



An interview with a Shakespeare Impresario



Jeff Watkins

Playing the Whole Shakespeare Canon: Great Works and Good Work, Too

By Eric Minton

Unparalleled drama, rich characters, soaring poetry, and an efficient rehearsal schedule: Shakespeare's First Folio has it all, said Jeff Watkins, and in that collected work of plays, he has found not just good theater but a good theater business model, too. It was a lesson confirmed for him as his Atlanta Shakespeare Company this year achieved a goal of producing at its New American Shakespeare Tavern every play credibly attributed to Shakespeare.

"I think the closer we get to Shakespeare's own business model, the more successful we will be," he said. "Shakespeare had the same actors, the same costumes, the same set, the same audience, and his job was to get those people to come back day after day after day. If you commit to his solutions, you're in good hands."

Watkins, a trained magician and one-time street performer in New York and Chicago, is these

days pursuing his desires and next dinners—literally and figuratively—as artistic director of the Atlanta Shakespeare Company and its unique Peachtree Street theater just north of downtown. The 240-seat (plus tables) Shakespeare Tavern serves up The Bard, with a bar in the back offering some 25 imported and local beers and ales, including Guinness and British ales on draught. Patrons dine on such pub grub as shepherd’s pie, roasted tarragon chicken, Cornish pasties, spinach and cheese enchiladas, and various sandwiches, salads, soup, and black bean chili (traditional pub grub legitimately has a bad rep, but the Shakespeare Tavern’s food is quite good, with the shepherd’s pie rivaling that of an Irish pub up the street in Buckhead).

The only full-time, year-round professional acting ensemble in Georgia, the Atlanta Shakespeare Company has 21 employees—17 of whom can perform on the stage, and 14 are full-time actors and/or directors. The company also sends some of its members out to local schools for eight-week workshops that end with the students performing plays at their schools as well as at the Tavern. The company performs a wide range of classics plus 19th and 20th century works, but its bread and butter—or, rather, what brings people to eat its breads and butter—is the namesake playwright.



Watkins as Galileo (Atlanta Shakespeare Company).

In staking its claim as the first U.S. company to play the entire canon of Shakespeare’s plays, Watkins’ enterprise staged not only all of those in the First Folio plus *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, but also two plays of questionable Shakespearean authorship, *Edward III* and *Double Falsehood*, or *The Distressed Lovers* (nee *Cardenio*). Watkins, who founded the company in 1984 and started producing plays at the locally famous *Manual’s Tavern* before moving to the company’s own Peachtree Street digs in 1990, didn’t necessarily set out to produce the whole canon of plays. As he was planning out last season, he realized the com-

pany had done 34 of Shakespeare’s known plays, lacking only *Coriolanus*, *Henry VIII*, *Timon of Athens*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.

Then somebody pointed out that *Edward III* was in the *Riverside Shakespeare*. Watkins was unfamiliar with it. “I start reading it out loud and I go, ‘It’s Shakespeare. I have to do this,’” he said.

Watkins decided to go for broke and do all five plays in a single season, not only because he’s somewhat impetuous anyway, but also as part of a long-term economic strategy. Because his theater’s near-term future might require more reliance on the always-popular titles, he said, “this last year I really wanted to reach out to the übergeeks in my audience, and I really wanted to sound the horn to say, ‘We’re the company that does it all.’”

In the Tavern lobby, 39 posters feature production photos of every Shakespeare play the company has done there from *Pericles* in 1999 through *Edward III*. On that last poster is written, “Commemorating the Completion of Shakespeare’s Canon on March 17, 2011.”

Then somebody pointed out that the *Arden Shakespeare* series has published *Double Falsehood*, first printed and “revised” by Lewis Theobald, who claimed he started with a Shake-

Shakespeare-penned play. The Royal Shakespeare Company in England also produced a version of the play this year. So, Watkins felt obligated to produce it, too, and scheduled a short run in June.

Upon reading it, he determined it was not Shakespearean. Furthermore, the director, Andrew Houchins, decided it not only was not Shakespeare, it was so bad that the only way to stage it was as an over-the-top presentation in the theatrical style of the play's actual publication date of 1727. This was a way to adhere to the company's mission of producing plays "guided by a single clarion principle that ASC reveres above all others: the voice of the playwright." Watkins and Houchins could not hear Shakespeare's voice through Theobald's, but at least they had covered the company's canon track record.

