

Rosemary Gaby

Open-air Appropriations: Shakespeare from Sand Harbor to Balmoral Beach

In the closing moments of the Foothill Theatre Company's *Taming of the Shrew*, performed at the Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival in July and August 2007, the figure of Shakespeare was forced off-stage. Literally embodied within his own play, Shakespeare had appeared in black doublet and Elizabethan ruff attempting to direct the action at strategic moments throughout the show. He was finally danced off the stage, however, by the female cast members to the music of the Pat Benetar song, "Love is a Battlefield," reprising the choreography of its 1983 video clip. The feminine defeat of the traditional image of the bard was emblematic of the whole irreverent approach of the production. Foothill Theatre Company presented a pared down, accessible and entertaining Shakespeare to suit the holidaying crowds at Sand Harbor State Park. A quite different contemporaneous open-air production of the *Shrew* was staged a day's drive away in Ashland, Oregon. Performed on the Elizabethan stage for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the production eschewed gimmicks and presented a polished and largely uncut rendering of the text. The town of Ashland derives much of its income from Shakespeare and the enthusiasts who sustain its shops, motels and theatres. Unlike the Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival, in 2007 it could not really afford to chase Shakespeare offstage.

Since 2007 both the Lake Tahoe and Oregon festivals have undergone significant changes in an attempt to broaden their appeal. According to Kate Taylor in *The New York Times*, the artistic director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Bill Rauch, has brought in new directors, expanded the use of non-traditional casting, and pursued a connection between Shakespeare and contemporary theatrical forms in order to reach audiences beyond the festival's normal devotees whom she describes as exhibiting "a level of devotion and nerdiness more typically found among sports fans" (C1). Meanwhile the Lake Tahoe festival's board of directors appears to be cultivating a stronger following from Shakespeare "nerds" through its decision to bring its production mechanisms and teams in-house under the coordinating eye of former Oregon Shakespeare Festival director, Henry Woronicz ("Henry Woronicz...").

Despite shifting artistic policies, however, the Lake Tahoe and Oregon festivals will continue to provide a significantly different encounter with Shakespeare for actors and spectators alike because of their idiosyncratic playing

spaces and locales. They illustrate the diversity that characterizes the open-air Shakespeare industry in the USA and indeed elsewhere. Open-air Shakespeares are inevitably shaped by the local physical and social environment, and often in more obvious ways than productions staged in indoor venues. They can tell us a lot about how Shakespeare is viewed and valued within particular communities, and about the extent to which Shakespeare is performed to edify or to entertain. As in the USA, Australian open-air Shakespeares are now a firmly established feature within the theatrical landscape. Australian audiences can see a range of contrasting open-air productions, from amateur to highly professional, from low-budget to spectacular, and from middle-brow to avant-garde. This paper puts some recent open-air productions from the USA and Australia side by side in order to explore some of the different ways in which locale and the ambience of performance space impacts upon the embodiment and promotion of Shakespeare and his plays.

In both the USA and Australia cultural tourists can find a notably varied range of open-air Shakespeare productions. There are companies that produce plays in scenic locations and work hard to find synergies between place and play. There are also other companies that work on fixed stages and attempt to minimize the impact of place on performance. Some productions are designed to tour around the country while others are constructed for a specific physical and social space. Some use microphones and sophisticated sound and lighting systems; others are staged with minimal expense. Some employ several front-of-house staff and charge relatively steep ticket prices; some pass round a bucket for donations at the end of the performance. It seems that the main differences between the two countries are the result of differences of scale. The University of North Carolina's Institute of Outdoor Drama has a Shakespeare Festival Directory online which listed 57 open-air festivals in the USA in the summer of 2007 and many of those produced several different plays. For the same year there were around seventeen plays produced outdoors in Australia.

