auditorium or arena itself. But for many of these festivals, a pageant of its own field of cultural production performs for the guests as they make their way to their auditory space: donation requests, t-shirts with the festivals own identifying images, food of community flavor, jugglers and performers, a Shakespeare impersonator, and education-based initiatives are all put on display. Like a modern-day civic pageant, the place of these festivals functions as a type of civic celebration, often extolling the virtues and health of the festival and the community itself. And the remarkable, compelling variable in this community event that keeps the mechanism performing is the cultural capital of and interest in Shakespeare.

3. Research Background, Objective, and Methods

For this essay, I focus on my travel to the Shakespeare festivals that do not exist in major urban areas since they prove to be the most remote and, therefore, difficult to attend. These locations are the communities of “small-time” Shakespeare. Why would one travel to Durant, Oklahoma to see Shakespeare when one could travel to or stay in Oklahoma City or Dallas to see Shakespeare and additional tourist attractions? Are these “bad” Shakespeare productions or cultural productions that represent a community’s ideals or both? (Note 9)

Produced in university performing arts halls, both the Oklahoma Shakespeare Festival and the Texas Shakespeare Festival operate as community theaters. Largely due to their territorial, geographical isolation, these festivals rely upon the relatively small, available population of Durant, Oklahoma and Kilgore, Texas to maintain and support their operation. Anyone driving to Durant, Oklahoma or Kilgore, Texas would either need to purposefully travel to these places or happen upon them by way of traveling between major cities: Tulsa, Oklahoma to Dallas, Texas or Shreveport Louisiana to Dallas, Texas. My own 490-mile journey from Hays, KS to Durant, OK maintained a highway path until I exited Highway 35 from Oklahoma City to Dallas and took State 199 to Kingston before getting to Durant. Even though the state route offered smooth travel, I had to slow down and stop in several small towns before making it to Durant, a community that largely enjoys the tourism drawn from the boating and recreational activities of the Lake Texoma State Resort Park. While not quite as out of the way as Durant, Kilgore as a community offers three primary reasons for outsiders to travel to its locale: Kilgore College, the Kilgore College Oil Museum and the Texas Shakespeare Festival. The downtown of both these cities looked as if they had a vibrant, promising past. Kilgore, once the hub of the Texas oil industry, now has a downtown region of abandoned buildings, rusty oil rigs and pump jacks scattered about the area as if ready to call up the now-dead vibrancy of the past. Yet surrounding both the universities of these festivals, I found beautifully maintained homes and communities, a city of abundant magnolias for Durant and a neighborhood of splendidly maintained and architecturally crafted homes from the 1920s and 1930s near Kilgore College. Like so many small cities in the Midwest of America, the economic pulse of these communities center around strip malls and the local Wal Mart. And their Shakespeare festivals underscore civic aspirations for the revitalization and rehabilitation of the community—and quite possibly the resurrection of the promises of the past.

Given that the Oklahoma Shakespeare Festival performs in Montgomery Auditorium on the campus of Southeastern Oklahoma State University, it does not provide the atmosphere of a festival as much as a theatrical event (<http://www.oklahomashakes.com/>). And Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and *The Winter’s Tale* for the 2006 season were not the only productions for the summer; *Beauty and the Beast* and *Love Is Here to Stay: A George Gershwin Revue* shared performances for the 27th season of this festival. I attended a *Richard II* performance on a Thursday night in mid-July, so I have little experience with the entire festival. However, based on the information Riley Risso, the producing director, provided me about the general audience, those in attendance matched her description of the festival’s demographics: roughly fifty year-old, Caucasians (Note 10). Outside the auditorium, an entire display of photos and biographies of actors and directors connected to the festival offered a portrayal of the personnel investment in this initiative. This cultural, historical display of portraits underscores the local appeal—as well as an appeal to locals—of this festival’s investment in Durant, OK. Rather distant and non-intrusive forms of donation requests hovered amid this photo display, mostly in the form of some festival related t-shirts and other Shakespeare associated items. But since the price for admission was twelve dollars, the push for donations seemed rather tame

