



washington
theater
review

FALL 2005

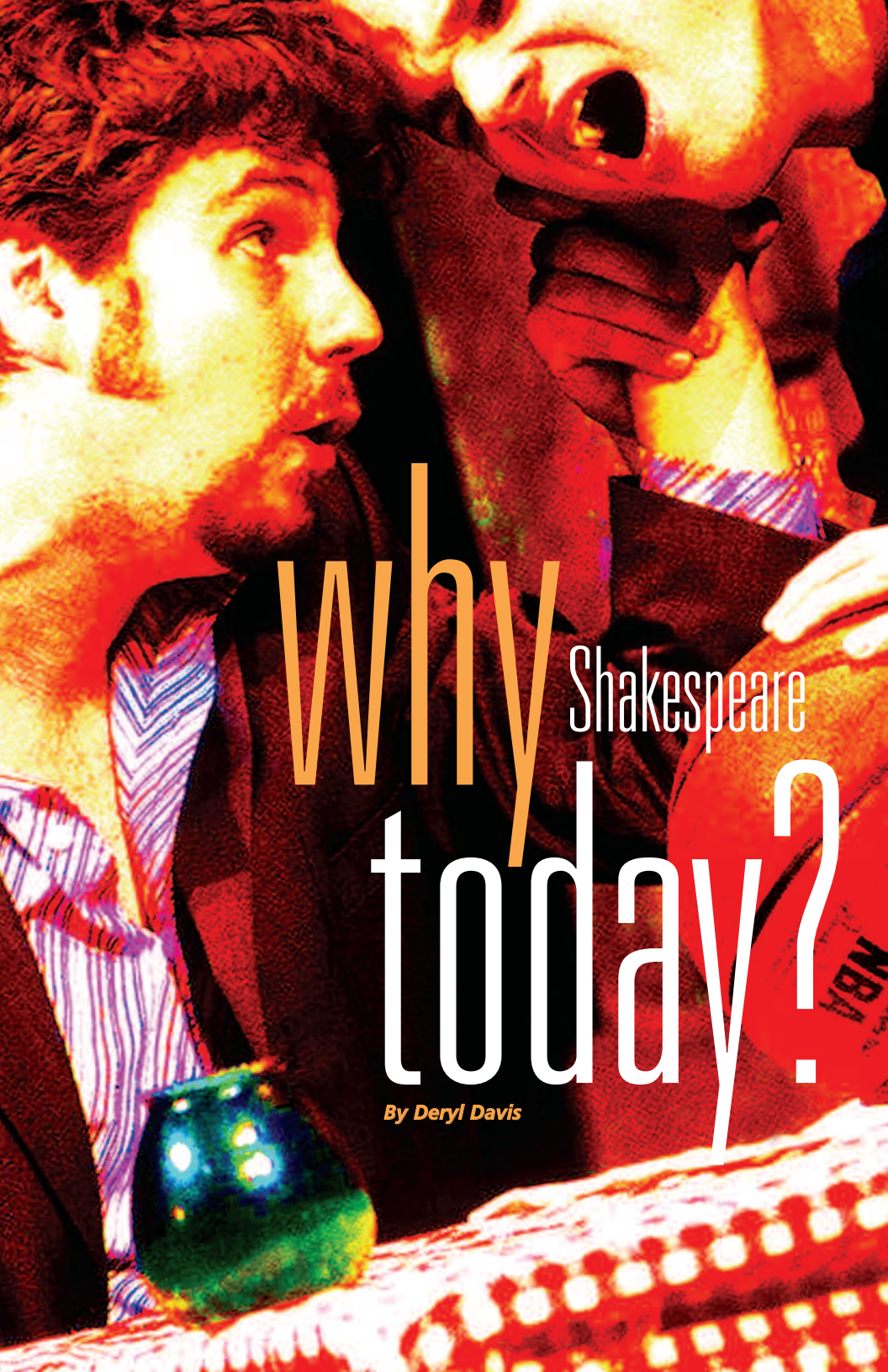
Jews vs. Christians:
Broadway Star
Theodore Bikel
Portrays this
Ancient Debate

Ted van
Griethuysen
Expands His
Range in
A Number

Keeping
Shakespeare
Fresh for Today's
Audiences

DC's Youngest
Playwrights
Collaborate With
a Latin Flavor

**AVERY
BROOKS
RAGES AS
THE NOBLE
MOOR**



why Shakespeare today?

By Deryl Davis

There's been so much Shakespeare done in this town in the last few years," says Washington Shakespeare Company (WSC) Artistic Director Christopher Henley, "that the question becomes, 'Why do it now? Why do it at all? What's going to make your production of Shakespeare different from the last one people saw?'"

