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## Review

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# A National Shakespeare Touring Company

by Mary Jane Freeman and Paul Gallagher

There was a time in our nation's history, well over a century ago, when the plays of Shakespeare were a major part of our national culture, entertainment, and thinking, from the Irish neighborhoods of Manhattan, to cowboy and railroad camps in Utah and California. The bard's plays were presented—often not complete, but with faithful intent—playfully to involve the average citizen in thinking about the paradoxes of history, the demands of leadership and the qualities of love. President Lincoln gave his cabinet members late-night discourses and powerful recitations from Shakespeare; Generals Grant and Sherman suited up in costume, along with so many others, for rustic western performances watched by railroad men and troops. Americans wanted their Shakespeare “raw,” with plainly intelligible speech, open humor, and grandly visible gesture and action. They wanted to learn history from Shakespeare, and the characteristics of great human lives, and small. New York's Irish rioted against British actors who substituted genteel elocution for passionate acting.

Shakespeare was America's bard. The major collections on Shakespeare's life and work are in America, not England; there are in America 18 theaters built on the model of Shakespeare's Globe Theater, but in England only one, and that reconstructed by an American actor.

How far we've fallen. It is still true, that any Hollywood film of Shakespeare—or about Shakespeare, his life and writings—becomes popular, be it good, bad, worse or worsen. But the historical and human truth of Shakespeare's plays has become unrecognizable. Both filmmakers, and also the major live professional companies like the National Shakespeare, cover every performance in a haze of wierd psychodramatic interpretations, politically correct re-settings, scores from Bert Bacharach to acid rock, or just outright tear the plays up and rewrite them. “Premier” Shakespearean actors pride themselves on shouting or whispering their lines so rapidly that few audiences can understand what's being said.

### The ‘Shenandoah Shakespeare Express’

So, it now depends upon smaller touring companies and even amateur acting groups to try to bring back honest Shake-

speare. One truly national touring company, and surely one of the best, is the Virginia-based “Shenandoah Shakespeare Express.” The two acting groups of the Express are currently performing six plays across the United States: *Richard II*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, *Othello*, Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, and *The Roaring Girl*, by Shakespeare's contemporaries Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton.

So named because they attempt to perform every Shakespeare play within approximately two hours of unbroken action (no scene or act breaks), Shenandoah Shakespeare Express is putting on a play somewhere in the 50 states, 220 days out of the year. The company was founded only 12 years ago, by James Madison University Prof. Ralph Alan Cohen and his co-director, Jim Warren, in Staunton, Virginia.

This company makes an excellent effort to present Shakespeare “raw and true,” to the limits of their and their directors' comprehension of the plays. Line by line, individual scene by scene, they succeed brilliantly in staging and action, on what is often just a high-school gymnasium floor, surrounded on three sides by the audience and with normal lighting throughout—they are attempting to replicate the relation between actors, audience, and surroundings characteristic of the Elizabethan stage.

The Express's audience hears every thought clearly, sees the humor in every turn of plot, gets every joke and discovers anew the true hilarity of which Shakespeare is capable. The characters often speak directly to and “with” spectators, whom they can see around the stage. The actors, young but extremely well-trained in stagecraft, throw themselves passionately into the action, and use the bare thrust-stage space extremely well. The end and purpose of all is the clear *intelligibility* of Shakespeare to their audiences—which always include a lot of children—and in this, Shenandoah Shakespeare Express consistently succeeds. For the Shakespearean history plays and tragedies, their costumes are consistent with the period setting of the play when composed; for comedies, they may costume in modern dress. But they do not consciously introduce *modernisms*, as do so many companies in mis-

guided efforts to make great truths “relevant” to audiences presumed to be uninterested in truth. The company’s attempt to understand the tragedies as history, is evident in their educational work with aspiring teenaged actors, as in their performances.

There are only 12 actors in each of the Express’s two touring groups, and so each actor plays two or three roles in each play, despite the lack of act or scene breaks. This challenging practice is, again, their historical view of how Elizabethan dramatic companies worked.