Theobald's *Double Falsehood* aside, the biggest surprise Watkins discovered in completing the entire canon was not simply the unexpected hits that were *King John* and *Two Noble Kinsmen*, but how every one of Shakespeare's plays resonated with the Tavern audiences. "The playwright has never let me down," Watkins said. "I kept expecting to get up to the clunker, the one that really had nothing to offer and there's a reason the play is never done, and I never found that."

For Watkins, the experience proved his belief that Shakespeare's texts are all you need to produce great theater. He is not interested in conceptualized productions of Shakespeare with modern visual metaphors layered over the poetry. To him, these visual gimmicks not only denigrate the poetry itself, they ultimately rob the plays of their powerful payoffs—and as a street performer, Watkins learned early on that it is the payoff that wins over the audience and earns you that night's meal. "Actually, when I started (in 1984), I meant to let the plays teach me enough so I could monkey with them, but I've never gotten past that," he said. "The plays keep talking to me. There's more there, even to the point where I've done the play five or six times in some cases."



Overly conceptualized theater also robs the performance of the spontaneity Watkins deems so important, another street performer lesson he brought to his Shakespeare theater. Indeed, he feels a street performer kinship with Shakespeare and the Chamberlain's Men/Kings Men companies, who not only played to rowdy crowds in the theaters but in banquet halls, taverns, markets, and

Macbeth at the New American Shakespeare Tavern (Atlanta Shakespeare Company).

other makeshift stages. In all those settings, the actors had to interact with the audiences and, using Shakespeare's text, win them over. It was an interpersonal dynamic.

Purity of text along with an improvisational performance dynamic makes Shakespeare—all Shakespeare, as Watkins feels he has proven—not only accessible to modern audiences but to what he calls “normal people” as opposed to elitist intelligentsia. He's proud of an intended insult from the director of a rival Shakespeare theater who said of the Atlanta Shakespeare Tavern, “Anybody can enjoy that.”

Such was Shakespeare's own business model, Watkins contends, based on theaters that had no fourth wall, pre-electric standards that not only precluded special effects but also dictated the performance schedule, and the need to get return business by constantly producing fresh material that would attract “normal people.” Watkins is therefore not only trying to replicate Shakespeare's production environment with the tavern setting, but also The King's Men's business operations with a repertoire company.

Even in that, Shakespeare's texts offer valuable clues. Working through the whole canon confirmed for Watkins his theory that the act structure in the First Folio is, in fact, The King's Men's rehearsal schedule. Watkins has come to build his own rehearsal schedule on the five-act break-down. As a Shakespeare aficionado, he looks at the three Henry VI plays and sees a series so taut and trim it would be an injustice to condense them into two plays; as a theater operator, he looks at the three Henry VI plays and wonders why any producer would settle for selling two tickets when you can sell three.

Watkins freely admits he is not a scholar; he's wholly a Shakespeare practitioner. He also points out that some academics and critics consider him a charlatan. Granted, he is practiced in magic, so perhaps remembering his adeptness at sleight of hand is in order. But the company has a 27-year history operating in three successive theaters (after moving from Manual's Tavern to Peachtree Street in 1990, the theater underwent a complete, \$1.6 million renovation and expansion in 2001). The company was the first American company to perform on the stage of Shakespeare's Globe in London, England. And now it is the first U.S. company to complete the canon (with people flying from England to see the Tavern's *Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Edward III* to complete their own personal Shakespeare canon). On the two nights I saw *Double Falsehood*, the Tavern was about 80 percent full, and about a dozen people identified themselves as first-time patrons. All of that testifies to the credibility of his practices if not his theories.

To complete my own personal Shakespeare canon, I flew from D.C. to Atlanta to see *Double Falsehood* (I still have not seen *Edward III*). I had been to many plays at the Tavern when we lived in Warner Robins, Ga., in the late '90s, but this was my first return visit since the Tavern became “New” in 2000. After seeing the play Saturday evening, a couple of hours before curtain on Sunday afternoon, June 5, 2011, I sat down with Watkins, who played various “Citizens” along with the Prologue in *Double Falsehood*. In an office-cum-conference room upstairs from the lobby, we talked about the Atlanta Shakespeare Company's mission and producing the entire Shakespearean canon. Our conversation began with our individual experiences enjoying the Henry VI plays, mine sitting in the audience for the American Shakespeare Center's productions at the Blackfriars Theatre in Staunton, Va., Watkins producing them downstairs in the Tavern.