According to some local theater directors, there's more Shakespeare to be seen in Washington than anywhere else in the country. This year alone, you'll have the chance to see professional productions of *Othello*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Measure for Measure*, *Richard II*, *Hamlet*, and *Love's Labor's Lost* at area theaters, and this list is not exhaustive.

The WSC's Henley believes the sheer amount of Shakespeare being done in our politics-saturated city raises the bar for every future production of the Bard. While that's a good thing, it's also a challenge. "You've really got to work hard to get an audience interested in seeing a play they

may have seen at another theater just a few years ago," he says.

This, in part, is why Henley's own company is doing only one Shakespeare play next year—a production of *Richard II* in April directed by SCENA Theatre Artistic Director Robert McNamara. While a few WSC subscribers may have raised eyebrows, this is a matter of pragmatics: with so much Shakespeare on the boards, every new production is a bit of a risk, and it has to offer audiences something different.

How, then, does a director "freshen" Shakespeare for contemporary audiences and for theatergoers who have already seen *A Midsummer Night's Dream* three or four times?

Shakespeare Theatre Company Artistic Director Michael Kahn, by any measure the "Dean" of Shakespeare directors in Washington and perhaps the nation, frames the question this way: How do you make a 400-year-old work clear and resonant to the life of the audience and to your own?

Folger Theatre's *The Comedy of Errors* directed by Joe Banno (Photo by Carol Pratt)

"For me, the important thing is to make these characters as alive and psychologically interesting and complex as possible," says Kahn, recipient of a 2005 Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Director. "I'm not going to go look for parallels to my own time and place, but inevitably, I'm going to interpret the play in some way that relates to my own life."

Any production of Shakespeare's work centuries after it was written is going to be a form of interpretation, Kahn asserts. "What else do you [the director] do but reinterpret? These plays have lasted so long *because* they are so very interpretable."

The Shakespeare Theatre Company will offer three productions of the Bard this year in its regular season of classical works. Kahn will direct season-opener *Othello*, followed by *The Comedy of Errors* in the winter and *Love's Labor's Lost* (which Kahn also will direct) next summer. The latter production—set in 1960s Beatles-era India—will travel to Shakespeare's hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon in 2006 at the invitation of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

While Kahn doesn't consider himself a "historically accurate director"—that is, he doesn't feel obligated to recreate the look of Shakespeare's own productions—he does direct Renaissance settings of the Bard (though by his own estimate, about 50 per-

cent of his productions are period or modern settings). In the end, fidelity to the author's work is what matters to Kahn.

"You can do anything with a classic as long as you illuminate the text," Kahn declares. "That's a director's job."

Kahn considered setting his upcoming production of *Othello* in modern dress, but eventually decided against it, feeling that the original Renaissance backdrop presented the ubiquitous issues of racism, jealousy, and obsession clearly enough. The director believes that Shakespeare's extraordinary understanding of human nature doesn't require a particular setting (contemporary or otherwise) to make the stories relevant.

"The [sense of] humanity and the psychology of character found in these plays isn't that different from our own," Kahn says. Turning to *Othello*, the award-winning director notes that questions raised in the play are as real today as they were 400 years ago. "What is it like to be the stranger in a community? What is it like to be passed over for a job? What does obsession do to a person?"

Kahn also describes a "cinematic quality" and internal rhythm in Shakespeare's work which makes it accessible to modern audiences. Entrances and exits often overlap, scenes meld one into another, and time and place can change in the blink of an eye.

While modern settings sometimes offer a particular immediacy, it's the language that matters most. "You can't make it a visual experience alone and think you're doing Shakespeare," Kahn asserts.

It's no secret that Shakespeare's language, beautiful as it is, can be a problem for theatergoers. Source Theatre Artistic Director Joe Banno, who often directs Shakespeare at the Folger Theatre, argues that confining the Bard to the Renaissance (or whatever the original setting) can accentuate the problem.

"Why introduce the barriers of quaint costumes and architecturally correct buildings in stage flats?" he asks. "You already have Shakespeare's language, and that's challenging enough. Why add anything else?"

Banno agrees with Kahn that contemporary audiences aren't essentially different, emotionally or psychologically, from those in Shakespeare's day. Therefore, a modern *Hamlet* ought to have as much dramatic impact as Shakespeare's Renaissance version did centuries ago. Both, he notes, are "contemporary" to their time and place of performance.

"Shakespeare didn't choose Elizabethan dress because it was quaint," Banno asserts. "It was what the audience wore every day, and what they could relate to. He could attain the highest level of poetry and philosophical

thought and still not lose the groundlings [the day-laborers, who bought the cheapest tickets] because he was using their language."

