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REVIEW ESSAY

“The Joys and Accessibility of Shakespeare’s Theatre”: Notes on the American Shakespeare Center’s Summer/Fall 2015 Season

NIAMH J. O’LEARY, *Xavier University*

Shakespeare’s Joan of Arc (Henry VI, Part 1)

Presented by the **American Shakespeare Center** at **The Blackfriars Playhouse**, Staunton, VA. ASC Summer/Fall Season, September 12–November 28, 2015. Directed by Jim Warren. Stage Manager/Assistant Director, Lauren Alexis Miller. Fight direction by Jeremy L. West. Costumes by Jennifer C. Bronsted. With Rick Blunt (Warwick), Patrick Earl (Burgundy/Suffolk/John Talbot), Sarah Fallon (Somerset), Allison Glenzer (Margaret/Countess of Auvergne), John Harrell (Beford/Salisbury/York), Abbi Hawk (Joan of Arc), Stephanie Holladay Earl (Henry VI), Chris Johnston (Charles/Vernon), James Keegan (Talbot), Patrick Midgley (Exeter/Reignier/Edmund Mortimer/William Lucy), Gregory Jon Phelps (Bishop of Winchester/Bastard of Orleans), and René Thornton, Jr. (Duke of Gloucester).

The Winter’s Tale

Presented by the **American Shakespeare Center** at **The Blackfriars Playhouse**, Staunton, VA. ASC Summer/Fall Season, July 10–November 28, 2015. Directed by Jenny Bennett. Stage Manager/Assistant Director, Lauren Alexis Miller. Costumes by Jenny McNee. Properties by Christopher Moneymaker. With Rick Blunt (Antigonus), Patrick Earl (2nd Lord), Sarah Fallon (Paulina/Mopsa), Allison Glenzer (Shepherd/Emilia), John Harrell (Autolykus), Abbi Hawk (Hermione/Dorcas), Stephanie Holladay Earl (Perdita/Mamillius), Chris Johnston (Clown/1st Lord), James Keegan (Leontes), Patrick Midgley (Florizel), Gregory Jon Phelps (Camillo), and René Thornton, Jr. (Polixenes).

A Midsummer Night’s Dream

Presented by the **American Shakespeare Center** at **The Blackfriars Playhouse**, Staunton, VA. ASC Summer/Fall Season, June 20–November 29, 2015. Directed by Ralph Alan Cohen. Stage Manager/Assistant Director,

Lauren Alexis Miller. Costumes by Jenny McNee. Properties by Christopher MoneyMaker. Fight direction by Patrick Earl. Choreography and movement by Stephanie Holladay Earl. With Rick Blunt (Puck/Starveling), Patrick Earl (Flute/Peaseblossom), Sarah Fallon (Titania), Allison Glenzer (Hippolyta/Snug), John Harrell (Oberon/Snout/ Philostrate), Abbi Hawk (Hermia), Stephanie Holladay Earl (Helena), Chris Johnston (Lysander), James Keegan (Theseus/Cobweb), Patrick Midgely (Demetrius), Gregory Jon Phelps (Bottom), and René Thornton, Jr. (Egeus/Quince).

In a post on the American Shakespeare Center's ASC Education Blog on October 9, 2015, ASC Co-Founder and Director of Mission, Ralph Alan Cohen, questioned the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's *Play On!* project, an effort to "translate" Shakespeare's plays into "modern English." Cohen argued the project was fundamentally flawed because "the assumption it makes about what audiences are capable of enjoying underestimates audiences, actors, and the nature of theatre." Cohen's cogent defense of performing Shakespeare's words was upheld by the delightful experience of seeing the plays staged at the Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton, Virginia. Shortly after Cohen's blog post was published, I had the opportunity to see three of the four Shakespeare plays featured in the ASC's Summer/Fall 2015 season, and it was clear that in these productions the ASC had lived up to its mission, underlined in that blog post, to "recover the joys and accessibility of Shakespeare's theatre, language, and humanity by exploring the English Renaissance stage and its practices through performance and education." Blending anachronism with original staging practices and capitalizing on the rich opportunities presented by a resident company performing four plays in rep, the ASC's productions delivered on Cohen's promise that Shakespeare's original language can be comprehensible and enjoyable to all audiences.