Montgomery Auditorium, itself, looked to be in need of renovation, having that antique velvet-fabric smell of an old movie house. Actually, I loved it! I kept thinking to myself that here I was in Durant, OK on a Thursday night, watching *Richard II* in a place I imagined most of my scholarly peers would find to be way out in nowhere. I felt the thrill of an academic adventure. Unfortunately, members in the audience did not seem to share in my thrill of an adventure. A group of six senior citizen women, sporting matching purple shirts and ornately decorative red hats, entered talking of their meals at dinner, and as they mulled around their seats, their topic of discussion percolated with a theme I call “cultural medicine”: “We need to be exposed to some of this cultural stuff up here,” I heard one say as they nodded in affirmation and replied with their own flavor of “cultural

medicine.” Across the way from these six women, two couples of elderly people, dressed in suits and evening dresses, shouted hellos to the women, obviously knowing one another from the community. And their topic of discussion: dinner. “Ladies,” one of the gentlemen politely inquired, “What did you all have for dinner this evening.” And they all began to relish in a hospitable performance of shared menus. Then one of the men proclaimed in great jocularity, “Ladies, I don’t know if I’m gonna understand this Shakespeare stuff, but I’m here!” “So are we!” gleefully replied several of the red-hat wearing women in playful unison. In the middle of this exchange I sat and another man about my age sat in the row in front of me. Before he sat down, I noticed that he had a copy of the Arden Shakespeare paperback version of *King Richard II*. Dressed similarly in t-shirts, Abercrombie & Fitch shorts and flip-flops, I felt a kinship with him as I wondered whether or not he might be a faculty member at the university out for an evening of Shakespeare. He shifted in his seat during the conversation—was it agitation or just the combination of a hot summer night in southern Oklahoma and baggy, knee-length shorts? Or both? I never asked.

In all honesty, I truly enjoyed the performance. Yes, the acting was uneven with the obviously better actors playing the parts of the primary characters while the lesser actors played the parts of secondary and tertiary characters. James Harbour, appearing courtesy of the Actor’s Equity Association, played Richard II superbly, and I would say the same for Chad Bradford (Bolingbroke) and Steven Brown (Hotspur), both graduates from university theater programs. There were times when I wanted to shout at some of the actors to keep acting—don’t just say your parts and then stand there until your next cue. But I did not come to this festival with any other expectation beyond what I received: a community theater production. And I came to see the community. Despite the size of the auditorium—which could probably hold at least a thousand people—only about sixty-three people attended the performance. And after the intermission, only forty-nine remained. I feared at one point before the play resumed that the cast on the stage would outnumber the audience. But the community of elderly people I had been eavesdropping upon dutifully returned—as well as the *Richard II*-toting individual in front of me—even though they seemed befuddled over what they were seeing on the stage. “This isn’t what I expected,” one lady remarked, her red earrings dangling like cherries swung with her nodding. Another woman, looking over the playbill, nodded in agreement, asking, “Is this Shakespeare?”

Having grown up in a small farming community in northern Ohio and within a family and community of blue collar workers, I know these people at this Shakespeare performance. They have ideas about Shakespeare as a cultural good that belongs to something outside their own entertainment choices. In fact, they probably prefer *Beauty and the Beast* over Shakespeare—a production that OSF itself seems to understand as having cultural value given that *Beauty and the Beast* was slated to go on tour for four performances in Claremore, Oklahoma in early August. But they are out to see Shakespeare because it is the right thing to do. Unfortunately, I am not convinced that this production won them over. Or is that really the purpose? Gaining converts of Shakespeare. Overwhelming the audience with a stunning performance. Or offering a community good. The mission for this festival wants to provide both, celebrating nearly three decades of bringing “high quality professional theatre” to Southeastern Oklahoma (Morris, p. 3). This festival strives for quality, but it also delivers the cultural good of live performance to a community that would likely not receive the theatrical arts.

A little less than a two hour drive east from Dallas, Texas, the community of Kilgore enjoys an isolation in the piney-woods region of Texas that insulates itself from the harried, dueling, traffic-filled metropolises of Dallas and Fort Worth. And on a Saturday afternoon in mid-July, I wandered about the campus of Kilgore College and the East Texas Oil Museum until I made my way to a Shakespeare garden, devoted to the plants one finds mentioned in Shakespeare’s works—complete with accompanying quotations to help identify the flora. As I sipped my cinnamon and hazelnut coffee, I watched well over two hundred people enter the Applied Arts Building for a showing on *Coriolanus*. Built in 1966 this building portrays the stark unimaginative architecture of the period. However, the building, re-named the Anne Dean Turk Fine Arts Center, houses the Van Cliburn Auditorium, a place adapted and prepared for plenty of Shakespeare festival activity. Outside the auditorium, tables with large umbrellas and chairs provided plenty of places for festival goers to enjoy refreshments, and inside the building I found a gift shop, aka, The Stratford Room.

