

# "What service is here?" Exploring Service Shakespeare

Michael P. Jensen, Contributing Editor, Shakespeare Newsletter

---

## Abstract

This introduction to the cluster on Service Shakespeare introduces the essays, considers the current state of the field, and suggests topics for future consideration.

---

The reason for this issue of *Borrowers and Lenders* is to explore some current facets, though not so much the limitations, of the still-emerging area of Shakespeare studies commonly called Service Shakespeare. It is an attempt to partially answer the questions, "What is Service Shakespeare currently like, and what has it the potential to become?" The idea for the issue began with Michael Dobson's 2012 Shakespeare Association of America (SAA) seminar, "Voluntary Sector Shakespeare." Most papers studied amateurs mounting a Shakespeare performance, but three papers were different from the rest. Those by Amy Scott-Douglass, Isabella Schwartz-Gastine, and me were about volunteer productions that served communities in need.<sup>1</sup>

The first such community I was aware of is served by the Shakespeare program at the Luther Luckett Correctional Complex in Oldham County, Kentucky, the subject of the moving documentary *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, directed by Hank Rogerson and released in 2005. I soon learned of other theater programs in different correctional facilities. Indeed, most of the literature and media on Service Shakespeare I have seen to date is about Shakespeare prison programs. A partial list includes a 9 August 2002 episode of the National Public Radio series *This American Life* that looked at act 5 of *Hamlet* performed by inmates at the Missouri Eastern Correctional Center, Amy Scott-Douglass's *Shakespeare Inside: The Bard Behind Bars*, published by Continuum in 2007, and *Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary with the Bard*, by Laura Bates, which was published by Sourcebooks in 2013. Certainly, there was room for prison Shakespeare in this issue, but prisons must not limit the subject. Good proposals had to be turned down because so many were about Shakespeare in prisons. One reason for my proposal to *Borrowers and Lenders* was simply to learn how varied the manifestations of Service Shakespeare would be.

After receiving approval from *B&L*, I posted the call for papers on a couple of internet sites visited by Shakespeare scholars and copied that message to my own list of contacts. Responses poured in, some from people telling me they already worked in Service Shakespeare, meaning that the name is probably too entrenched to change. I have a problem with the classification "Service Shakespeare" as I do with all taxonomies, and would like to have avoided it. "Service" does not seem quite right, since "therapeutic" is sometimes more accurate, and what if Shakespeare should be tried but fail to serve a community in need? This leaves an opening for wags to call the field "out of service Shakespeare," or worse, "disservice Shakespeare." Furthermore, taxonomies always seem to break down sooner or later. Most labels are inaccurate to some degree or become so over time. Why should "Service Shakespeare" be any different? The best we can do is attempt to understand what service programs have in common and the ways they differ, and they *will* differ because each is designed to solve different problems.

The one spot saved for a prison paper in this cluster went to Yu Jin Ko's fascinating and useful look at *Macbeth* performed as part of the *Shakespeare Behind Bars* program. This paper confirms that the striking parallels between the lives of the prisoner actors and the characters they portrayed in *The Tempest* in *Shakespeare Behind Bars* is no fluke, but persists through other plays and other actors, helping the prisoners come to terms with their crimes, learn empathy for those they wronged and the families of those they have wronged and the prisoner's own families, who are deprived of having a normal relationship with them. These parallels help non-actors give compelling performances. Though it would not have been appropriate to fully develop this idea, given the other goals of the paper, the Shakespeare Behind Bars program interrogates by example some of W. B. Worthen's theories about actors and performance, as argued in his book *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (1997). Professor Ko had me weeping as I read his Coda.

Some of these themes are very much the subject of Schwartz-Gastine's otherwise very different paper, which studies a group of disabled (in many different ways) non-actors (mostly) who give compelling performances in a favorite Shakespearean comedy in and near Paris. The author carefully sets-up the basic situation of a couple of directors on a mission to create theater for and by people from ostracized communities in plays that speak to these communities and their needs. The result is a transformative experience for some homeless, mentally ill, destitute, addicted, and other disadvantaged people who are the majority of the cast. The process is liberating and expressive of the deepest needs of some participants. The things that alienate the actors from mainstream society become advantages on stage. The issues in this paper are complex, nuanced, and never wholly good or bad or right or wrong. The paper is about striving and its rewards.

Schwartz-Gastine brings a welcome international look at Service Shakespeare, which is furthered by Sheila Cavanagh's paper on the World Shakespeare Project (WSP), conducted from her base at Emory University. The WSP teleconferences Shakespeare classes with classes in Native American tribal schools in the U.S. and students from several countries around the world. Cavanagh, in introducing the WSP, presents examples of cross-cultural learning in multiple directions. Students from diverse parts of the world understand Shakespeare via their own cultures. As each group shares with others, the result is a heterogeneous understanding of Shakespeare. Just as exciting is the exposure students from one culture have to students from another. They learn some of the myriad ways to have a life, whether they are discussing Shakespeare, or not. Cavanagh's paper blurs the line between service and education in ways that I hope will get us thinking.