The size of the industry in the States has made for some striking contrasts. On the one hand there are companies like the Oregon Shakespeare Festival at Ashland and the Old Globe in San Diego which have developed into impressive institutions with resident acting companies, high-profile sponsors, a range of indoor and outdoor theatres and shops full of Shakespeare trinkets. According to its website, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival operates on a budget exceeding \$26 million and presents more than 780 performances annually with an attendance of approximately 400,000 ("About OSF"). At the other extreme there are companies like the Independent Shakespeare Company, which has been offering free Shakespeares in Barnsdall Park, Los Angeles, since 2004, while struggling heroically to be heard above the ubiquitous LAPD helicopters. After playing on their first night in 2004 to fourteen people and a dog, the company optimistically expected audience numbers to reach 10,000 for their 2007 season of plays ("Free Shakespeare in Barnsdall Park"). For many USA companies the notion of

providing free Shakespeare in the park is a strong political commitment. The Public Theatre Company's free Shakespeare productions in Central Park are offered as part of its idealistic mandate to make theatre that is available to all New Yorkers, and accordingly the only way for the general public to secure tickets is to camp out in the park for half a day before tickets are released at 1pm. Bodily discomfort and time replace money as payment for the actors' skills. Such framing factors significantly affect the contract between stage and audience, and impinge upon the meanings we assign to the Shakespeare event.

In Australia, open-air productions are generally much closer in scale to the Barnsdall Park Shakespeares. For some companies, if bad weather sets in, fourteen people and a dog may well be all the audience a performance can attract. On such evenings actors and audience soldier on, motivated by a shared conviction that somehow Shakespeare is worth some physical endurance. There is nothing comparable to Ashland in Australia. The Bell Shakespeare Company has similar educative aims, but it is not in the business of building theatres or establishing any one town or city as a Shakespeare Mecca, nor is it interested in the vagaries of open-air performance. In Australia, open-air productions tend to be generated mostly by smaller companies to entertain local communities.

The open-air Shakespeare company in Australia with the highest profile is Glenn Elston's Melbourne-based Australian Shakespeare Company. It has been producing Shakespeare in parks and gardens around the country since 1988 and has developed into a high-profile commercial enterprise citing an annual total direct audience of over 50,000 people ("Partnerships"). The ASC has consistently entertained audiences in Melbourne's Royal Botanical Gardens, but it has also taken several productions to Adelaide, Perth and Sydney, and in recent years, with the help of some government funding, has managed to take shows to places as far flung as Tennant Creek, Mt Isa, Weipa and Thursday Island.

Elston's Company is one of a number of Australian companies that specialize in open-air Shakespeares. Others include Shakespeare By the Sea, founded by David MacSwan in Sydney in 1987 to produce a summer season of plays at Balmoral Beach, and Ozact, a group formed in 1996 by Ballarat University performing arts lecturer Bruce Widdop. Both companies operate on a much smaller scale than Elston's, with minimal props, lighting and sound effects and no microphones. To date Shakespeare by the Sea has produced twenty two different Shakespeare plays and has managed to survive for two decades on donations collected from the audience. Ozact is notable for taking Shakespeare to unusual locations, including *The Tempest* at Loch Ard Gorge, Port Campbell National Park, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* at Heatherlie Quarry in the Grampians National Park, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Naracoorte Caves in South Australia. Recently formed specialist companies include Nightsky Productions which began staging plays at Coogee Beach in

Sydney in 2004, and Essential Theatre which, since 2003, has been taking its “Shakespeare in the Vines” to wineries all over the country.

Many regional and University-based theatre groups have also established local Shakespeares in the Park as an annual tradition. Shakespeare in Queens Park, Toowoomba, associated with the University of Southern Queensland, started in 2004 and has since expanded to include a tour to Fraser Coast, and in Townsville Tropic Sun Theatre Company has built on its early association with James Cook University to produce annual Shakespeares – mostly in outdoor spaces – since 1995. In Tasmania, Directions Theatre Company draws on a mixture of local professional actors and University students for its annual Shakespeare in the Botanical gardens, and various open-air sites at the University of Adelaide and Flinders University have been used over the years for well-received productions. Professional and State theatre companies around Australia have also produced some notable open-air Shakespeare productions. Western Australian company, Deckchair Theatre, followed Glenn Elston’s lead with summer Shakespeares in King’s Park from 1992 onwards. Their summer shows became an annual fixture until funding cuts forced them to shave their program in 2008 and make way for a new open-air company, Shakespeare WA. Companies like Brisbane’s Grin and Tonic and the Darwin Theatre Company have also produced successful open-air shows in recent years as part of their wider program.