The spirit of these theater-goers definitely contained a deeply rooted sense of community pride in the festival. I was greeted at the door by several people identified with the festival, eager to help me find refreshments, purchase tickets, or visit the gift shop. In this crowd of people ranging in age from high school students to senior citizens I overheard a series of conversations about the festival productions in the past and in the present. One group of elderly patrons debated the previous year’s production of *Macbeth*. One woman, who looked about seventy years old, grumbled about the costume choice of that production. “They better not try any of that funny business,” she bellowed, while she looked around the room for friendly Kilgorians. The man next to her, most

likely her husband, responded with, “What do you mean?” “Those Japanese costumes. Just not right for Shakespeare,” she replied. Rather credulously, her companion retorted with, “They gotta try some new things, you know, from time to time. They can experiment a little.” “Not with Shakespeare,” she huffed, in a manner that indicated that she was finished talking about this topic. They both sipped their coffee, waving to friends, excited to see so many from Kilgore at the Saturday matinee.

Van Cliburn Auditorium had at least two hundred or so audience members in a space that can hold about three hundred. Having never seen *Coriolanus* performed on the stage, I eagerly anticipated this production, hoping not to be disappointed by a less-than-professional production—even though I was not necessarily there just for the stage production. And I was not disappointed. The stage production was powerful and, at times, mesmerizing, largely to the spectacular performance of the lead actor, Mic Matarrese, playing Caius Martius. Yet other than his performance, the rest of the cast carried the show with exceptional aplomb. And I found myself sucked into a show I believe to provide timely material for our current culture and its global political and martial enterprises. Along with the somber, Sibelius-sounding music of the production, my mind wandered in and out of the plot with a character that becomes the tool for power brokering leaders. I looked about the audience to see whether or not the contemporary application of the play resonated with it. Or did they see *Coriolanus* to be just the leader we needed for our time? On the whole, I saw an audience riveted to the stage, and what looked to be nearly all of them returning after the intermission, busily talking about the action and the fight scenes of the play being so “real.”

As with all of these festivals, the mission for the Texas Shakespeare Festival asserts the desire to bring live theater to a community that is underserved with such forms of art. This mission for the Texas Shakespeare Festival dates back to April, 1984 (<http://www.texasshakespeare.com/>). Well over sixteen years later, the NEA will pursue a similar agenda with its Shakespeare in American Communities initiative, bringing great art to underserved communities. One might think, then, that such ambitious agendas are not all that new since so many of these festivals have been pursuing nearly the same goal. Regardless, on the whole the Texas Shakespeare Festival I witnessed accomplished what it proposes in its mission:

“to create a company with a name that would have broad appeal to professional theatre artists, employing high caliber actors, designers and directors from throughout the nation; to offer professional actors and theater students the luxury of working on plays from the world’s storehouse of dramatic literary masterpieces; and to create a regional play about East Texas world’s storehouse of dramatic oilfield discovery to be produced as a cultural historical memento of our unique and colorful heritage. (Caldwell, 2006, p. 6)

A quality production and a desire to provide live theater that connects to the “local habitation and a name” underscore the ambitions of this mission for the Texas Shakespeare Festival. This regional appeal makes this festival its own, and Shakespeare makes it possible to produce not only what is regarded as high art but to maintain a sense of the civic, communal identity for a culture that sees that identity slipping away. And, yet, this festival and its mission connect well to ideas of the global stage: for both Shakespeare as a global entity and Kilgore’s past global part on the oil stage. The Texas Shakespeare Festival anticipates its global ambitions, here. The tremendous cultural and economic investment in this festival highlights the glocal appeal of this enterprise. As with the Oklahoma Shakespeare Festival, this festival in Texas offers a season of plays that include non-Shakespearean works like *Harvey*, *The School for Husbands*, and *The Monkey King*, bringing audience favorites, classics and global, cultural works to the people of East Texas.

