

"NC Shakes": The North Carolina Shakespeare Festival

Bethany Sinnott, Catawba College

Abstract

The North Carolina Shakespeare Festival, founded in 1977, has flourished in High Point despite some major difficulties: a relative dearth of suitable audience members, tight budgets, and falling ticket sales. Effective cost-cutting measures and new artistic direction, however, appear to have secured the Festival's future in the area.

Founded by two enthusiastic Shakespeare partisans in 1977, The North Carolina Shakespeare Festival (NCSF) continues to pursue its purpose of entertaining and educating the citizens and students of North Carolina "with quality professional classic theatre productions." The Festival is located in High Point, in the North Carolina Piedmont near the larger cities of Winston-Salem and Greensboro, and enjoys the status of being the official state Shakespeare company. Nevertheless, it has struggled over the years with building its audience base and attracting the kind of government, corporate, and individual support necessary to its existence. Thus, it probably has more in common with Shakespeare companies in other regions of the United States than it has differences. The very fact that a professional theater company devoted primarily to producing Shakespeare's plays can survive for over a quarter of a century in a small southern city testifies to the universality of Shakespeare's appeal. Where are the Marlowe festivals or the Tennessee Williams festivals?

Shakespeare companies across the country face the task of building and maintaining an audience, raising the money necessary to finance the operation, and fulfilling their artistic and philosophical vision. Though in 2003 *Time* named the Oregon Shakespeare Festival number two among the top five regional theaters in the country, most Shakespeare companies enjoy far less recognition, and many struggle in their efforts to remain viable. (It is perhaps revealing that though the Oregon Shakespeare Festival opened in 1935 with an all-Shakespeare program, the 2003 season of eleven plays featured more non-Shakespeare [six] than Shakespeare [five] plays.) A Shakespeare company in the South faces the additional challenges of certain socio-economic realities. In the twentieth century, the South's largely agricultural economy was transformed into an economy based more on manufacturing, but toward the end of the century hard times fell on many southern industries. In North Carolina, tobacco was for years a leading agricultural commodity,

and cigarette manufacturers provided both jobs and a large tax base. In addition, often tobacco companies became important donors to local and state charities and artistic endeavors. When medical research revealed the extent of health problems caused by the use of tobacco products, demand for those products in this country decreased. Furthermore, large monetary settlements in lawsuits brought on behalf of cancer victims resulted in more financial hardships for the companies. The North Carolina economy understandably suffered. Textile manufacturing, a once-flourishing North Carolina industry, has fallen victim to cheap imported goods and the export of manufacturing operations to countries where lower wages prevail, and North Carolina is still reeling from the closing of such companies as Pillowtex. The furniture industry, a mainstay of High Point, the home of The North Carolina Shakespeare Festival, also suffers from the effects of foreign competition. A cultural asset like a Shakespeare festival may be seen as more of a luxury than a necessity when the economy is not flourishing.

Another disadvantage of Shakespeare companies in the American South is the educational level of the population. A relatively high level of illiteracy, combined with relatively low teachers' salaries and under-funded public schools, can result in citizens less likely to choose to attend Shakespeare plays. Even North Carolina, which boasts such superb universities as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University, has real deficiencies in its primary and secondary educational institutions. Thus, the audience base for "high culture" is somewhat limited.

Watch Out for the Weather

Yet despite the challenges of its location, The North Carolina Shakespeare Festival has endured for twenty-seven years and continues to bring classical theater to Piedmont North Carolina. The Festival did not originate with native North Carolinians. Stuart Brooks was stage manager of the Opera Company of Boston before he was attracted to the South by a designer at the North Carolina School of the Arts. Mark Woods had acted with companies in New York City, but came to North Carolina in search of "open air and artistic challenge." The two men met, perceived a gap in North Carolina's theatrical offerings, and founded the North Carolina Shakespeare Festival, at the time the only paid Shakespeare company in the Carolinas. Both Brooks and Woods were twenty-seven years old. Their youthful enthusiasm and ambition are reflected in the planning of the early seasons of the company.