### A Step Beyond Intelligibility

To impress the guiding idea of one of Shakespeare’s masterpieces upon the minds of an audience—what the play *as a whole* is about, what does it call us to realize about human life—is a different, taller order than to make intelligible each individual speech and action. This higher task, Shenandoah Shakespeare can achieve as well: as in their *Richard II*, which we review below; or in their wonderful performance of Shakespeare’s paradoxical triumph of love, *Much Ado About Nothing*.

In other cases, Shenandoah Shakespeare may fail at this second step, as with Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* and Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. Their very pace can be a problem for cognition; the burst of each scene on top of the ending of the scene before it, can leave the spectators no time to reflect and grasp a deeper sense of what is happening. Their sheer hilarious comic skills can lead them overboard. In *Dr. Faustus*, their slapstick staging of the scene of the Seven Deadly Sins, compounding similar mistakes earlier, breaks the spectators’ concentration, reducing the impact of the ensuing terrible death of Faustus, to an old wives’ tale. In their *Twelfth Night*, this problem spawned a series of mischaracterizations, exemplified by the portrayal of the melancholy Lady Olivia—acted absolutely brilliantly, but wrongly—as another comic character along with her clown and her retainers.

At Shenandoah Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, the audience spends the two hours rolling in the aisles with laughter, but *thinking* at the same time. The spectators at their *Twelfth Night* are also in stitches throughout—but that’s all; they are left wondering, “What was that all about?”

These shortcomings come only from the limitations of the company’s comprehension of Shakespeare’s (or Marlowe’s) idea. And many of Shenandoah Shakespeare’s performances are so good, that one does not find shortcomings, but wants to see their efforts imitated as widely as possible. One such is *Richard II*.

### Legitimacy To Rule: Richard II

Shakespeare, as with Friedrich Schiller after him and Aeschylus before him, composed plays and poetry of universal ideas, that is, ideas relevant for all time. If indeed their plays are performed as written, the ambiguities and complex dy-

namics of human relations confront the viewer so as to cause him or her to reflect on their life and whether they are part of the problem or the solution to the unfolding of history.

The presentation of the bard’s *Richard II* tragedy by the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express adequately portrayed the burning question explored in the play: If the legitimacy to rule is lacking, is it appropriate to depose a king? Shakespeare posed this question in his day to his ruling monarch, Elizabeth I—who paid this play great attention on this account. It is highly relevant today as our elected officials concern themselves with personal gain and exercise of power for its own sake, at the expense of the population’s general welfare.

In King Richard II’s day (reigned 1377-99), his failure to act on behalf of the general welfare led to civil war. As poet Schiller wrote in *The Stage Considered as a Moral Institution*, “The jurisdiction of the stage begins where the domain of secular law comes to an end. When justice is blinded by gold and revels in the wages of vice; when the crimes of the mighty scorn her impotence and the dread of human power has tied the hands of legal authority, then the stage takes up the sword and the scales and drags vice before a dreadful tribunal. The entire realm of fantasy and history, the past and the future are at its beck and call. Bold criminals, who have long since turned to dust, are summoned to appear before us by the all-powerful voice of poetry and to reenact their shameful lives for the instruction of a horrified posterity.” Shakespeare and Schiller put these issues before us in hopes we would reflect on such failures of character that we might change to secure a better future.

Shakespeare’s play opens with King Richard II preparing to mediate a royal feud between the King’s cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford, later King Henry IV, and Richard’s trusted knight Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, who accuse each other of treason against the interests of the King. Richard, unable to cool their demands for a duel, sets a trial day, proceeds to convene the contest and arm the combatants, and then at the last minute calls it off, and sends both antagonists into exile. By Richard’s act, the seed of destruction unfolds, as the audience intimates when he has Bolingbroke and Mowbray return to take an oath.

You never shall—so help you truth and God!—  
Embrace each other’s love in banishment,  
Nor never look upon each other’s face,  
Nor never write, greet, nor reconcile  
This luring tempest of your home-bred hate,  
Nor never by advised purpose meet  
To plot, contrive, or complot any ill  
’Gainst us, our state, our subjects, or our land.

Scene four drives home Richard’s real motive in banishing the Duke of Hereford, his cousin and a potential heir to

the throne. He tells his hangers-on at court that Hereford had a “courtship” with “the common people,” as if, Richard rebukes, “our England [were] his.” His rival now removed, Richard shows us the bankruptcy of his rule. He declares that he will wage war against the “rebels in Ireland” and to finance it, he will tax the “royal realm” to whatever extent required.