Originally named the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express, the ASC was formed in 1988 by Ralph Alan Cohen and Jim Warren. Eleven years later, the company, which had received attention nationally and internationally, relocated to Staunton, VA, and began raising money and planning the construction of an authentic recreation of Shakespeare's indoor theater, the Blackfriars Playhouse, which opened in September of 2001. A year later, the theater cast its first resident ensemble. Now marketing itself as "Shakespeare's American Home," the ASC produces sixteen plays a year. Each of those plays is performed in conditions that draw on original staging practices: no sets, universal lighting (which means that the actors can see the audience, and the audience members can see each other), brisk

spacing in an attempt to achieve the promised “two hours’ traffic” (*Romeo and Juliet*, Prologue 12), plenty of music, and actors doubling parts.

I saw these plays within the context of the biennial Blackfriars Conference, which provided a significant frame for the experience. All of my commentary is colored with the excitement of seeing these plays in a theater full of experts, which heightened the anticipation of and delight in climactic moments—and also guaranteed that the audience got all the “inside jokes.” While seeing these plays during the conference added to the experience, they remain excellent productions regardless of the audience. By highlighting several consistent strengths across three productions, I hope to demonstrate the ASC’s season-wide quality. In particular, this review will consider how the productions used music; how the ASC capitalized on repertory performance and brilliant casting/double casting to add layers of meaning; how these productions, though lacking set and lighting effects, still achieved moments of impressive spectacle; and, of course, how innovative direction kept these plays fresh.

Music

In their “Staging Conditions” notes, available both on the ASC’s website and in the front matter of every program they print, the ASC emphasizes music alongside costuming, sets, and lighting. “Shakespeare had a soundtrack,” the note claims, and the ASC preserves music’s place within performance, updating it with contemporary music audience members can rely on to help them interpret the action of the play. One of the delights of seeing a play at the Blackfriars is the pre-show music, provided by the actors themselves playing instruments and singing from the balcony above the stage. It’s always chosen to fit the production in some way, and those familiar with the play’s plot can find humor in the song choices. The pre-show music for *The Winter’s Tale* included covers of Alabama Shakes’s “Hold On,” Aretha Franklin’s “Respect,” and Simon & Garfunkel’s “Cecilia.” Intermission featured another *à propos* selection: The Faces’ “Ooh La La,” with its memorable chorus “I wish that I knew what I know now when I was younger,” helped to transition the audience forward sixteen years in time to the play’s concluding acts. In act four’s long sheep-shearing scene, the assembled shepherds and bumpkins broke into song and dance to John Denver’s “Thank God I’m a Country Boy,” confirming the action’s relocation to the happy country setting of Bohemia and the play’s shift from tragedy to comedy. Meanwhile, the pre-show music for *1 Henry VI* consisted primarily of songs in praise of women, telegraphing the play’s focus on Joan of Arc. The interval concluded with

a performance of Steppenwolf's "Born to be Wild," segueing directly into Joan's plan to enter Rouen. ASC's use of contemporary music both underscores the celebratory aspect of attending live theater and shapes audience members' receptivity to certain characters or ideas. The cheery silliness of their cover of the Lovin' Spoonful's "Do You Believe in Magic?" set the right light-hearted tone for *Midsummer's* potentially menacing fairies, and Steppenwolf helped us step away from Joan's saintly reputation to admire, or perhaps even question, her zealous violence.

Casting

1 *Henry VI's* pre-show music's focus on women was no accident, since ASC retitled their production *Shakespeare's Joan of Arc*. (Interestingly, their announcement for next season advertises 2 *Henry VI* as *The Rise of Queen Margaret*). Their season program cover featured a confident Joan (Abbi Hawk), her face bloody, wearing chain mail and leather, with flames rising from her cupped hands. By contrast, the promotional photo of Henry (Stephanie Holladay Earl) depicted the young King looking particularly anxious, knees drawn up and clasped to his chest, fear plainly written on his face, dwarfed by the heavy ermine-lined robe draped around his shoulders and the massive throne he sat on. Casting a young woman as Henry VI emphasized the King's youth, and Earl used her slight physique to good effect, seeming physically uncertain and hesitant. Her performance contrasted sharply with Hawk's confident physicality as a sexually mature, physically powerful Joan (Fig.1).