Two Shakespeare plays, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Henry V*, and Molière's *The Miser* opened the first season. The July debut of the new theater company evoked an enthusiastic response not only from newspapers in the nearby cities of Winston-Salem and Greensboro, but even from the *Charlotte Observer* in North Carolina's largest city, nearly a hundred miles away. The *Observer's*

headline, "High Point on Avon a Triumph," indicates the enthusiasm with which the area greeted the new theater company. Reviewer Allen Oren noted in the *Observer*, "All told, the festival may offer the state's best theater." He praised the company's *Taming of the Shrew* as a directorial tour-de-force and endorsed the modernization of the story to contemporary Italy with characters in "slicked hair and sunglasses" riding motorcycles (Oren 1977). Though Charlotte is some distance from High Point, the *Observer's* audience includes many readers with a particular interest in the arts, and the newspaper has continued to review NCSF productions. The *Greensboro Daily News*, published in a large city only fifteen miles from High Point, also hailed the inaugural performance of the Festival series as "an outstanding success," as evidenced by a full-house audience that responded warmly to the modernized *Taming of the Shrew*. Reviewer Joe Knox suggested that prospective audience members read the play in advance, however, because "the language of Elizabethan England is not easy to understand" (Knox 1977). Knox was not alone in cautioning audiences about Shakespeare's language. Genie Carr, reviewing that season's *Henry V* for the *Winston-Salem Sentinel*, observed, "The language, of course, is something of a problem all around for modern, American audiences" (Carr 1977), though she did admit that the ear becomes accustomed after a few scenes. One suspects that few reviewers of Shakespeare productions in New York City, Chicago, or Los Angeles find it necessary to warn audiences about Shakespeare's language. Carr's review introduced another rather provincial note. She observed that the drive from Winston-Salem to High Point (less than twenty miles) is "not bad," unless the driver in front goes 45 miles an hour instead of the legal limit of 55 (Carr 1977). The reluctance of potential audience members to drive out of their own towns to attend performances in a nearby town has puzzled and troubled NCSF personnel since the company's founding.

The 1977 Festival opening season included a play that was to become a mainstay of the company — Dickens's holiday favorite, *A Christmas Carol*. With the exception of 1981, that play has been offered every year since the company was founded, and it continues to draw large audiences. *A Christmas Carol* has become a holiday tradition for many families in the Piedmont Triad. Though it is produced by The North Carolina Shakespeare Festival, the Dickens play, always performed in December, is not considered part of the company's regular season, which in recent years has run from August through October. Actors and technicians who participate in *A Christmas Carol* receive separate contracts for that production.

Buoyed by the success of the first season, Stuart Brooks and Mark Woods "ambitiously attempted too many plays" in the next four seasons, according to current management, and the company went into serious debt. In 1978 the NCSF season included two Shakespeare comedies, *Much Ado about Nothing* and *The Merchant of Venice*, and four non-Shakespearean and rather

eclectic selections: Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, Carlo Goldoni's *Servant of Two Masters*, Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*, and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The 1979 season featured Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Henry IV, Part 1*, and four non-Shakespeare plays. The company produced its first Shakespeare tragedy, *Macbeth*, in 1980, along with *Twelfth Night* and four non-Shakespeare plays. The following year, 1981, again saw six productions, this time equally divided between Shakespeare (*As You Like It*, *Comedy of Errors*, and *Hamlet*) and non-Shakespeare plays. By 1982 the financially strapped company was forced to reduce the season to only three plays, Shakespeare's *King John* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and Georges Feydeau's farce *A Flea in Her Ear*. Though 1983 saw a brief return to the six-play schedule, from 1984-1987 NCSF settled into a four-play pattern. The seasons from 1988 to 1992 varied from three to five plays, each with one or more non-Shakespeare plays. The most non-Shakespearean season was 1989, when Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* was matched with four non-Shakespeare plays. In 1993 the decision was made to launch a purely Shakespearean season. The company performed *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *King Lear*, and was satisfied enough with the results to stay with the Bard for the following season. Plays performed in 1994 were *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Measure for Measure*, and *The Tempest*. A three-play season prevailed from 1993 to 2002 except for 1997, when only two plays, *Richard III* and *As You Like It*, were staged. Four of those years included at least one non-Shakespeare play, but the trend was clearly toward emphasizing Shakespeare's works. The twenty-seven year history of The North Carolina Shakespeare Festival has seen 104 plays produced, not counting the perennial *A Christmas Carol*. Of these, over half (fifty-nine) have been by Shakespeare. Comedy is the dominant genre; thirty-three comedies and four romances outweigh the eight histories and fourteen tragedies. For the first eight seasons of NCSF, no Shakespeare plays were repeated. Then in 1985 the company returned to *The Taming of the Shrew*, which had successfully opened its initial season.