A grassy slope, curved like a halved bowl in a city park still preserved from the heavy encroachment of urban development becomes the ideal location for an outdoor theater, an amphitheater without built-in seats. Urban activity punctuates this theatrical space with heavy-metal sounds of city auto-traffic, occasional sirens, and loud voices of pedestrians. But the show goes on in Forest Park (St. Louis), Samuell-Grand Park (Dallas), Southmoreland Park (Kansas City), and Elmwood Park (Omaha). And the audience members remain insulated within the local habitation of life on the stage. I identify the locations of these Shakespeare festivals as urban pastorals, an idea of place connected to locales of leisure maintained as oases in an urban environment where one travels to escape the harried work schedule. Instead of sheep and the conflicts of shepherds in love, viewers at Shakespeare festivals watch the poetic portrayal of life created by Shakespeare. And, interestingly, all five of the festivals I traveled to that produced plays in this setting performed Shakespeare’s works exclusively. For me, Shakespeare festivals in these urban pastorals provide the best venues for relishing the life of these works on the stage. And I have come away from these urban pastoral productions wondering whether or not there might be something in the very nature of the plays created in the Shakespeare’s day that works best in an open space, a

point Raphael Parry, artistic director of Shakespeare Dallas, and I discussed concerning the differences between producing *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Note 11).

Since I attended the University of Kansas to work on my doctorate in English, I have enjoyed many performances at the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival in Kansas City, MO. This festival—as were all the festivals I traveled to in this outdoor type of environment—is well attended, having anywhere from hundreds to thousands of audience members in one night. And as my friend and mentor at the University of Kansas, Geraldo de Sousa, has often commented upon while sitting amid a packed amphitheater with the audience members sitting on the stone wall that encircles the park, “Shakespeare is alive and well in Kansas City.” Anyone attending these urban pastoral Shakespeare festivals will be able to make the same declaration and insert the respective city. These types of festivals engage in a full array of cultural activities that benefit the community, from educational to artistic to civic forms of material production. And given the outdoor production space of these festivals, these cultural activities often occur between audience members in attendance. Festival goers interact with one another in these urban pastoral settings in ways that would cause a disturbance in indoor productions. For it is not uncommon for festival goers to share food, engage in discussion about the performance, and make acquaintances with fellow festival members. In fact, I consistently have been amazed by the hospitable performances of these urban pastoral Shakespeare festivals. The festival organizers engage in various methods to invite festival members to participate with the event, but festival members also participate in a series of hospitable performances themselves, making these outdoor, dramatic events a remarkably unique congregation of civic engagement.

Even though I have attended many productions at the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival, I will focus on one particular performance—its 2006 production of *Henry V*—since I want to discuss this festival with the context of my summer travels to all of these festivals (<http://www.kcshakes.org/>). And this particular festival experience proved to be especially memorable since I travelled to it with my then-five-year old stepson, Jonah. We made the nearly five hour drive from Hays, KS to Kansas City, MO by making an adventure out of the trip, travelling in my 1999 Ford Ranger—a vehicle “too cool,” according to Jonah, for just any ordinary trip. We were on an adventure. And we bided our time identifying animals along the way—a herd of bison, a badger, and a band of coyotes—and imagining shapes in the limestone formations along the landscape, all while listening to the Beatles and Queen, two of Jonah’s favorite rock groups. (I might have a hand in guiding his musical tastes.)

Situated in an idyllic urban setting, across the street from the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and within an easy walk from the historic City Plaza, The Heart of America Shakespeare Festival performs in the quintessentially cultural atmosphere of the urban pastoral. Festival revelers, including myself, wheel or carry coolers of refreshments to the park—beer, wine, baskets of fine picnic food—and the evening comes alive with an excited leisure. Whatever our busy lives throw at us, this festival offers respite from a hectic world of overloaded information from the Internet and cable/digital television. Here in the multi-ethnic atmosphere of the City Plaza, festival goers can enjoy food and beverages that most participants seem to savor and sip; none of the gobbling down of stadium food one might over-indulge in at a football or baseball game. Jonah and I sample a variety of cheeses: Jarlsberg, feta, and good-old Colby-Jack. While at these urban pastoral events I often wonder if Shakespeare is good for our diets—physically, culturally, and intellectually.