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The [Blackfriars] did the three *Henry VI* plays, one at a time, over the course of three seasons, with *Richard III* coming up next year.

We did a four-play repertoire of Shakespeare comedies and the Scottish play while rehearsing the entire Henriad. So I had actors who had nine playscripts in their book over a four-month period. Most recently, when we did the *Henry VI* plays, we did a similar thing where we had to do a repertoire of plays we knew in order to get the rehearsal time for the *Henry* plays over a two-month period. I'd come to the conclusion that if the Queen of England showed up on our stage and requested a fortnight's entertainment, we could do a different Shakespeare play every night for 14 days—not only that, we could do them well.

How many actors did you use for that?

I used 31. And I shouldn't have. It didn't require nearly as many as I thought. [He gets up from his chair, crosses to the other side of the room, picks up a T-shirt and brings it over to me. The T-shirt says "31 actors, 152 speaking roles, 17 battles, 38 unnatural deaths, seven severed heads, 3 parts of *Henry VI*."] For somebody who does as much Shakespeare as me, you'd think I would be wise enough to understand it.

Especially when you get to the second part, the [casting] chart for it is just unbelievably massive. There are so many parts, so many people doing so many different things that my assumption was you needed a big company. That isn't the case. I didn't get it until we were doing revision nine or ten on the casting grid, and then I realized I actually only had five or six people who had massive line loads. Everybody else had smaller line loads because they were doing so many different parts. So many of those characters in those first two plays are doing

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functionary things, and they're introduced as Keeper One, Keeper Two, the Mayor of London and the Mayor of So and So, and they're only there for a brief amount of time. I think the entire thing could be done certainly with 21 actors, but more likely with 18 if you really doubled the men and women, maybe even fewer. I did have a lot of people who were just in one part or maybe they were in two parts; they had day jobs and we farmed them in. So I wasn't hell bent for leather to make it as small a company as possible, which is what I would try to do next time.

[Theaters] often take the three of these plays and squeeze them into two evenings, which is a really dumb thing to do. Number one, it's dumb because you could have sold three tickets and you chose to sell two. No wonder you're going broke. The other thing is, my final conclusion after doing the whole project was that those plays had been

revised and streamlined over many, many, many years and that there was not a wasted syllable in the whole darn thing; there's no fat. I assumed there was, because they were like three-hour plays and there's three of them, so I assumed there was a lot of junk in there that didn't need to be there. Not so. Those plays were already refined, and they were already refined for a small acting company. Now, if you start pulling scenes out, then suddenly the doubling isn't going to

work as well and you have to add actors to it.

They turned out to be just enormously gratifying plays, extremely well structured, and they had a lovely progression all the way through and it was just meaty and chopping heads off on stage...

Carrying heads on stage.

Carrying them on. But you know it was a progression too because you had to get into the second part before the heads started coming out. They had the one thing where the guy says, "Well, who's this dead soldier?" "Oh, I know this guy, I hated this guy, 'Hey, you're not doing so well now, are you?'" and they're doing a ventriloquist act with this dead guy, and then they drop him and they say, "Take his head off." So then you have to cut that head off on stage. "Give it here." And scurry up to the battlement and, "Bring me that head." They're tossing heads back and forth from the upper plane to the lower plane, and if you're going to follow the stage directions you have to do it on stage. What fun to get to do that, to figure out how to cut the head off on stage and work it in with the text. That's the kind of stuff that some idiot with a blue pencil comes in hacking through there because they're worried about their running time, and then they wind up missing the good bits. We got to where we just relished those crazy stage directions.

You like those plays as much as I do.

Oh, man, those are the best plays. If I ever get to where I do them again, and I certainly hope that does happen for me, I'm going to keep them in the repertoire for two or even three years. And I'm just not going to quit until everybody and their dog sees the damn things, because they are just so gratifying. It's just like a big meaty meal, and you get to see all levels of society; there's so much comedy in them you'd never know if you didn't have the nerve to go there.

I had some really good comedic actors. I had one guy, an English guy [John Curran] playing the gunner of France in *Part One*, and he was just dead serious. Normally, I do the casting and I'd have to stick with it, but with that massive project I did do some recasting after we started rehearsing because I just couldn't get my head around that many people. Maurice Ralston, he was available, so to John I said, "This isn't for you, let's take you out of that one and, Maurice, why don't you do that?" Maurice found this really ridiculous hat and he came out and [speaking Monty Pythonesque French], "I am the gunner of France!" [Laughs] He just had us in the aisles. And then little Matthew Felton came in with his little linstock and he picked right up on it and he's going, "Ah, poppa, how are you this fine day?!" So he's giving this instruction using this goofy French accent, and, oh man, it was just so satisfying to do that. Then, later, Maurice was a Welshman, so he got his hair all pouffed up and was using this outrageous pompous Welsh accent.