Certain plays have been repeated more than others in the ensuing years. The most frequently performed plays have been the three comedies *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, each of which has been produced four times. The company has explored almost the full range of Shakespearean comedy. *All's Well That Ends Well*, a notably dark play, is the only comedy missing from the company's production history. Of the romances, *The Tempest* has been produced three times, *The Winter's Tale* once, and *Cymbeline* and *Pericles* not at all, perhaps not surprisingly. What may be surprising is the number of history plays the company has produced. Three of the best-known history plays (*Henry IV, Part 1*, *Henry V*, and *Richard III*) have appeared twice, and the company has also produced *Richard II* and *King John*, the latter a work performed relatively rarely, if at all, by most Shakespeare companies. Missing from NCSF's

production schedule are only the three parts of *Henry VI*, *Henry IV Part 2*, and *Henry VIII*. Of the tragedies, *Macbeth* has been performed most frequently, four times, with *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* next at three times each. *King Lear* has been performed twice and *Julius Caesar* and *Othello* once each, though the latter is on the schedule for 2004. These selections are not surprising; audiences are generally more willing to attend familiar tragedies, especially those that have been taught in the public school systems. None of the omitted tragedies, with the possible exception of *Antony and Cleopatra* — *Titus Andronicus*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Coriolanus* — is frequently performed by Shakespeare companies anywhere.

Local Heroes

The State Shakespeare Festival serves North Carolina communities other than High Point by touring with one or more plays each season. The company began its touring program in 1983. In 1984 NCSF established a residency in Asheville, in the western part of the state. By 2003 the company featured not only the program "On Tour," taking major productions to other towns, but also "GlobeWorks," a compendium of Shakespeare scenes done by a small group of actors and taken to secondary and middle schools statewide. Other outreach activities include "SchoolFest," special performances of the mainstage productions offered at reduced prices during the school day for student audiences. The North Carolina Shakespeare Festival obviously takes seriously its mission to educate the state's citizenry. With an endowed lecture series, the Nancy Lyles "Classics in Context" seminars, the company arranges for area college and university professors to conduct Saturday afternoon seminars that provide an overview and discussion of the Shakespeare play to be performed that evening. Beginning with the 2004 season, NCSF will also sponsor a weekend entitled "Elizabeth's Bard," which will feature presentations on the Elizabethan world and theater, lectures on two plays, tickets to those plays, a meeting with the actors, and accommodations and meals at a local hotel a block from the theater. The educational thrust of the company has extended for some years to "AfterWords," a conversation between actors and audience after Sunday matinee performances.

From 1977's opening production of *The Taming of the Shrew* set in twentieth-century Italy to the 2003 Elizabethan unit set that served for both *The Merchant of Venice* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, NCSF has explored a wide range of set and costume designs. One early production put the actors on roller skates, while the 1987 *Midsummer Night's Dream* opened with a very modern Theseus and Hippolyta basking on beach towels that featured a colorful portrait of Shakespeare and the words "To Beach or Not To Beach." Over the years the company has benefited from the presence of the furniture industry in High Point by having access to furniture and fabrics that made

possible more elaborate productions. The 2002 NCSF production of *Much Ado about Nothing*, set in nineteenth-century Europe and utilizing French Impressionist colors and design, evoked praise from reviewers for the beauty of its sets and costumes. Certainly, no consistent attempt has been made in the company's production history to provide audiences with Shakespearean staging. The 2003 season signaled a change in direction toward a more Elizabethan style of production. Financial concerns in large part prompted the move, but the change also resulted in artistic success. The simple wooden set, utilizing lumber made available by a local veneer company, provides the framework for an Elizabethan stage: two arched entrances at the back of the set separated by a recessed area, a banistered "above," and two tall wooden columns downstage, their bases surrounded by wooden benches. This unit set was easily adapted for both *The Merchant of Venice* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the simplicity of the staging had the effect of focusing attention on the language, the primary element in producing Shakespeare's plays.

The trend toward a more Shakespearean style of staging was already well established in the American South. Ralph Cohen's Shenandoah Shakespeare Express, founded at James Madison University in Virginia in 1988, utilized from the beginning a thrust stage, universal lighting, simple stage sets and props, and actors interacting with the audience. The company emphasizes Shakespeare's language in audience-pleasing productions; such an emphasis is less likely in lavish productions, where spectacular sets and costumes can distract the audience's attention from the language. Shenandoah now has its own venue, a reconstruction of Shakespeare's Blackfriars Theatre in Staunton, Virginia. Other southern Shakespeare companies have followed the emphasis on the language and use of simple staging. Encore! Theatre Company in Richmond tours Shakespeare plays using a handful of actors and minimal sets and props. Their focus is also on the language. The decision to adopt a more Elizabethan style of staging may prove to be a boon to NCSF not only in reducing expenses, but also in appealing to audiences.