One of the advantages of staging shows in rep with an ensemble company is the extra layer of meaning created by viewing the plays in rapid sequence, considering how the plots and themes mirror each other. In this case, Margaret's claim, "To be a queen in bondage is more vile / Than is a slave in base servility; / For princes should be free" (5.5.68–70), called to mind Hermione of *The Winter's Tale*, who would take the stage the next night. Similarly, as Joan refused to acknowledge her father when he called "God knows thou art a collop of my flesh" (5.6.18), I thought ahead to Leontes's pondering Mamillius's legitimacy (1.2.137), and his rejection of Perdita.

Beyond these echoes, the productions' casting created extratextual meaning. Stephanie Holladay Earl, who played Henry VI in *Joan of Arc*, played Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale*, and her casting as both of these male characters developed an effective, tragic echo between the two sad youths. When one considered the tension between Earl as Henry VI and



Fig. 1. Abbi Hawk as Joan of Arc in the American Shakespeare Center's 2015 production of *Shakespeare's John of Arc (1 Henry VI)*, directed by Jim Warren. Photo courtesy of Tommy Thompson.

Hawk as Joan in concert with the disrupted friendship of Earl as Helena and Hawk as Hermia in *Midsummer*, further ripples of meaning arose: Earl always remained the more tenuous figure—the youthful King, the abandoned Perdita and deceased Mamillius, the misvalued Helena—while Hawk had the power of Joan's agency, Hermione's endurance and strength, and Hermia's certainty of love. Such connections enrich one's experience of live theater and the ASC invited us to make them by including a two-page "Casting Grid" in the program that listed actors across the top and plays down the left-hand margin, thus showing in direct visual conversation the parts each actor played in each production.

Within the context of the Blackfriars Conference, where presenters whose papers exceed the allotted 10 minutes are chased offstage by a bear, the whole audience was particularly eager for *The Winter's Tale's* famous "exit, pursued by bear." John Harrell played the bear brilliantly, but before that he was the Mariner speaking with Antigonus. He added a bear claw gesture and growl when he warned Antigonus that "this place is famous for the creatures / Of prey that keep upon't" (3.3.11–12), getting a great laugh from the audience. Throughout the production, Harrell took every opportunity he could to make bear noises. This proclivity carried forward into *Midsummer*, when Harrell as Oberon drugged Titania's eyes and took the opportunity in his incantation to emphasize, "Be it ounce, or cat, or BEAR" (2.2.36), to roaring laughter from the audience. Again, we can see the advantage not only of playing these shows in rep—because the audience recognized Harrell as the bear from *The Winter's Tale*—but also of playing to the Blackfriars Conference attendee crowd, who had spent several days dodging the bear themselves.

During the *Winter's Tale's* intermission, Harrell came onstage in the bear costume and danced. Toward the end of intermission, he removed the bear's head and began speaking the 4.1 monologue by Time, moving us forward into the play's second half. The connection between the bear and Time implied by this double casting—both unstoppable forces, both wholly natural—helped draw together the play's sorrowful first half, its startling shift to absurdity and comedy before intermission, and the ensuing turn to romance. As Time spoke of Perdita and Florizel, the actors playing them entered, Florizel teasing Perdita and chasing her by pretending to be a bear. Once more, the ASC's inspired double casting was used to great effect: Stephanie Holladay Earl, the same actress who had portrayed Mamillius, appeared now as Perdita, a vivid embodiment of the lost child who would be found.

Double casting again yielded brilliant performance opportunities in *Midsummer*. Cohen handled the casting of Rick Blunt as both Starveling and Puck with great humor and creativity in 3.1. Starveling, angry with the suggestion that the ladies might “be afeard of the lion” (3.1.26), stormed out, shouting and slamming the door behind him. When he re-entered as Puck at 3.1.46, hilariously, Alison Glenzer’s Snug could *see* him, and gestured in silent fear and horror at him, trying to draw the other Mechanicals’ attention. The joke was doubly entertaining because Glenzer herself was *also* double-cast, as Snug and Hippolyta. Thanks to this choice, the ASC had the chance to do a unique take on the “Pyramus and Thisbe” performance. Hippolyta jumped up before the play and offered, “Let *me* play the lion!,” taking the written-out part from Peter Quince. As she read, “For if I should as lion come in strife / Into this place, ’twere pity on my life” (5.1.220–21), she sat on Theseus’s lap. Unusually, Cohen chose not to bow to convention and double cast Theseus/Oberon and Hippolyta/Titania. Instead, double casting Hippolyta and Snug led to this metatheatrical joke at the play’s close and allowed the audience to see the fierce Amazon as the tamed lion. Notably, Glenzer’s Hippolyta had a strong sense of humor about herself in this part.