Got to make fun of everybody with an accent. It was good. Shakespeare would have approved.

The topic I want to get into is the fact that you've done every play in the canon.

And then some [laughs], like you saw last night.

By the way, I'm convinced that there is some Shakespeare hidden in that.

Well, then you're nuts [laughs]. The guy who foisted that onto the world [was the third influential editor of Shakespeare's works]. But I cannot hear the intelligence, certainly not late

Shakespeare, which is what it would have had to have been.

Some of the stuff in *Two Noble Kinsmen* is pretty obtuse stuff. It's hard to get through. I don't think late Shakespeare is necessarily his best poetry.

Our *Two Noble Kinsmen* was terrific. Everybody wants us to keep it in the repertoire, and I will definitely bring that play back. We did do some cutting. But we know that was a collaboration. So when you say a little obtuse, there's some truth to that.

But any of those speeches [in *Double Falsehood*], certainly at the end when you start talking about what a parent is and the lieutenants of God, when I hear that stuff, I don't hear the intelligence, I don't hear the structure. The thing that's closest to Shakespeare in the whole thing is the Prologue, which is clearly written by a guy doing a homage to Shakespeare.

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As opposed to say *Edward III*, which is of questionable provenance: but when I heard that, especially when I heard it night after night, the messenger speeches in particular are Shakespeare to the nth degree. Very early Shakespeare. And having just done the *Henry Sixes*, I decided for myself that *Edward III* is a Shakespeare play. Personally, I think it's his first play because it's not really producible—having produced it, I can say that; because of the structure of the story it would take too much work to make it producible. In my experience of having gone through all the Shakespeare, he wasn't very big for rewriting things. There's a lot of clunky stuff in the Shakespeare plays that could have easily been a little bit better with just a tiny bit of effort, but he chose not to do that. Now, he did rework certain things for certain purposes, to accommodate something that happened. But they weren't big on rewriting things. And *Edward III*, the plots don't complement or support each other. There was no back and forth, there was no structural building of tension, there was no multiple storyline; you do one thing and then you do the other. In order to break that apart and figure out how to make it work, a whole new thing would have had to have been added, and I think it was too much work and didn't happen.

The scholars say *Edward III* was not done because it makes fun of the Scots. It's only one little section, less than 200 lines. They could have easily made him a Welshman or anything else they wanted to make fun of. They could have just changed his name, made him King of the Welsh, could have made him the King of Bohemia, for all that mattered. It would have been very easy to rewrite that aspect of it without rewriting a single syllable, just change the guy's name.

Like he did with Oldcastle.

Yeah. Yeah. That's the kind of rewriting they would do. But it's structurally not there.

Next year we're doing the Evolution Series where we're going to do all the comedies in the order that they were written, and we're consulting with Gary Taylor, Stanley Wells, and a bunch of other hotshots at [the Royal Shakespeare Company] on the order of Shakespeare's plays. They put *Edward III* after the *Henry VI* plays, and after two or three of the comedies. I look at that and I just go, "You're nuts." I'm sorry, you know? This was a journeyman's play, it was at the beginning, and if you assume that you have all these plays by one guy and one of them had to be the first, that's the odds-on favorite in my perspective.

Before we get into the whole canon stuff, a brief history of you. I don't know anything about you. You're just this guy running this cool place here. Where did you come from?

That's a good question.

I'm from Texas originally, and my father was a number of things, a small businessman and a photographer, and he was also a magician. He taught me magic when I was growing up. So when I got to college—actually, I found Shakespeare by the [Franco] Zeffirelli film [*Romeo and Juliet*]. That really turned my crank and I fell in love with that Olivia de Hussey gal. I couldn't believe it. That red dress and jet-black hair and almond eyes, the décolletage. Oh, my God! that woman. I was only 13 at the time, so that pricked my interest, as it were, in a Shakespearean sense.

I was doing magic and got a theater degree because that's where all the smart, interesting women were, although I didn't realize at the time most of them were nuns—theater nuns, we came to call them. After college, I made a living as a magician. I was doing street magic. I did a stint in New York and then Chicago. That is a particular performance style that's really important. My undergraduate degree [in theater] had no Shakespeare component; they taught me Greek, Roman, Medieval, and then Restoration.