At the entrance to the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival one encounters festival organizers who welcome festival-goers and skillfully ask for donations. As part of this festival’s mission, there is no charge for admission. And the Che Gueverra-esque t-shirts with the double image of Gueverra and Shakespeare and the statement “Free Will” helps to underscore this major part of its mission while also suggesting the rather populist and socialist agenda of bringing quality art to the people. After having visited some 125 Shakespeare festivals in North America, Felicia Hardison Londré and Daniel J. Watermeier (1995) have had ample exposure to the items and images involved in “Shakespeare Selling Shakespeare.” According to Engle, Londré and Watermeier (1995), these pre-show and pre-textual previews for the show “exercise a tacit or explicit imprimatur, and therefore one can safely assume that those visuals reflect the values and goals of the festival” (p. 52). Yet given the rather socialist implications of the image, Sidonie Garrett, Producing Artistic Director, assured me that no deliberate liberal agenda guided the mission of the festival. In fact, given that the festival relies upon donors and sponsors who come from a variety of political affiliations, she emphasized that she purposely does not impose a political agenda within the production—even though she and others in the production might want to do so. And, interestingly, she often finds herself pulled by both the left and the right with reviewers and festival-goers wanting her to “use” Shakespeare as vehicle for the support of ideals and beliefs that they see in Shakespeare. Otherwise, some of these critics argue, how is Shakespeare relevant? Why produce even a comedy like *Much Ado about Nothing* if there is no perceived relevance to our present cultural issues? However, Garrett and I both

discussed that one of the powers of Shakespeare's works is its ability to "reveal" what one might be looking for, a testament to his works' durability and longevity. My own desire to read the Iraq War within the production of *Henry V* and in the title of Felicia Londré's (2006) title to her short introduction to the play—"A 'Band of Brothers' Looking to a Leader" (p. 4)—demonstrates my own liberal preview of the show and what I am looking for in the production.

I find it fascinating at these festivals to witness the near-theme-park atmosphere of these cultural events. Typically, someone dresses like Shakespeare or in "English Renaissance" attire and tries to imitate the voice of Shakespeare's day. Fortunately, at the festivals I travelled to for this study such activity was tastefully performed and at a playful minimum. At none of these festivals did anyone go to the extreme of a Renaissance Festival event. Much to Jonah's delight, swords were part of the pre-show material, given the Medieval background of the play. So along with my purchasing two t-shirts I obtained a sword for Jonah's imaginative amusement during the show. Certainly, Dennis Kennedy's (2008) analysis of cultural tourism and Shakespeare at the Globe Theatre applies at these festivals in regard to commodifying Shakespeare: ". . . the Globe presents a Shakespeare that has crossed over from high art representation to the realm of commodified icon and image available to all consumers" (p. 187). This commodification of Shakespeare and representations of "his period" speak to the cultural production of these festivals, signifying the identity of the festival and the community more than providing or pursuing any historical accuracy. Engle, Londré and Watermeier (1995) make this point when they discuss examples of copy-righted designs like the Texas Shakespeare Festival's "sophisticated-looking Elizabethan face to combine with the Lone Star State flag" (p. 55). Accuracy and authenticity of depiction remains fluid and dynamic at these festivals in the face of cultural production.

In fact, these festivals serve the community more than any desire to pursue some kind of authentic, high art performance of Shakespeare. And I think that this intention is often missed by those who might be scholars of Shakespeare rather than cultural explorers. At the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival that night, well over fifteen hundred people were present—this hillside packed with festival-goers while others sat on the stone walls that encompass part of the park. Jonah and I found a great spot to watch the play, and while the play progressed Jonah would jump to his feet and flash his sword around, pretending to engage in the fighting on the stage. He and I could not have enjoyed this production in this manner in a closed theater. Eventually, Jonah invited two young college women to take part in his own version of *Henry V*—something they enjoyed as they called Jonah the new Johnny Depp.