Banno believes that audience resistance to modern settings of Shakespeare, when it occurs, is largely the result of misperception. "A guy sitting in an office cubicle under fluorescent light, dealing with a crisis in his personal or professional life, isn't one iota less dramatic or less epic than if he were dressed in pumpkin hose, carrying a sword, standing on an Elizabethan street," Banno asserts. "This is the everyday stuff that we do. It's just because we're living in this particular moment that the contemporary trappings seem mundane. They [Shakespeare's costumes] must have seemed mundane to the Elizabethans, too."

Banno, who says he approaches Shakespeare the same way he would approach "David Mamet or any other contemporary playwright," is known



Folger Theatre's
The Two Gentlemen of Verona
directed by Aaron Posner
(Photo by Carol Pratt)

for his specific period settings of the Bard. At the Folger Theatre, he has directed a Huey Long-era *Macbeth* set in the bayou (with echoes of the 2000 election crisis), a Mafioso-inspired *The Comedy of Errors* set in modern-day Brooklyn, and a 1980s corporate culture *Merchant of Venice*, among other productions.

“What excites me is to find points of contact between Shakespeare’s world and our own,” Banno says. “I like to make it [the setting] as specific as possible. If you make a modern setting less specific and water it down, you lose something in terms of theatrical punch and how the play can speak to people watching it this week, this month, this year.”

By way of example, Banno points to the opening scene in his 1995 production of *Merchant of Venice*: Expensively dressed business people sit at tables in a “power restaurant” reading the financial pages, talking aggressively on cell phones, and obsessively checking

investment figures on laptops. But, like Shakespeare’s merchant Antonio, they are powerless to control the outcome of their investments.

“They’re pacing around Venice

just like Antonio, saying ‘I hope to God my ships come in,’” Banno recalls. “It’s almost impossible for an audience not to see people they know in that—to say, ‘Oh my God, that’s my brother-in-law!’”

Banno says he’s been “surprised and gratified” by how readily Washington audiences embrace his updates of Shakespeare. If there’s an element of conservatism, he suggests it’s more likely to come from theater administrators (as a whole) than audience members themselves. And he adds that the track record for contemporary and period Shakespeare proves his point.

“Every [modern] production expands the potential audience for Shakespeare and the number of people in DC who say he’s approachable. You hear people say, ‘I really liked this,’ ‘They made parallels’—that ‘aha’ moment is worth its weight in gold in terms of bringing people in.”

WSC Artistic Director Henley agrees that the contemporary approach to Shakespeare, which has dominated many Washington stages over the past decade, has paid off.

“Actors and audiences are a lot less fearful now,” Henley says. “You don’t get people saying they can’t understand, and they’re able to relate to Shakespeare in a more obvious fashion.”

Henley, who has directed both Elizabethan (often referred to as



Page 44: Folger Theatre’s *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* directed by Aaron Posner; This page: Ian Merrill Peakes and Holly Twyford in Folger Theatre’s *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* directed by Aaron Posner (Photos by Carol Pratt)

“traditional”) and modern settings of Shakespeare, warns against getting too specific with thematic parallels. He also sees a distinction between “modernizing” the histories or comedies and attempting the same with the great tragedies.

“When Shakespeare writes a play like *Henry V*, he’s re-imagining history for himself,” Henley says. “The politics were often very topical, and might transfer into the present. But if you’re doing *King Lear* or *Hamlet*, those plays are so universal—if you’re too specific [in making time and place parallels], you could lose something.”

By way of example, Henley points to his own productions of *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet* in the WSC’s first season (1990-91). Inspired by the fall of the Berlin Wall, Henley set *Julius Caesar* on the rooftops of Ballston, VA, where the intrigue

of empire and power take place amid modern glass and steel. He pointedly went in the opposite direction with *Hamlet*, however, feeling that the classic tragedy could be weighed down by contemporary references. In addition, there had recently been several modern-dress productions of it.

“If a play has been experimented with a lot, it’s interesting to go back to the original setting,” Henley says. “On the other hand, a specific time or place can inform a play in a new way.”

Henley cites several examples from recent memory: a 1996 *Merchant of Venice* set in 1960s Italy, in which racism and xenophobia exist in a more subtle—and perhaps insidious—way than in Renaissance England; a 1999 all-female *Taming of the Shrew* set in Paris, which exam-



David Marks (left) and James Sugg in Folger Theatre's *Twelfth Night* directed by Aaron Posner

(Photo by Carol Pratt)

ines the theme of misogyny from what might be termed "the inside-out"; and a female-lead *King Lear* (played by Mikel Sarah Lambert in 1994) which examines mother-daughter relationships.

There are, of course, theatergoers who take issue with such changes. A familiar lament is "Why don't directors do Shakespeare the way *he* did it?" To which Henley responds: first, all the actors would be wearing tights; and second, they would all be male. (Women did not perform onstage in Shakespeare's day, and indeed, no woman performed in a Shakespeare play until 1660.)

