

Performing Shakespeare in the Old/New South, or What Happens When Shakespeare Is Your Middle Name

Susan Willis, Alabama Shakespeare Festival and Auburn University, Montgomery

Abstract

This historical commentary on the development of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival compares the experience of the Festival as summer theatre in Anniston, Alabama, to its year-round embodiment in Montgomery, Alabama, its styles of production, and the factors influencing the current development of the theatre.

A man with a vision or, better yet, three men with vision — Shakespeare, Martin Platt, and Winton Blount. By 1972, Shakespeare had amassed a notable reputation. In 1972 Martin Platt, with a brand new theatre degree from Carnegie Mellon, had just begun as director of Anniston, Alabama's community theatre, an interesting cultural move for this Los Angeles native. Winton Blount, a native of Union Springs, a small town in eastern Alabama, had made a fortune from a successful family-owned construction business that transformed from local to international; as that *rara avis*, a lifelong Alabama Republican in the 1960s and 1970s, he also served as Postmaster General in the Nixon administration. In 1972, he owned a large estate in east Montgomery and had built a corporate art collection of American Masters (now in the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts). He was also dedicated to the growth and development of the big little town of Montgomery, the state capital, currently approaching a population of 200,000. Put these three men together and you have a sure-fire recipe for a classical theater.

History

Conceived and born as a summer theater event rehearsed and performed in the gymnasium of an un-air-conditioned local high school, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival was raised as the beloved child of Anniston, Alabama, an enterprising town of about 30,000 near I-20 east of Birmingham. In 1971, when plans for the Festival began, there were Shakespeare festivals across America, but none in the Old South — none between Dallas and Washington, D.C. (Volz 1986, 3-4). Founding Artistic Director Martin Platt sought to remedy that fact with an initial summer season using fifteen unpaid actors performing *Hamlet*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and

Hedda Gabler. *Hamlet* opened (after a forty-five-minute delay so that costumes could be finished) to an audience of two, but that initial season eventually garnered 3,000 theatergoers and broke even financially. The presence of Shakespeare proved increasingly enticing — by 1977 the summer audience had quintupled to 15,000 — and subsequent seasons brought much more interest: a larger budget, and expansive growth, with ASF's first Equity contract in 1976 (up to twelve by 1978); the first regional tour that reached as many or more audience members as the summer season; a New York Times review calling Martin Platt's work at ASF "brash and brilliant" (a quotation used for decades in publicity); a conservatory program for young actors; and the promise of Platt's own "midsummer night's dream" — a resident company doing classic repertory theater in Alabama.

Dreams and visions have played crucial roles not just in Shakespeare's plays but also, for our purposes, more particularly in the life of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. Platt's initial vision developed, as Anniston built a new high school with a 1,000-seat auditorium — this one air-conditioned and not a gymnasium — into which ASF's custom-built thrust stage could easily fit in the summers. Yet, ultimately, this new venue also trapped ASF in a four-to-six-week summer season because performances could not overlap the school term. The financial situation alternated a year of profit with a year of loss for the first eight seasons, with a net profit until the early 1980s. Then, despite growing success, debt rose, as the quick growth of the now-professional company quickly outstripped fund-raising efforts and increasing ticket sales. Three straight seasons took the theater over \$100,000 in cumulative debt, and before the next season's nearly \$265,000 profit, decisions about ASF's future were made, decisions that changed it materially, geographically, and programmatically.

Enter Montgomery businessman and philanthropist Winton M. Blount, husband of ASF board member Carolyn Blount, who single-handedly saved the 1982 season with a large donation. With business-based pragmatism, he then began to discuss the pressing need for a longer performance season if the theater were to survive. His proposition involved combining the Festival's needs and his own concern for Montgomery's future by moving the festival to Montgomery and by donating most of the land on his estate to the city as a park, as well as by building a \$21.5 million theater complex to be given to the state so that ASF could produce plays year-round. Such gifts are far from common; at the time, it was the largest single gift in the history of American theater.