They skipped Elizabethan.

Yeah. Thank God. Really, I am so grateful, because everybody else in my profession is given a matrix of the reconceptualization and repackaging of these old classics. So what you get is the mainstream American conceptual approach to Shakespeare, which never ever spoke to me personally. And I wasn't trained in it. Having been trained in theater and then as a street performer, when I would come to these concept pieces, I'm going, "Obviously, there's real power here somewhere, but that ain't it."

Also, the audiences for that kind of theater, they're just dull. I remember doing magic in New York on the street, and I could have a phenomenal time in Washington Square with this multi-ethnic, multiclass audience, these people going nuts, loving everything I'm doing. They were so much fun to perform for, but I wouldn't make any money. Then I could go down to the Wall Street district where you have all these button-down guys, and make a good amount of money. Just 20 minutes I could make 30 or 40 bucks, which was a lot of money back then, and I could

eat, get the train back out, get one more meal and get back down. But they weren't any fun to perform for.

I would say that this intelligentsia audience seems to respond to what I call American-concept Shakespeare. They're not normal people. That's neither good nor bad, it's just saying that they're not normal people. If you come to my theater, for the most part you're going to see a very diverse audience, and a lot of them are just normal people. And they're responding directly to the work itself. They're not responding to my idea of the work or my conceptualization of the work.

Anyway, as a street performer I learned that if you do a proper setup, you get a proper payoff. That's the basis for all show business. You have to lay the exposition out, you've got to get your storyline in place, then you can bring it all together in act four and act five. So, much of modern Shakespeare, the way I've come to describe it, is modern visual artists creating visual

They found us by accident somehow, and there they are, coming to see Shakespeare play after Shakespeare play after Shakespeare play because they "Love y'all." They're not here for the intellectual stimulation or the fun of seeing King Lear with a pink silk tie talking on a cell phone.

simile and visual metaphor in counterpoint to Shakespeare's poetry. So you have two things going on. You have Shakespeare's play, and then you have a modern digression or a modern construct of visual poetry, which is ideal for the modern theater because the modern theater has turned into a very visual medium. And we're a very visual society. You hear this all the time: [the Elizabethans] were aural, we're visual. So modern theater technicians use Shakespeare as the opportunity to do that.

And it drives me crazy. What I crave is actors speaking to an audience in real time, wielding their text in a room with people who are acknowledged as being there, and having a real possibility of communion, if you will. That's what we're about.

For me, poetry by definition is already a distillation, and it is a distillation to something that is by definition complete.

And if it is complete, woe betide the fool who wants to go out and put a bunch of other stuff on top of it. But that's what they tend to do, and it costs a lot of money. I don't have that kind of money, and it only speaks to a very small percentage of the population.

[One night at the Tavern], I was busing tables and there were these two older ladies sitting there and they had a teenager with them and I come over and say, "Is this your first time here?" The little girl goes. "Uh-huh," and the two ladies look at each other and say, "Well, no, no we've been several times." "Well, how long have you been coming?" "Oh, I don't know, I guess it's been two years." So I said, "What have you seen?" And they start naming all these Shakespeare plays. And I said, "Oh, so you have an affinity for Shakespeare." And they looked at each other and said, "No, we just love y'all." [Laughs] I just thought, these are country people and they didn't live in the city, they were driving in from somewhere out there in the middle of nowhere, they found us by accident somehow, and there they are, coming to see Shakespeare play after Shakespeare play after Shakespeare play because they "Love y'all."

They're not here for the intellectual stimulation or the fun of seeing King Lear with a pink silk tie talking on a cell phone.

From my perspective, your production does not come home for that. But it's amazing, I see it all the time. I went to see the Royal Shakespeare Company last month and they were doing the "Merchant of Vegas," and I'm sure they must have considered using that title. It was set in Las Vegas. Patrick Stewart played Shylock. They had a game show with television monitors for the three [chests]. And this is something I've always really noticed is that the concept guys,

Very often I see theater created by theater people—dare I say it?—for other theater people. I'll quote Dominic Dromgoole of the Globe, where he says that modern Shakespeare, modern theater, has digressed to become a dialogue among the director and the design team and the critic to which the audience is privileged to be a witness. That's not what I'm about. And I've got the bad reviews to prove it.