Spectacle

While the ASC uses universal lighting and no set, they still manage to create moments of great drama and even spectacle onstage. One such moment occurred in *Henry VI, Part 1* as Joan greeted, “ye familiar spirits, that are culled / Out of the powerful regions under earth” (5.3.10–11). The spirits were embodied by three actors in black, shimmery suits that completely covered their bodies and faces. The suits’ suggestion of latex hinted at fetish and the forbidden. The spirits sinuously slid up from the stage’s trap door and danced in frightening gyrations around Joan, appearing like nothing so much as malevolent inkblots in an ever-changing Rorschach test. It was an impressive effect to achieve in a theater without dramatic stage lighting, and the eerie music added to the sense of dread. The spirits conveyed a wonderful sense of menace, suggesting that Joan might be in danger from her own invocations. In *The Winter’s Tale’s* trial scene (3.2), the actors achieved a similarly chilling moment by capitalizing on the theater’s universal lighting. Hermione entered from the back of the house, walking through the audience, underscoring how exposed she was to public humiliation in the trial. She walked slowly, clearly uncomfortable and in pain, allowing the audience to see and understand how

weakened she was by labor and delivery. Once onstage as the accusations against her were read, Hermione slowly looked around the full house, making eye contact with patrons. It was a deeply uncomfortable experience, and it brought the voyeurism of the trial home to the viewer in a vividly real way that wouldn't be possible in the darkness of a conventional theater, where the patron can hold more tightly onto the illusion of the fourth wall. By staring right at us, Hawk made us complicit in Leontes's abuse of Hermione.

One of the most creative moments in *The Winter's Tale* occurred in 2.1, which began with a sweet tableau: Hermione sat on a bed in her nightdress, her heavily pregnant belly prominently displayed in the loose gown. Mamillius sat at her side, and a maid lay across the foot of the bed. The scene presented a visual surprise by including the large set component, as ASC productions traditionally do not employ sets. However, the choice to include the bed (not required by the text itself), allowed director Jenny Bennett to stage Leontes's violation of it, a decision Sarah Fallon (Paulina) discussed with audience members at the talkback after the performance. The domestic scene was delightful with Mamillius rambunctiously jumping around, making them laugh, and demanding a story (Fig.2); and Leontes's intrusion upon it to haul Hermione to jail was startling. As Leontes ranted about having drunk and seen the spider, the bed was still visible upstage, and the charming domestic image as Mamillius whispered his story to Hermione contrasted sharply with Leontes's fury. After Hermione was taken to prison, Leontes's glances at the now empty bed seemed only to feed his fury. A silent witness to the marital contract he was violating, the empty bed suggested a vivid palimpsest of the happy family it no longer held. At the scene's end, after the stage cleared, the audience was startled as Mamillius crawled out from under the bed, revealing that he had been listening all along. Stephanie Holladay Earl's profound look of sorrow was deeply affecting.

Aside from "exit, pursued by bear," *The Winter's Tale* is known for its most famous moment of spectacle: the reanimation of Hermione's statue. The ASC handled this with a deft, simple touch. Without dramatic lighting, they achieved a lovely effect by placing Hermione on a pedestal behind translucent white drapes. She was dressed in a Grecian manner, in a white gown and blue overgown, the colors and shape of her costume invoking Marian iconography of the Virgin Mother. She revived only after several long moments of utter stillness on stage with all the attendant characters ranged in a semicircle in front of her, their backs to the audience, waiting. Posed with her head bowed and eyes downcast, Hermione



Fig. 2. Stephanie Holladay Earl as Mamillius, with Abbi Hawk as Hermione and Ensemble, in the American Shakespeare Center’s 2015 production of *The Winter’s Tale*, directed by Jenny Bennett. Photo courtesy of Lindsey Walters.

came to life with a sudden indrawn breath as she raised her head. These subtle motions were rendered spectacular by the onstage actors’ amazed collective startle in response. Hermione moved gracefully, stepping off the pedestal and heading straight for Leontes, whom she embraced and kissed. Their gestures were almost balletic as he held her, lifted her off the ground, and turned in a slow circle. The simple movements, graceful execution, and clever staging together crafted a sense of the miraculous in this scene.