**Richard:** Bushy, what news?  
**Bushy:** Old John of Gaunt is grievous sick, my Lord,  
Suddenly taken, and hath sent posthaste  
To intreat your Majesty to visit him.  
**Richard:** Where lies he?  
**Bushy:** At Ely House.  
**Richard:** Now put it, God, in the physician’s mind  
To help him to his grave immediately!  
The lining of his coffers shall make coats  
To deck our soldiers for these Irish wars.  
Come, gentlemen, let’s all go visit him;  
Pray God we may make haste and come too late!

These six lines are the seed crystal of the tragedy which unfolds. John of Gaunt is Bolingbroke’s father. Act II opens with Gaunt, dying, pronouncing the likely demise of England if Richard does not change his ways. Richard turns a deaf ear.

The ripest fruit first falls, and so doth he;  
His time is spent, . . . ;  
So much for that. Now for our Irish wars.  
We must supplant those rough rug-headed kernes . . .  
And for these great affairs do ask some charge,  
Towards our assistance we do seize to us  
The plate, coin, revenues, and movables  
Whereof our uncle Gaunt did stand possessed.

Stricken with horror and grief, the last remaining son of King Edward III, the Duke of York (Richard’s uncle and Gaunt’s brother), cries out yet one more warning to the King to mend his ways. York says,

If you do wrongfully seize Hereford’s rights,  
. . .  
You pluck a thousand dangers on your head,  
You lose a thousand well-disposed hearts,  
And prick my tender patience to those thoughts  
Which honor and allegiance cannot think.

Richard yet again fails to heed the voice of reason.

### **The Tragedy Becomes Unavoidable**

The noblemen of the realm take heed of these events, band together, and join forces with the returning banished Duke of Hereford, who comes in arms to reclaim his “rights and royalties.” Deserted by his noblemen, Richard, returning

from the Irish wars, begins to unravel. He relinquishes power to Bolingbroke, who in turn determines that to “proceed without suspicion” to ascend the throne, Richard must “in the common view” surrender his crown. The remainder of Act IV, the deposition scene—subject of tremendous discussion and controversy in Shakespeare’s lifetime—has the audience witness the dissembling of Richard’s will and vanity. In Act V, Bolingbroke assumes power, but not without peril, as the divine right of kings, in that day, was considered sacred, and he had just usurped the throne. Or in the words of the cleric, Bishop of Carlisle, who speaks against this assumption of power:

My Lord of Hereford here, whom you call king,  
Is a foul traitor to proud Hereford’s king;  
And if you crown him, let me prophesy  
The blood of English shall manure the ground,  
And future ages groan for this foul act; . . .

Indeed, Shakespeare writing this play 500 years after the reign of Richard II, has the Bishop prophesy the War of the Roses, which would follow Richard’s rule 50 years later.

The great strength of the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express performance of *Richard II* was in the completely clear use of Shakespeare’s own words, to give this turn in the history of modern nations plain life before the audience, and in the truthful development of the characters. In this regard, director Jim Warren had King Richard evolve from a foppish dilettante, to a greedy self-serving careless heir to the throne, to a broken, dissimulating dethroned king, as indeed Shakespeare intended.

Likewise, the skillful portrayals of the Duke of York—torn between two royal loyalties—and of Henry Bolingbroke—from put-on hothead, to righteous returning soldier, to lamenting king—all added to the tension of the questions presented by the play. The male roles (even those played by women) were all well done. Unfortunately, the three women (Duchess of Gloucester; Isabel, Richard’s queen; and the Duchess of York), as presented, lacked a certain depth and maturity to successfully convey their part in this unfolding history.

Finally, the complexity of the plots and counter-plots, and pageantry of this play were artfully done by Shenandoah Shakespeare Express without elaborate set changes or costuming. Its presentation of *Richard II* had a driving pace, without rushing, which enhanced the focus on the dialogue and content of the play.

The times and locations across the country of the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express’s remaining 2000 touring schedule, mid-September to mid-November, and its 2000-2001 tour schedule, can be found on their Internet site, [www.ishakespeare.com](http://www.ishakespeare.com). Admission for performances range from free to about \$15, depending upon the hosting facility.