It seems obvious that open-air productions should bring us closer to the stage-audience experience of Elizabethan and Jacobean times. Most of Shakespeare’s plays premiered in open-air theatres after all, and we are frequently told that the actors had to work hard to retain the attention of an audience that surrounded them on three sides and had not been trained to sit passively and quietly in the dark. Ironically, however, as Marion O’Connor points out, reconstructive Shakespeare performances can, in practice, work against an interactive stage-audience relationship. O’Connor notes that audiences often “lack experience of the space and the playing relationships of reconstructive Shakespeare” and that the invitation to impersonate an Elizabethan or Jacobean audience implicitly issued by the period environment “interrupts the immediacy of performance in that space and structure” (94). In my experience, audiences at the Elizabethan theatre in Ashland Oregon and the Old Globe in San Diego are remarkably quiet and well-behaved; a reflection, perhaps, of the demographic attracted to these venues, but also a simple physical response to the fixed seating and general spatial arrangements as well as to implicit signals within the performance space.

I saw *Measure for Measure* at the open-air Lowell Davies Festival Theatre in August 2007 in San Diego, and was struck by the huge contrast between the ambience of this event and that of most open-air festivals I’d hitherto attended. The centre provided virtually all the comforts of a regular theatre apart from the roof: a bar, hinged theatre seats, ushers in dinner suits and an optional pre-show

lecture on the play. Although some patrons took cushions and rugs, most were dressed for a formal night out. Late-comers were forced to sit at the back of the theatre and all refreshments had to be left outside. As an event the production savoured of Angelo's influence rather than Pompey's and young people were noticeably absent from the audience. Fortunately the acoustics of the space and the acting and design of the production compensated for its formal context. Director Paul Mullins set the play in Freud's Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century and Ralph Funicello's imposing set recalled the solidity of the period's interiors with its wooden staircase with turned banisters and its early twentieth-century wooden furniture. For most of the evening the Balboa Park surroundings were effectively ignored, but nature was allowed to enter the scene when the back wall of the stage opened to suggest Marianna's grotto at the beginning of Act 4 and, more spectacularly, the whole of the back wall of the stage opened up for the Duke's return in Act 5.

Local space was strikingly incorporated into the scenic design of the Old Globe production, yet did little to promote an interactive stage-audience relationship or lighten the tone of the occasion. The high level of financial and ideological investment needed to keep Elizabethan-style venues like those in Ashland and San Diego running tends to formalize their productions, turning them into high-brow and relatively conservative events. They contrast sharply with open-air productions in Australia and with many productions in the United States as well. A clear distinction can be made between open-air productions staged in a purpose-built auditorium, and productions which respond to local *found* space for performance. What the latter may lack in technical, scenic and acoustic capabilities, they tend to make up for in atmosphere and local engagement. In terms of the stage-audience relationship they are probably a lot closer to replicating Elizabethan playing conditions than many modern Elizabethan-style theatres. Interestingly the ultimate site for reconstructive Shakespeare, "Shakespeare's Globe" on London's Bankside seems to be an exception to this rule. Writing about the Globe in its early days (1998), Dennis Kennedy argues that spectators were already taking charge in a way they could not do in more regular theatres:

The open enjoyment the groundlings take might parallel that of their Elizabethan predecessors, but surely no one can argue for long that the detailed and precise architecture of the building has much to do with it. The standees are having fun in the way they are accustomed to have fun at a football match or a rock concert or a panto, talking, drinking, eating, wandering around, shouting back at the actors. They laugh in the "wrong" places in *The Maid's Tragedy*, or so the review in the *Times Literary Supplement* insists. They regularly hiss the villain without apparent prompting. (185)

This sounds more like picnic-Shakespeare than the high-brow events staged in Oregon and Ashland.

Audience behaviour at Sand Harbour, Lake Tahoe, is strikingly different from San Diego. Premium wooden deckchair seats can be purchased immediately in front of the stage, but most of the audience brings or hires beach chairs to settle into the bank of sand that rises in a semi-circle above the playing area. Beyond the stage and its rudimentary scenery the lake sparkles and later in the evening car headlights can be spotted driving round its edge. Outside the theatre space several stalls sell meals, wine and beer, and many patrons arrive early to secure a good spot for their chairs before purchasing food or setting up their picnics. A carnival atmosphere predominates before and during the performance. At *The Taming of the Shrew* in August 2007 a comedy juggling duo warmed up the crowd before the performance and sold juggling balls at interval. Audience members walked in and out of the crowd throughout the play, just as they might at a sporting event. Not surprisingly the actors needed microphones to be audible and the production as a whole deployed broad acting and lots of slapstick comedy. Petruchio and Katherine's pivotal wooing scene was played as a violent confrontation with Kate first kneeling Petruchio in the groin and later knocking him down and Petruchio resorting to tying his future bride to a post. The various stages of their fight were punctuated with the "ding" of a boxing ring, and to underline the point Grumio rushed on stage to towel down his master in between rounds.