The North Carolina Shakespeare Festival's personnel have changed over the years, of course, though several individuals have provided continuity. Lucius Houghton holds the record for longevity, having begun acting with the company in its inaugural 1977 season and having remained through the 1997 season. In those twenty years he played over seventy-three roles in fifty-three plays. Pedro Silva also joined the company in 1977, and though he left in 1993 after serving as actor, director, tour organizer, and managing director, he returned in 2001 as managing director and is currently assuming more duties since the departure in 2002 of Lou Rackoff, who had served as artistic director for fifteen years. Randell Haynes, a young actor who joined the company in 1978 and performed for six years, returned in 2003 to direct *The Merchant of Venice*. He had played Launcelot Gobbo in the 1978 production, and Pedro Silva had played his father. Allan Edwards

joined the company in 1989 as an actor and continues in that role, but also serves as Director of Outreach. Such connections and experience contribute to the sense of ensemble in the company. Though NCSF employs actors, directors, designers, and technicians from all over the country, it gives priority to North Carolina theater professionals. The company is associated with the Actors' Equity Association and employs both Equity and non-Equity performers. Several area institutions have provided a talent pool of both performers and technicians. The North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem has maintained a close connection with NCSF since co-founder Stuart Brooks established that relationship in 1977. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro has a strong theater program that has often furnished employees and interns to NCSF. Because the NCSF season is relatively short (August to October in 2003), the performers and technicians must find other work during the rest of the year. This situation sometimes makes recruiting more difficult for the company; theater personnel prefer longer contracts. Nevertheless, a good number of NCSF personnel are affiliated with area institutions, where they teach or do professional work. Michael Kamtman, a twelve-year veteran of NCSF, is an adjunct faculty member of both the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Guilford Technical Community College. Two vocal/text coaches, Ben Furey and Mary Irwin, are on the faculty of the North Carolina School of the Arts. Each year several company performers are students, graduate or undergraduate, at area colleges and universities.

Conclusion

One of the cost-cutting measures adopted by NCSF in recent years is a reduction in staff personnel. The administrative staff listed in the 1990 program numbered nineteen; by 1995 that figure fell to twelve, and only seven were listed in the 2003 program. A similar though less severe reduction is apparent in the production staff, which went from twenty-two in 1990 to twenty in 1995 and seventeen in 2003. The number of actors has remained more consistent; there is a limit to the amount of doubling that actors can do in Shakespeare plays. The large cast of twenty-five in 1990 fell to nineteen in 1995 and rose again to twenty-two in 2003, though that figure reflects more interns than were used in the three preceding seasons. The NCSF budget showed a general increase from the first year, when it was only \$70,000, to a high of \$1,400,000 in 2000 and 2001. Though it has fallen slightly in the last two years, it is still over \$1 million. Audience figures, however, have dropped consistently. The plays were reaching 100,000 people in 1990, as estimated by the company, but the 1995 audiences shrank to 70,000. Since 2000, the numbers have fallen from 63,000 to 45,000. Clearly, the company faces the major task of building an audience. One encouraging note is that the audience of 50,000 in 2002 was for three plays, while the two plays of

2003 attracted 45,000 people. Justin Cord Hayes, in a *Greensboro News and Record* article entitled "New Play Schedule Helps Festival" (Hayes 2003), says that the 2003 ticket sales came within two percent of the company's goal, a definite improvement over the previous five to seven years, when the festival was shy of its goal by twenty percent or more.

What lies in the future for The North Carolina Shakespeare Festival? With apparently effective cost-cutting measures, a season of successful ticket sales, and a new artistic direction, the company may well extend its history of entertaining and educating citizens of the state far into the new millenium. Advertisers in the 2003 playbill seem confident that audience members will patronize businesses not only in High Point but in Winston-Salem, Greensboro, and even Chapel Hill.

References

- Carr, Genie. 1977. Review of *Henry V*. *Winston-Salem Sentinel*. 23 July.
- Knox, Joe. 1977. Review of *The Taming of the Shrew*. *Greensboro Daily News*. 16 July.
- Hayes, Justin Cord. 2003. "New Play Schedule Helps Festival." *Greensboro News and Record*. 28 October.
- North Carolina Shakespeare Festival Website [accessed 26 May, 2005]. Available online at <http://www.ncshakes.org/about.cfm>.
- Oren, Allen. 1977. "High Point on Avon a Triumph." *Charlotte Observer*.
- Shakespeare, William. 1997. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Edited by G. Blakemore Evans, with the assistance of J. J. Tobin. 2d ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.