Transplanting a theater to allow new growth can be a tricky maneuver in artistic horti-"culture"; some Anniston supporters have never recovered from the "theft" of their much-loved theater, while other Annistonians wistfully and seriously observe, "We had a choice. We could watch it die or we could let it go somewhere else. It was like a child going away to college; we raised ASF and now it's left home and has a different life and chance of success." Montgomery had been a regular

stop for previous ASF tours; I have vivid memories of happily watching *Arms and the Man*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and the first half of a subsequently rained-out *Romeo and Juliet*, sitting on a blanket on a hillside at Jasmine Hill Gardens outside Montgomery. Finding enough people for one or two nights of theater on a hillside is markedly different, however, from finding subscribers for a ten-play season that would range far beyond Shakespeare. The soil into which ASF was now transplanted had not nurtured ASF; the theater was a gift, and much of the community did not realize what a professional theater could mean to the area. While one or two Montgomerians basking in the park may ask, "what do they do in that building?", my friends from Mobile and Pensacola now regularly exclaim, "You are so lucky to live in Montgomery! You have ASF!", and many, many people buttonhole me in the lobby to attest how the presence of ASF has changed their lives for the better.

ASF's new state-of-the-art theater complex opened in December 1985 with a stunning, Edwardian, open-space production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* — complete with Mendelssohn melodies, Renaissance-clad fairies, and a bicycle built for two — and opening ceremonies attended by state and local dignitaries as well as by Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Flowers from the board of the Royal Shakespeare Festival, Tony Randall, and Olivia de Havilland, with fireworks as the finale. The gala event got extensive newspaper coverage, and for several years thereafter the marketing department ran into a surprising response to their efforts to sell theater tickets to locals who had seen the gala pictures, "Oh, I don't have the formal clothes to go there." Welcome to your new home in Montgomery. Eventually ASF even ran a "come in blue jeans" campaign to counteract the perceived belief by those who were not regular theatergoers that theater was strictly a black-tie affair.

In Anniston, audiences came from across the state and eventually from across the Southeast, true believers in the appeal of classical drama, theatergoers eager to share the exciting work of this increasingly talented company. Moving to Montgomery meant a larger subscription base, for Montgomery far exceeds Anniston's population, but nonetheless forty-five percent of ASF's patrons to this day come from outside the Montgomery area. There are, in fact, regular subscribers from nineteen states. The two-audience phenomenon is exacerbated in Montgomery, for the tastes and theater experience of many locals do not, by and large, match those of patrons from Atlanta or New Orleans, not to mention the Shakespeare festival-goers who travel from Oregon to Utah to Alabama to see Shakespeare seasons. Some locals might be perfectly happy with less Shakespeare while ASF's out-of-town audience consistently lobbies for more Shakespeare. And the question must be asked, what part does Shakespeare play in the current Alabama institution that bears his name in the middle?

The Anniston seasons were dominated by Shakespeare — ASF was undeniably a Shakespeare festival. Its first five seasons offered twenty-two plays, two-thirds of them by Shakespeare. The others were all classics, three Molières, an Ibsen, Machiavelli, Feydeau, and Udall. Not until 1977, with Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in a season with *Hamlet*, did ASF perform a twentieth-century piece. Only with the addition of a second performance space, a 100-seat storefront theater on Anniston's main street, did more contemporary and more Southern works become a part of ASF regular offerings. Throughout its years in Anniston, over sixty percent of the main stage shows were Shakespeare, not counting Shakespeare revues such as *The Hollow Crown*.

In Montgomery, the ASF season expanded, as was intended, to at least a nine-month season, with a summer rotating repertory as its core. The inaugural 1985-86 season offered an ambitious eight-play repertory including *Dream*, *Richard III*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; after that, with the exception of the 1987-88 season, which had no repertory, a six-play repertory has been standard. Shakespeare remains the heart of ASF's repertory, which usually runs from March through July, traditionally with three of the six plays being Shakespeare. But in terms of an entire nine-, ten- or eleven-play ASF season, Shakespeare is now only twenty-five to thirty percent of the theater's offerings. One of ASF's new marketing tag lines proclaimed, "Shakespeare and a whole lot more!" and what expanded with an expanded ASF season was not Shakespeare but the "whole lot more." The classic repertory — Shaw, Molière, Ibsen, Sheridan, Tennessee Williams — filled early Montgomery seasons, joined by contemporary works of American and English playwrights such as Pinter, Fugard, and Tina Howe and the North American premiere of Stoppard's *Rough Crossing*. Along with classic plays, a musical play or revue became a staple of an ASF season as well as that blessed theatrical cash cow, *A Christmas Carol*. (Several seasons ASF offered other plays as the holiday focus, but only Big River garnered an audience equivalent to that for the Dickens classic.) In terms of box office, the Shakespeares alone now attract more patrons than an entire Anniston season did, but as a rule a single production of *A Christmas Carol*, or *Smokey Joe's Café*, or *Beehive*, can sell at least as many tickets for ASF as a single Shakespeare can.