Direction

Finally, another of the ASC’s strengths is the creative choices in direction that keep these plays both fresh and accessible. In particular, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* demonstrated this skill. It’s a challenging play to render fresh, given what well-trod theatrical territory it is. But Cohen made some very clever choices to present a unique approach to *Midsummer*. The production opened with John Harrell, who was to play Oberon, Snout, and Philostrate, costumed as the latter character in a

tux and delivering a hilariously snarky curtain speech calling the play "Shakespeare's least well-known play" and "the most expensive nap I ever took." This humor sold particularly well to a room full of academics who had spent the weekend discussing less familiar texts, but it would carry, I am sure, to any audience.

One of the best-known characters of the play, Bottom can be tough to perform in an original manner. Gregory Jon Phelps's characterization emphasized his overeager nature: he was jumpy when not speaking, always anticipating his next opportunity to contribute. Rather than self-important, he appeared the overeager younger child in the playground, trying to take part in the big kids' game (Fig.3). At the end of 1.2, Bottom and Quince (Renè Thornton, Jr.) engaged in a funny display of one-upmanship, each struggling to have the last word. Bottom won with his "Hold, or cut bowstrings" (1.2.90). This emphasis on his almost geeky quality—desperate to be liked, always trying a bit too hard to participate—both fed humorously into his "translation" into an ass and provided a lovely contrast with Harrell's reserved, aloof attitude as Oberon.

Puck presents a similar challenge, and Cohen's creative casting here opened up a world of rich new territory. Rick Blunt, who had previously played Falstaff in *1 Henry IV*, is an unusual choice for Puck: a large, muscular man, rather round, as opposed to the elfin mischievous Puck one might expect. Immediately recognizable as Falstaff, he was a shocking Robin Goodfellow. Emphasizing him as a physical oddity among the fairies, Jenny McNee costumed him like an overgrown boy, in high-waisted knickerbockers with suspenders and a cap. Harrell's Oberon was amusingly dismissive of Puck—this was not the tender master/pet servant relationship we sometimes see in *Midsummer*. Rather, Harrell was a bored, barely tolerant superior to Blunt's oafishly attentive Robin. Meanwhile, the other fairies, attendant on Titania, were similarly costumed as outgrown children. The absurdity provided good comedy, but also undercut Titania and Oberon's self-important melodrama. Titania (Sarah Fallon) was oddly devilish, wearing a headdress with horns, red paint across her forehead, and a black dress of spidery lace under a glittering black cape; while Harrell's Oberon, in a silken turban and robes caught up with velvet tassels, resembled nothing so much as Thomas Phillips's famous 1813 portrait of Lord Byron. The menace of Titania, modulated by her goofy attendants and lust for an ass, was a nice match for the amusing aloofness of Oberon. Neither fairy monarch seemed to delight as much in the foibles of the humans or their schemes as they did in their own presence. A choice like this would have been less successful if Cohen had double



Fig. 3. Gregory John Phelps as Bottom and René Thornton, Jr. as Quince in the American Shakespeare Center's 2015 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Ralph Alan Cohen. Photo courtesy of Lindsey Walters.

cast the Athenian lords and the fairy monarchs, but because he did not, the audience could revel in this odd assemblage without reading it as a direct commentary on the Athenian court (though it was not a far leap to imagine Hermia, Helena, Demetrius, and Lysander as just as childish as the overgrown fairy attendants). Notably, Fallon was not double cast, but Harrell was. He played not only Philostrate, who was just as aloof and self-important as Oberon, but also Snout. As Snout, he was Wall in "Pyramus and Thisbe." After watching his self-important performance for the previous four acts, it was a wonderful treat to see him locate the chink in the wall and engage in some truly uproarious physical comedy—all with a straight face, of course.

The ASC has many theatrical weapons in its arsenal, but the one it wields best is its successful devotion to original staging practices. The use of double casting in concert with performing plays in rep rewards both loyal patrons who visit for a week and see several shows in quick succession, and academics who find new meaning revealed through odd marriages of actors and characters. To be able to say that I better understand Henry VI after thinking about Mamillius, or that Hippolyta is informed by Snug, is truly to appreciate the joy of theater at the Blackfriars Playhouse.

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