In between the fight scenes, Jonah would settle down—maybe after some coaxing by me—and ask questions about what was happening on the stage. Much to my delight, he followed the plot very well and could identify the "bad guys" by their accents. As the live performance continued, I realized that this live urban pastoral venue offered me the best way to teach my son something about live theater. He and I could talk about the play, and I could not only discuss with him what I thought about the play but I could also engage in a conversation with those around me. This communal communication at these types of plays is very common. I have had many conversations with fellow festival-goers, usually about the performance and the festival itself. At the Dallas Shakespeare Festival, for example, a young couple sat near me during the 2006 production of *The Tempest* (<http://www.shakespearedallas.org/>). The young man, a construction worker, wondered why I was writing down notes during the performance. "Are you a critic or something?" he asked. I explained what I was looking for at this festival, and he was more than eager to offer his ideas about the festival. As it turned out, the first time he had ever attended the Dallas Shakespeare Festival was during the 2005 season for the first date he and his present girlfriend went on. They were now celebrating their one year anniversary as a couple. He informed me that he would have never come to festival on his own had he not wanted to impress his girlfriend with "different kind of date," meaning a picnic under the stars while watching Shakespeare. I soon found out that he was hooked on Shakespeare. Having read the reviews of both plays being produced that summer—*The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—he let me know that *The Tempest* had "some problems with the energy of the acting." His summary of the play was actually quite on the mark based on one of the reviews of the festival, so I knew that he had read the reviews before going to the festival. Quite excited to speak with me about the festival and how much he valued it for Dallas, he told me that the main reason they were at *The Tempest* that evening was because it was their anniversary. But once his girlfriend went to the concession stand during the intermission, he was more than anxious to show me the engagement ring he would give his girlfriend the next night when he and his soon-to-be fiancé would watch *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—the play he really wanted to see because he read it.

As I watched *The Tempest* that night in Dallas, I thought that someone must have planted this guy next to me. But, then, as I reflected upon other stories I had heard from people who went to these festivals for special

occasions I knew that this young man's story was not unusual. I, myself, went to the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival during the summer of 2001 to see *Twelfth Night*. Earlier that summer, my fiancé, Anne Turner, had passed away due to cancer. *Twelfth Night* was one Anne's favorite plays, and she and I went to the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival every summer. In that urban pastoral environment, sitting among other festival-goers, I felt a strong connection to the experience of the play and the community of festival-goers that night. I did not need to discuss with anyone how special or important it was to be at that play, at that festival. But I could "hang out" with others who wanted to enjoy a performance in which several characters conceal a sense of self as they face the loss of loved ones.

4. Results and Discussion

At these festivals, I have found tremendous community pride. At the same Dallas Shakespeare Festival on the following night, I sat near two women who were friends and worked together as nurses. One of these women had been coming to the festival for many years as far back as when it was held in its previous location in Fair Park. For her friend, this night was her first time attending a Shakespeare festival. During what proved to be my all-time favorite production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we engaged in light banter about the play, the people at the festival, and the food we brought to the festival and, soon, began to share. Amid what must have been about three thousand festival-goers that night, I found myself fully engaged in not only the performance but the spirit of the festival. The music had a 1970's flair and psychedelic flavor, and the mechanicals were transformed into the working class of Texas, making Bottom a Hispanic "lawn guy" rather than the weaver. Obviously, there is cultural appeal to this depiction for in Dallas, as the production director Raphael Parry explained, everybody has a lawn guy who is typically an undocumented worker. The music, the play, the go-go dancing clad fairies resonated spiritually with an audience of over three thousand. And I imagined that somewhere in that audience, at some time during the performance, a young man orchestrated his own wedding plans, producing a ring and proposing to his future wife.

The breadth of this essay cannot cover all of the festivals I have had the exciting and vibrant experience of travelling to and witnessing the cultural spectacle of live Shakespeare. I only intend to open up the possibilities for future study of live theater and its cultural production. Easily, one could write a single essay on each of these festivals, going beyond the performance and engaging in the habitus of the company or organization creating the entire entertainment: from sponsorship/patronage, educational initiatives, local identity, audience expectations and to marketing. One of the most valuable aspects of these festivals involves their educational initiatives, which often make these festivals year-long theatrical activities. The Shakespeare Festival of St. Louis, for example, has three attractive and exciting education programs. The Metro Youth Shakespeare program engages students in a "collaborative 10-school student production" that works with "teens from diverse backgrounds to study and perform Shakespeare" (*Dream and Discover*). Again involving students, the other two education programs open up the world of Shakespeare and performance to elementary students who might otherwise be underserved: The North Side Neighborhood Partnership and City Academy. Each summer, festival-goers get the opportunity to see the splendid work of these educational programs. And children attending the festival that night can participate in these programs as my son, Jonah, did after seeing a rap-adaptation of *Julius Caesar* that completely enthralled him and capped off with his chance to lead a group of children up and down the hillside aisles, chanting "Julius! Caesar!"