Production Values

And what kind of Shakespeare does ASF perform? There is no house style; the production choices are director-driven, yet because the artistic director over time directs many of the Shakespeare productions, his style has considerable influence on theatergoers. Some care is taken in design conferences not to set all the rep Shakespeares in the same era (as could have happened one year). Martin Platt's Shakespeare productions ranged from a Thousand-and-One-Nights *Much Ado*, World War I *Macbeth*, and rock opera *As You Like It*, as well as many traditional Renaissance-

clad productions in Anniston, to the gorgeous and well-remembered inaugural Edwardian *Dream* in Montgomery, an Orientalist *Tempest*, a spare eighteenth-century *As You Like It* and a raucous eighteenth-century *Shrew* (with Sly). The only thoroughly Southern Shakespeare we have had was directed by a visitor: a 1989 *Much Ado*, set around the Battle of New Orleans, which shocked many theatergoers, as it opened with a coonskin-cap-clad woodsman yahooping from the rear of the theater and charging onstage to join a Jean Lafitte-style Benedick and an Andrew Jackson-esque Don Pedro. (Many New York actors, on first hearing of ASF in the 1980s, stereotypically responded with hayseed Bard talk. Stereotypes die hard, but as ASF's reputation grew, that response quickly changed, and the scoffers asked to audition for the company.)

When Kent Thompson assumed the artistic directorship in 1989, he began to explore Shakespeare's history plays in historical order, all in appropriate historical dress. The series petered out, however, with *Henry VI, Part One*, when this show, nearly sold out to subscribers, had an unusually high no-show rate (completing this series is the most frequent request of ASF's traveling patrons). His favorite periods for costuming are Napoleonic to pre-World War I (although his 1950s *Shrew*, with Bianca in poodle skirt and Hortensio as an Elvis knockoff, was a huge crowd-pleaser), while visiting directors and former Associate Artistic Director Kent Gash offered modern-dress interpretations of Shakespeare — a contemporary Miami *Comedy of Errors*, a 1930s Germanic *Measure, Romeo and Juliet* in polo shirts and khakis, Gash's Busby Berkeley *Twelfth Night*, and desert camouflage *Troilus and Cressida*. The overall range of Shakespeare interpretation has been gratifyingly varied.

Many vocal locals find modern-dress Shakespeare distracting, while the traveling audience usually finds them thrilling. With a nearly fifty-fifty audience split, varying the costuming keeps everyone happy for part of the time. ASF telemarketers have found that some patrons consider the nineteenth century to be comfortably "Shakespearean" (Renaissance-ish for the historically-challenged) when asked which productions they most enjoyed, perhaps because they have so often seen his work produced in that era at ASF in the past decade. More demanding production concepts, such as Ray Chambers's 2002 *Hamlet*, with design inspired by Columbian sculptor Doris Salcedo, proved nearly "unreadable" to some theatergoers, though if they picked up the free print materials on the show, or heard a lobby talk, they quickly realized and appreciated the brilliance and relevance of the design to the play. Thompson also dedicated ASF to completing the canon, so recent seasons have seen *Antony and Cleopatra* and *King John*, while 2004 offers *Titus Andronicus*, and 2005, *Coriolanus*, leaving only *Henry VI, Parts Two and Three*, *Henry VIII*, *Timon* (scheduled for 2006), and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* to be performed. (We'll argue later about *Cardenio* and *Edward III*.)

Another issue arising from Kent Thompson's artistic directorship has been nontraditional casting. With the Anniston conservatory program now a degree-granting MFA program associated with the University of Alabama, a number of skilled young African American actors have been trained in ASF's Professional Actor Training program, and appear in both MFA and Equity productions at ASF, especially the Shakespeares. In addition, Thompson, a Southerner by birth, and the son of a Baptist preacher, is dedicated to the principle of open casting. That has not proven an entirely welcome proposition to a very small minority of patrons. To this day, Kent Thompson gets letters about classic plays with "mixed" casting, each of which he answers, and he also gets letters of praise. Derrick Lee Weeden, an exceptionally talented Othello at ASF some years ago, commented on how many mixed-race couples he noticed in that play's audience. Thompson has also tried to cast nontraditional families in Shakespeare, as with Leonato and Hero in *Much Ado* or Banquo and Fleance in *Macbeth*, but the audience response, often subterranean, has not entirely disappeared. In a city with a changing demographic, one that will soon be more than fifty percent African American, these issues are not incidental. On the other hand, the student matinee audiences, which have a much higher proportion of African Americans than many of the adult Shakespeare performances, respond very positively to the presence of African American actors in Shakespeare and are full of questions in the post-show discussions.