Glenn Elston's productions in Australia deploy similar knockabout humour and cater to an audience that expects a fun night out. In recent years their Melbourne productions have been staged on the Southern Cross lawn near the Botanical Gardens Observatory. The lawn lacks some of the romance associated with earlier Elston productions in the heart of the gardens, but it provides an appropriate space for audience members to set up picnics and socialize before the show. Bottles of wine can be bought on site, and locals often use the occasion to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries or other special events. Music is an important feature of all Elston productions (fans can now purchase a CD of their *Much Ado, The Musical*), and audience participation is always encouraged. The company's focus is very much on entertainment and the actors are adept at meeting the demands of an audience that could be easily distracted.

Scatological jokes and references to local pop culture have become an integral part of the Elston show, with phrases like "Give it a crack, Bottom" and "Puck off" guaranteeing easy laughs ("Puck off" made its way onto a souvenir t-shirt). When comedian Wil Anderson played Lysander in Elston's *Dream* in 2000 he described the process of finding the humour succinctly: "We've had to take 400-year-old dick jokes and turn them into modern, cutting-edge dick jokes" (Harris 7). As at Sand Harbour the actors wear microphones and they present a physical, loud show with plenty of music and lighting effects that will appeal especially to younger audiences. The fact that audience members are

regularly drawn in to take part in these Australian shows also heightens the excitement of the event; spectators can be turned into active participants rather than passive observers at any moment and this unpredictability creates tension that seeks relief in laughter.

The Glenn Elston productions provide a reliably enjoyable experience and they have done Shakespeare great service in Australia through building new audiences for his works – or at least for open-air productions of them. The drawback of their approach is that it leads to a repetition of the same kind of performances year after year. They have a formula which works well for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Twelfth Night* and *Romeo and Juliet* and for twenty years they have stuck with these same five plays rather than risk anything less popular. Elston's 2008 *Romeo and Juliet* in the Melbourne Royal Botanical Gardens was dismissed by one review under the heading "Tired old schtick" (Rose 19). The company staged their first indoor production – a gripping and innovative *Richard III* – at the Atheneum in Melbourne in May 2008, but despite plans to stage *Macbeth* for their 2008/2009 summer Gardens season, they reverted to the safer choice of *The Taming of the Shrew*, and at the time of writing were preparing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for 2009/2010.

In a profile on Elston for the Adelaide *Advertiser* in 1990, Peter Goers painted him as an entrepreneur with a focus on "product": "He talks about 'product' – describing masterpieces by Shakespeare and Lewis Carroll as though they were cans of beans" (13). Whether Shakespeare is promoted as highbrow and arty, or popular and accessible, all modes of production engage in some sort of commodification of the plays, but the ASC's history suggests that commercial viability has always been a high priority. The scale of its productions and its dependence on an audience with varying levels of interest in Shakespeare has left it with a surprisingly narrow "product" range, especially when compared with smaller companies like Shakespeare by the Sea at Balmoral Beach or Directions Theatre in Hobart. Elston's approach to the plays has always been irreverent, but his company's particular mode of commodification of Shakespeare can suppress experimentation and inhibit subtle readings of language or character.

It is not inevitable, however, that open-air performances will be either highbrow, exclusive events or Shakespeare designed for modern-day groundlings. That somewhere in between the two extremes is possible was illustrated for me by a visit to Shakespeare Santa Cruz in 2007. Founded in 1981 and based at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Shakespeare Santa Cruz is a professional resident theatre company which, like the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and the Old Globe in San Diego, recruits artists from all over the United States. It has an educational outreach program, and it produces a season of Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean plays in repertory each summer, using both its outdoor and indoor theatre spaces. Unlike Ashland or San Diego,

however, it does not have an Elizabethan style theatre; instead its open-air Shakespeares are staged in the Festival Glen: a theatre space once described by Artistic Director Paul Whitworth as “An eccentric fusion of Shakespeare’s Globe, Chartres Cathedral and Middle Earth” (5). Set within a glade of magnificent tall redwoods that encircle both stage and audience, the site forms a natural amphitheatre with a permanent playing platform set across its base. The incline means that there is plenty of space beneath the stage, used for storage as well as staging effects. Above ground scenic intrusions on the space are kept to a minimum, allowing the action to spill out into the woodland grove and into close physical proximity to the audience at suitable moments.