My own academic training prepared me to regard Shakespeare Festivals with harsh, judgmental criticism. After hearing my mentors talk about performances they have seen at some of the great theaters in the world, my expectations followed a prescribed script: anything other than an "elite" production is banal. Lopez (2004) uses "banal" often in his response to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. And at one point in his essay, he grapples with the place of "banal" Shakespeare asserting that "Academic discourse has not yet come to terms with the phenomenon of bad Shakespeare productions, . . ." (p. 207). I agree. And had Lopez offered alternative ways to look at and review Shakespeare productions that are other than the "elite" productions, he would have helped to alter the attitudes about these community productions. But he does no such thing. Instead, Lopez makes a few well-placed stabs at support only to retract such valiant gestures with attacks on performances that are less than "stellar." So why has academic discourse not come to terms with "bad Shakespeare productions"? According to Lopez (2004), it's because "this phenomenon is so persistent" (p. 207). I suggest that academic discourse had not come to terms with "bad" Shakespeare because it's too closed-minded and wrapped up in maintaining its own elite status to explore the options in the cultural value of alternative and community-based productions of Shakespeare (Note 12).

5. Conclusion

The National Endowment for the Arts' Shakespeare in American Communities and Folger Shakespeare Library's Shakespeare in American Life suggest that the time is ripe for a concentrated exploration and study of the field of cultural production of Shakespeare in America. They become "destination" festivals when we re-examine our purpose for going to live theater. Scholarly curiosity stimulates alternative ways to see our objects of study. After all, don't we ask such things of our students? Do not go to these festivals with tunnel-vision focused on the performance. We learn very little when we call other productions of Shakespeare "small-time," "banal," and "bad." I suggest that one navigate oneself around the field of possibilities based on the culture producing the live performance. Walk around the community. Listen to the voices of the people who are there. Experience the local habitation as a scene of knowledge with global appeal.

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Notes

Note 1. Quotations come from *The Norton Shakespeare*

Note 2. Bergeron opens his revised edition of *English Civic Pageantry 1558-1642* with a discussion of the duties required of Thomas Middleton which included his providing a breakfast and fire for "the children scheduled to perform in his Lord Mayor's Show, *The Triumphs of Integrity*" (p. 1).

Note 3. Bentley, pp. 12-13.

Note 4. See Note 1

Note 5. See Pierre Bourdieu and his discussion in "Rites of Institution." *Language and Symbolic Power*. (pp. 117-126).

Note 6. Plenty of studies in the past decade have addressed the marketability of Shakespeare. Here, I am thinking of Michael D. Bristol's *Big-Time Shakespeare* (1996) and Barbara Hodgdon's *The Shakespeare Trade* (1998).

Note 7. See Pierre Bourdieu's *The Logic of Practice*, p. 57.

Note 8. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.17.

Note 9. I have in mind Jeremy Lopez's statement: "Academic discourse has not yet come to terms with the phenomenon of bad Shakespeare productions, perhaps precisely because this phenomenon is so persistent" (p. 207). I address this idea later in my essay.

Note 10. Riley Risso, e-mail to the author, 11 Oct. 2005.

Note 11. During my interview with Raphael Parry, we discussed the differences between two plays that utilize as locations the outdoors yet have a different theatrical sense of place. *The Tempest* has a contained feel to it while *A Midsummer Night's Dream* relishes in expansiveness, even though Shakespeare frames that play within the urban environs of Theseus's court in Athens. We speculated about two possible influences. One, the changes in theater production within the period of time for the performance of each play could have refined the sense of theater. And two, the influence of the enclosed theater at Blackfriars could resonate in the creation of the actual plays as writers consider the locale of a play's production.

Note 12. I would like to note that Lopez makes another attempt at supporting community-based productions of Shakespeare by stating the following: "Academic discourse should rise to the challenge of taking on professional Shakespeare seriously" (p. 207). But on that same page he offers a note that helps to explain his use of "banal": "The banal professional Shakespeare to which this paragraph refers is exemplified by the hundreds of summer Shakespeare festivals and regional Shakespeare theaters that relentlessly cycle through a set list of Shakespeare's greatest hits, often in order to provide a foundation on which to build a repertoire of other classic, modern, and musical greatest hits." Of course, he has the festivals I discuss in mind in this statement. But, again, he makes no real effort to understand any of the productions he covered within their cultural field of production.

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