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Shakespeare, Straight Up



By

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Staunton, Va.

What did Shakespeare's plays look like on stage four centuries ago? If you've seen "Shakespeare in Love" or the first reel of Sir Laurence Olivier's film of "Henry V," you know that Elizabethan theaters were simple structures whose modest-size open stages were ringed on three sides by galleries. Because there were no sets to shift, the productions moved with terrific speed (thus explaining the reference in "Romeo and Juliet" to "the two hours' traffic of our stage"). When Thornton Wilder scrapped the fancy décor and illusion-spinning special effects of the modern proscenium-stage theater in "Our Town," all he was doing was turning back the clock.



Mike Bailey

Sarah Fallon and René Thornton Jr. in American Shakespeare Center's 'Othello'

In theater, seeing is believing, and the best way to learn about 17th-century theatrical performance practices is to watch a Shakespeare play acted on a modern re-creation of an Elizabethan-style stage. The most famous of these is the replica of Shakespeare's own open-air Globe Theatre that was built on the banks of London's Thames River in 1997. The U.S. is home to a half-dozen such houses, including the indoor theater at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., and the open-air theaters that I saw earlier this year at the Oregon

Shakespeare and Utah Shakespearean festivals. Most of the American replicas, however, are variously modernized structures that incorporate such anachronistic devices as theatrical lighting. If you want to see the real thing -- and to see it used in a convincing way -- the place to go is Staunton, home of the American Shakespeare Center, whose performances are given in a dazzlingly exact re-creation of the Blackfriars Playhouse, originally built in London in 1596.

A Trip Back in Time

Staunton is a smallish Virginia town (pop. 28,853) located some $\frac{12}{12}$ hours southwest of Washington. Best known as the birthplace of Woodrow Wilson, it's not the sort of community where you'd normally go looking for first-rate theater. Yet that was what I found at the American Shakespeare Center, a year-round repertory company co-founded by Ralph Alan Cohen and Jim Warren that puts on 14 shows each season, all of them performed on the compact stage of the five-year-old Blackfriars Playhouse, whose elegant wood-and-plaster interior is encased within a modern architectural shell. To pass through the lobby doors into the 300-seat auditorium is like jumping into Mr. Peabody's Wayback Machine and setting the controls for 1600, with some allowances made for fire safety. Actors and audience are lit by the same electric chandeliers -- there are no spotlights -- and if you're fortunate enough to hold a ticket for one of the 12 "Lord's Chairs" placed on either side of the stage, you'll be close enough to the players to reach out and touch them.

All this would be of purely historical interest were it not for the high quality of the ASC's fast-moving productions, which are authentic (no sets, no scene breaks) but not antiquarian. The company consists of 11 mostly young men and women who perform in a cheerfully eclectic mishmash of period and modern dress. They speak their soliloquies and asides straight to the audience, and the uncomplicated stagings give the impression that you're seeing the play itself, naked and self-sufficient.

I saw three of the four Shakespeare plays now alternating in repertory at the Blackfriars. All were satisfying, but the one I found most illuminating was "Othello," directed by co-founder Mr. Warren. It goes without saying that "Othello" is deadly serious, but Mr. Warren and his cast approached it from a surprising angle: Rene Thornton Jr. was a crisply spoken, light-voiced

Othello, Sarah Fallon an unabashedly sexy Desdemona, while James Keegan played the villainous Iago as a balding, middle-age clown. I don't think I've ever heard so much laughter at a performance of "Othello," which made the play's climactic explosion of madness and violence all the more shocking.

Immensely Enjoyable

Mr. Warren's staging of "As You Like It" was less surprising, if only because it's become so much more common in recent years to see Shakespeare's comedies acted with the speed and simplicity that are taken for granted at the Blackfriars Playhouse. Even so, it's always a treat to see Shakespeare performed in a small theater with an open, undecorated stage, and this frisky production is immensely enjoyable, not least because of the splendid Ms. Fallon, here cast as Rosalind. I would have preferred an older, more seasoned ensemble in "Macbeth," though I have a feeling that "great acting" of the star-in-the-limelight type might well seem out of place, even overblown, in an Elizabethan-style theater like the Blackfriars. Suffice it to say that these actors charge through co-founder Mr. Cohen's no-nonsense production as if they were riding an express train to hell, with Celia Madeoy giving an exceptionally vivid performance as Lady Macbeth.

The narrow streets of downtown Staunton, where the Blackfriars Playhouse is located, are full of handsome 19th-century buildings, enticing storefronts and good restaurants. Even without Shakespeare thrown in, it'd be a nice place to spend a long weekend, and if you come on Friday and leave late Sunday afternoon, you can see as many as four different shows. (The current repertory also includes "The Tempest.") Why not go the limit and catch them all?