"He didn't write female roles because he knew Meryl Streep would be playing them 400 years

later," Henley insists. "What he knew was that boys would be playing them for the life of the play."

Henley also points out that the plays are themselves filled with anachronisms. A clock chimes in *Julius Caesar*, centuries before its invention; a character named "Pistol" appears in the Henry plays before the invention of the eponymous firearm; and the University of Wittenberg wasn't founded until centuries after the historical Hamlet walked the streets of Denmark.

"These weren't Cecil B. DeMille epics," Henley says. "The plays had things in them Shakespeare's audience knew firsthand."

Henley also suggests that many theatergoers don't realize the impact that financial considerations and time constraints have on the staging of a play. While WSC usually budgets 16 actors for a Shakespeare play (fewer than the average number of roles), it has sometimes used far less. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Producing Director Lee Mikeska Gardner, used only eight actors; Henley's *Hamlet* employed 12. These changes, in part financial but also artistic, helped to give the productions a fresh, new dynamic, with accomplished actors playing multiple roles.

Time constraints are another factor. Many of Shakespeare's

plays easily run three hours or more, longer than some contemporary theatergoers are willing to sit.

"The acceptable running time for plays is shrinking," Henley says. "You can't do Shakespeare in two-and-a-half hours unless you cut a lot. That's when many decisions get made—about keeping the play fresh and re-ordering things—to pare down minutes and characters and permit double casting."

According to Henley, there's a balance to be struck between another retread of a popular Shakespeare drama and the danger of puncturing the essence of a

play. Somewhere between the two is "a fresh angle, a position on the edge" which is true to the original vision.

Aaron Posner, resident director of The Arden Theatre Company in Philadelphia and a favorite guest artist at Washington's Folger Theatre, is regularly acclaimed for finding that magical "edge." He recently directed *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at Folger, which garnered him a 2005 Helen Hayes Outstanding Director Award. (Two separate productions received Outstanding Director Awards in 2005.) Like Kahn, Posner starts working on a Shakespeare play by considering his own relationship to it, not

pua naturally
life, love, beauty

Designs that are refreshingly original, contemporary, and timeless. We would like to invite you to experience the beauty of our clothing, the elegance of our handmade jewelry and the arresting imagery of our fine arts gallery. Live naturally...Pua Naturally.

10% off regular priced items, with this ad.

444 7 street nw, washington, dc 20004 202.347.4543



David Marks, Sarah Marshall, and James Sugg in Folger Theatre's *Twelfth Night* directed by Aaron Posner

with questions of how it might be contextualized.

"For me, it's through a personal connection," Posner says, "not a when-where approach. Lots of people find richness in making historical, specific time-place connections, but what I really enjoy is making up worlds that never existed."

Like the vast majority of Posner's productions, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* eluded specific time or place determinations. Audiences knew the setting was somewhere in the modern era, but the mix of Vaudeville and Commedia Dell'Arte styles, costumes from the 20s and 30s, and music from the 40s placed it in a more universal context. And like the rest of Posner's signature work, *The Two*

Gentlemen of Verona was highly theatrical, abandoning the usual realistic conceits.

"I'm passionately interested in truth and complexity, but not so much in day to day reality and not onstage," Posner says. "I'm looking for ways of getting at truth that are more inherently theatrical, that demand more leaps of belief on the part of the audience."

In contrast to The Source Theatre's Banno, who also directs at the Folger, Posner largely avoids period settings, telling designers that "it's fine to see a Pepperidge Farm cookie onstage, but not the whole package," because that would take the audience into another, non-imaginary world. Now developing a production of *Measure for*

Measure, which he will direct at the Folger next January, Posner says he will no doubt be influenced by contemporary political and religious debates. But you shouldn't expect to see any of them directly referred to (or inferred, for that matter) onstage.

"It will be my own imaginative setting inspired or evoked by the world around me," Posner says. "That makes it endlessly fascinating and much harder than, say, doing *Richard III* in 1933 Germany—going to costume books and histories of the Weimar Republic."

Instead, Posner starts with what he calls "a blank palette." He

asks himself what music exists in the world he's creating, what art, and how these things can have universal appeal.

"Aaron's shows have an archetypal feel that transcends specific period details," says Janet Griffin, the Folger Theatre's artistic producer. "He's very concerned with what the characters are really saying, with a truthful presentation."

That, of course, is what all Shakespeare directors are after in the long run. And Washington audiences can be grateful, both that so many fine directors are tackling the Bard in our backyard, and that his plays are so resilient to so many tellings. **WTR**



DC's source for knitting & crochet yarns, books, tools, and community.

NOW TWO LOCATIONS

CAPITOL HILL
731 8th St. SE, Washington, DC
202.544.8900

GEORGETOWN
1071 Wisconsin Ave. NW, Washington, DC
202.333.5648

www.stitchdc.com