Also blurring those lines is the paper by Michael Bahr and Don Weingust, which is about the annual Shakespeare competition for high and middle school students in Cedar City, Utah. There can be no question that education is a big part of the competition. Students learn about Shakespeare from the portions of the plays they present, about theater practice, and about much else, but the service aspect is also intrinsic to the competition, giving students everything from social interaction, team preparation, a sense of empowerment, feedback from theatrical professionals and educators, and in some cases, scholarships. The host institutions, Southern Utah University and the Utah Shakespeare Festival, benefit as well in their recruitment for the school and for future attendees for the Festival. Of all the papers in this issue, this is the most difficult to summarize because of the many educational and service benefits that result from the competition, plus some of the more philosophical questions raised by Bahr and Weingust about the relative advantages and disadvantages of competitions and noncompetitive festivals.

Theaters in the United States are required by law to meet certain access requirements for people with disabilities, but the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) goes much farther than required with a energetic and growing outreach to visually and hearing impaired people. Just-retired Access Coordinator Jim Amberg details the programs that help disabled audience members follow the on-stage action and dialogue, describes the outreach the Festival has made to disabled communities, and notes OSF's commitment to hiring actors from those communities — and one actor in particular, who has become a draw to bring hearing impaired theatergoers to the Festival from around the country. This program is not just a model of how other theaters might reach out to these communities; it is also models the rewards to a theater company that does.

My own paper raises questions about Shakespeare as a therapy. It is an account of reading an abridged version of *Twelfth Night* with a group of early stage Alzheimer's patients as an exercise in building self-esteem and the rather stunning success that surprised those of us facilitating the group.

While the feeling of accomplishment shared by most participants was one of our goals, this degree of success raises the issue of advocacy in Service Shakespeare. The therapeutic effects of music, art, photography, and similar activities have been formally studied by Alzheimer's researchers and the benefits documented in medical journals. Medical journals have no interest in an anecdotal story such as mine; they want the data of a proper research study, and correctly so. Perhaps this issue of *Borrowers and Lenders* is a place such a study can be suggested to the Alzheimer's research community, while helping to define the field of Service Shakespeare to the Shakespeare community.

The only article that sounds a note of caution is by Geoff Ridden, who studies the films *My Left Foot* (1989) and *The King's Speech* (2010), with a generous stopover at *The Madness of King George* (2004). Beginning with a distrust of imperial Shakespeare's presence in modern culture, Ridden notices that *My Left Foot* and *The King's Speech* both use Shakespeare as therapies for their disabled protagonists. He also notes that the films are fictional accounts of real lives and that Shakespeare was not actually used as a therapy for these people, only in the fiction of the films. Ridden sensibly warns us that just because we have been trained by popular culture to accept the therapeutic use of Shakespeare, we should be aware that popular culture may make Shakespeare seem more at service than is warranted.

"What is Service Shakespeare currently like, and what has it the potential to become?" I knew that both of these questions were unanswerable when I put them in the first paragraph, but I hope these essays move us in the direction of possible answers. When making notes to myself as I shaped the proposal for this essay cluster, I wrote the following paragraphs, asking some more specific unanswerable questions. I suspect that life, service, and Shakespeare are too varied, complex, and prone to evolve for us to have any final answers, but that does not mean we should not ask the questions. I hope that the questions not engaged in this issue will become a challenge to you as you think and, perhaps, someday write about Service Shakespeare. What are its parameters of Service Shakespeare? Are there limits? Where is Shakespeare not in service, but could potentially help? What services might Shakespeare programs give to children, students, the military, the elderly, the sick, the mentally ill, the poor, and the homeless? Can Shakespeare serve religious communities? Are Shakespeare clubs and reading groups an aspect of Service Shakespeare? We know that Shakespeare can boost the self-esteem of early stage Alzheimer's patients, but can he serve the self-esteem of other populations? Does service only make sense in the context of communities in need? Is education a category of Service Shakespeare, or are they distinct? Can they overlap? When do they overlap?

In a different sense, Shakespeare has served communities such as Ashland, Oregon, Stratford, Ontario, and Stratford-upon-Avon. In what ways has he been both a service and a disservice to communities such as these? Does it make sense to think of Shakespeare employment in terms of service? If Shakespeare social programs have legitimately been of help to people, what do we say to those alarmed about imperial Shakespeare? Do their warnings matter when the lives of people have improved? Further, how do we answer the concerns of those guided by Disabilities Studies literature, their best practices, and approved language if there are successful programs that follow different guidelines or practices?

Shakespeare is the literary 900 pound gorilla, but how important is the "Shakespeare?" Can some other writer do? When can some other writer do? Is Shakespeare and his prestige ever needed, and if it is, when? What of dramatic representations of Service Shakespeare, especially on radio, television, and the stage, and in film, where Shakespeare has been/may be used to serve fictional or historical characters in need? How might Service Shakespeare be manifested in books, both fiction and non-fiction, in addition to those books and articles about Shakespeare prisons programs? Surely there must be programs that attempt to, but fail to serve different populations. We should ask why they failed — was Shakespeare inappropriate, or did the problem lie in the execution or the concept of the program? Does this have larger implications for non-Shakespeare service programs that succeed and fail?

Some of the essays that follow address some of these concerns, but there is much left to study. Shall we get this conversation started?

### Notes

1. Scott-Douglass's essay will be published as "Shakespeare for Soldiers and Seniors," *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, ed. Bruce R. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

## References

- Bates, Laura. 2013. *Shakespeare Saved My Life: Ten Years in Solitary with the Bard*. Naperville, Ill.: Sourcebooks.
- Scott-Douglass, Amy. 2007. *Shakespeare Inside: The Bard Behind Bars*. London: Continuum.
- Worthen, W. B. 1997. *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.