Getting audiences into the theater young is essential not just for an appreciation of Shakespeare but for theater itself. I have been at AUM for twenty-six years, two decades of those with ASF in the neighborhood. Trying to teach drama in the first seven years was, let it be said, a daunting experience, because none of my students had ever seen a professional production. "Theater" simply meant more words on a page. Now that is not as often the case thanks to ASF's SchoolFest program, which offers productions to thousands of students (27,000 to 50,000 per year, depending on the schedule). If a paper assignment now takes students to the theater, they are gratified by what occurs — excited by Shakespeare and by theater. They prove far more open to the possibilities of Shakespeare than do some adult theatergoers who suffer from what I call "Shakespeare anxiety": "I won't understand it (and you can't make me)." The hard-core sufferers are probably unreachable, but those who simply feel insecure only need permission to listen and enjoy a clearly spoken and enacted performance — fortunately, the norm at ASF.

Despite its performance quality and audience loyalty, ASF sometimes experiences challenges because of its first, rather than its middle, name. As the State Theatre, ASF at one time enjoyed almost one million dollars of support from the State of Alabama with additional funds from the city and county governments of Montgomery. But, recently, the "Alabama" at the front of ASF's name has become almost virtual, amid state funding crises. First, some political infighting lopped

\$200,000 from the state funding; a few years later, another quarter of a million disappeared, and in the current tax crisis, the entire state allotment has been axed. Few theaters can cheerfully absorb an unexpected half-million-dollar cut in funding, especially when the cut is suffered along with simultaneous reductions in local government funding. Despite the fact that local and state officials continue to bring industrial prospects to ASF to show off what Alabama is and can do, Alabama no longer contributes funds to ASF or to any other arts or humanities organization or program. With the recent failed tax referendum, tax subsidies to the timber and other consuming industries remain unchanged, and so do tax rates, despite an alarming shortfall. Shakespeare's theater endured unexpected plague outbreaks and watchful city fathers; he would not find theater life in the New South markedly different, I suspect.

Conclusion

Such a state crisis follows ASF's recent growth initiative from nine-month to year-round programming, as it strives to become an artistic home for a larger resident company of actors and artisans. Maintaining that commitment proves more challenging with every year, but, so far, the season structure remains intact. The ASF Board has recently accepted the challenge of maintaining the budget, and thereby the programming of the theater in its entirety. Winton Blount died in 2003, as rare a local philanthropist as Shakespeare was an artist, but his vision is now shared by many civic leaders in Montgomery. Shakespeare lives in Montgomery, the town to which Winton Blount brought the festival: a small city dedicated to park athletic leagues, Auburn and Alabama football, and to its new minor league baseball team, the Biscuits; a town giddy with the filming of *Big Fish* in its midst, and often aware that also in its midst is a fine, large classic repertory company performing Shakespeare and a whole lot more (*Big Fish* 2003).

What does Shakespeare and ASF mean to Montgomery and to theatergoers from all fifty states and sixty foreign countries who have partaken of its work? It means that, at its core, ASF is dedicated to the quality of theater that Shakespeare provides and symbolizes — compelling stories vividly told. At our recent mission statement committee meetings, the group insisted that Shakespeare was our "most important product," the star atop our tree of vital commitments. We were born and bred with Shakespeare right in the middle of our identity, and amid many other offerings, his work is still the defining element, the very heart of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival.

Online Resources

Alabama Shakespeare Festival. <http://www.asf.net/>

Internet Movie Database Information for *Big Fish*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0319061/?>

[fr=c2l0ZT1kZnxteD0yMHxsbT01MDB8dHQ9b258ZmI9dXxwbj0wfHE9QmInIEZpc2h8aHRtbD0xfG5tPW9u](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0319061/?fr=c2l0ZT1kZnxteD0yMHxsbT01MDB8dHQ9b258ZmI9dXxwbj0wfHE9QmInIEZpc2h8aHRtbD0xfG5tPW9u)

References

- Volz, Jim. 1986. *Shakespeare Never Slept Here: The Making Of A Regional Theatre: A History Of The Alabama Shakespeare Festival*. Atlanta: Cherokee Publishing.
- Big Fish*. 2003. Directed by Tim Burton. Columbia Pictures. Performers Ewan McGregor, Albert Finney, Helena Bonham Carter.