The Santa Cruz festival consistently seeks to avoid presenting “museum Shakespeare” and to that end, its productions have included transplanted time periods, pop culture references, and non-traditional casting. The site provides ambience, but does not constrict the range of settings chosen or the imaginative design of their productions. *Much Ado About Nothing* in 2007, directed by Kim Rubinstein, was set in 1950s Italy: a period setting that makes sense of the sexual politics of the play. For much of the action the wooden stage resembled a Mediterranean taverna, perhaps anachronistically situated within a redwood forest grove, but still drawing added atmosphere from the multi-layered sensory experience of the evening air. Unlike many picnic Shakespeares its pop-culture references were unobtrusive and the company managed to tell an absorbing and well-acted story without microphones or broad comic clichés. The framing atmosphere for the event was relaxed and festive. Many audience members brought wine and picnics and lolled on the ground as well as on the plastic seats that could be booked in sections of the amphitheatre. Kate Eastwood Norris’s Beatrice let slip a distinct fondness for the Chianti bottle which struck a chord with the picnicking audience, but this lent an interesting edge to her character and only enhanced a brilliant central battle of the sexes. The venue’s relaxed holiday atmosphere did not compromise the subtlety of the production.

Previous Festival Glen productions have included *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *The Seagull*, and *Waiting for Godot*, so the company is obviously not wedded to the idea that the outdoor location is only suited to light-hearted Shakespearean comedies. Although its performances are not free, at roughly half the price of Ashland and San Diego, they are much more affordable. Unfortunately Shakespeare Santa Cruz, like many smaller companies, does struggle financially from time to time. The 2008 recession hit the company particularly hard and in December they found themselves facing a 10-day deadline to raise \$300,000 or close their doors. Donations exceeded this amount and their 2009 season was planned with a reduced budget of \$1.49 million (“Shakespeare Santa Cruz Exceeds \$300k Goal”).

The redwood forest setting at Santa Cruz has saved its company from following the same path of exclusivity as San Diego and Ashland. As a performance space the forest is redolent with meaning for actors and audience

alike: rightly or not it is associated with holiday and roughing it; the informality and egalitarianism of camping out. Most locations chosen for open-air productions in Australia carry similar significations and often the site takes centre stage. This is certainly the case at Ozact productions in Victoria where the journey to the performance is a physically significant part of the experience and where some audience members spend more time inspecting and photographing the sites chosen than attending to the players. At Balmoral Beach in Sydney, audiences for Shakespeare by the Sea are in part drawn from locals who have decided to spend a fine day at the beach and who drift into a performance simply because it is there. When the sea breeze whips up, the actors have to work particularly hard to keep their audience through to the end of the performance when donations are collected.

Unlike Ashland and San Diego, open-air Shakespeares in Australia tend to be more about celebrating community and place than a serious celebration of Shakespeare. Common descriptors in Australian reviews are “irreverent” and “playful” and, as Alan Brissenden has pointed out, the larrikin productions of open-air directors like Glenn Elston have gone a long way towards redefining Shakespeare as entertainment for Australians (258). That the open-air industry in Australia constructs Shakespeare as popular entertainment is determined to some extent by funding limitations: the kind of sponsorship that supports Ashland Oregon, the Old Globe at San Diego, or Shakespeare Santa Cruz is difficult to secure. But it is also a product of place, of the way actors and audiences respond to the physical demands of outdoor spaces. When Shakespeare’s words can be drowned out by police helicopters or kookaburras or the rock-concert next door, and when the whole production may be curtailed by the weather, it becomes less precious, less rarefied and less controlled. A strong sense of camaraderie adheres to the stage-audience relationship in the open air that can potentially break down resistance to the complexities and otherness of Shakespearean dialogue. The challenge for future producers of outdoor Shakespeare is to continue to devise culturally and financially accessible productions for a heterogeneous audience while also presenting thoughtful, provocative and creative interpretations of the plays.

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