they love the exposition, because every time a new element comes in, they can show you how "that's like..." and then fill in the blank. But then what happens is as you get into Acts Four and Five, where the real theater is happening, it's like you've found your exposition, you've found your setup, and then it becomes a burden. Where do you go with it? So when it got to the trial scene where you have is law of commerce as exemplified by the empire of Venice coming into conflict with the immutable law of the Israelites, and in the middle is all this racism. So you have these two huge forces coming together and you've got Christianity all tied up in the middle, and you go to Vegas. What is Vegas? Vegas is no consequences. No morality. It's whatever you get away with, you get away with. So when it came time for the trial scene, everything about legal precedent rang hollow because the Doge of Venice was just a guy in a big trench coat who looked like a cigar-chomping mob boss. But he didn't have the text to support that, so he's out of whack. They threw a ton of money at it, and of course it was RSC so the diction was just immaculate.

And then my final conclusion with the RSC is, because they rehearsed seven to 12 weeks, every single decision about the text had been made before we arrived. So what we saw was a rehearsed conversation along agreed-upon lines. It was a theater of no possibility. And it was an expensive theater of no possibility. They're the RSC and I'm

just some schmuck from Georgia, but it didn't do much for me, and the people in my tour group, they'd been ruined for Shakespeare because they come here all the time and they expect to be acknowledged, and if you don't they get ticked off about it.

But there's also the whole world of acting that believes what we're trying to do is to create characters. What they completely miss is the meta-theatrical layer on top of it. You know how the Western mind separates the mind and the body, and how Eastern philosophy goes, "No, there is no separation"? That's so hard for us to get our heads around. For the Elizabethans, this idea that history and story and actor are somehow separated and there's the concept of the way it really was or the way people really talked, none of that made any difference. If you have an actor on stage saying he's Henry V and he's talking to you as though you're there at the Battle of Agincourt and you're moved as an Englishman and your heart beats faster, you've

had an emotional experience. And that's the definition of truth. It isn't "what must it have really been like?"

When we did *Henry VIII*, which is a very thin play, or *All Is True*—boy, there's a tongue in your cheek—what you have is a rewriting of recent history being performed for people who lived through that history, and they're likely not to be taken in. You see a play of "good," "wise" King Henry VIII and how smart he is, and you get to see his good queen Katherine and what a tragedy that she's put aside for all the right reasons, and all this stuff is going on, but the characters don't really hold much water. So, what I said to my company was, "This is a history play, so bear in mind, first and foremost, it is an instructional device. We're here to instruct the audience how to feel about Archbishop Cranmer. We're here to remind the audience of certain aspects of Henry VIII's reign. So we are actors whose job it is to propagandize this way, by playing the actors whose motivation isn't to get this tax raised or lowered but whose motivation is to change your thinking on what a fine and avuncular individual Archbishop Cranmer was—in fact, he probably presided over the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of your friends and relatives."

I've got to say [that the actors] beat me up all the time because they want to do what they call their table work, where we sit around in a room and we discuss everything before we've learned the text. And I have no patience for this at all. The actors who work for me will tell you that they are the chief architects of their performance; I don't tell them what to do. But what they have to do is make those choices with their text. I have no time or patience for sitting in a room full of imaginative individuals hypothesizing what something may or may not mean or what somebody's brother may or may not have been or whether or not Lady McB had one or two children or whatever it is, based on their reading of the text. Until they can stand up and speak their text with authority on their feet, I just don't care what they think. I don't care at all. And don't take my time to burden me with it. After you've learned your text, and we're working it, if you've got something you want to share, like "what about...?" I can say, "Show me." And then we can do it quickly and we can make that decision. I'm very open to that.

The birth of this institution here. How did that come about?

Dumb luck and I guess I had the wit to see it. There was a lady who had the Atlanta Shakespeare Association, which had done two or maybe three full productions when I met her. She was not big on the concept approach to Shakespeare either. She and I hit it off and she said that I could direct a Shakespeare play for her.

I had been a part of a Shakespeare cult in Chicago, which was an improv group. These people—who were really good actors, and I was not—their day job was Second City tour team. They were touring for Second City, and at night they were doing Paul Sills' Story Theater—Paul Sills is the son of Viola Spolin, who wrote the seminal book *Improvisation for the Theater*. So they were busy actors. And then after that, at 11 o'clock, we would come together, and I got to work with these guys, and we would do Shakespeare with no rehearsal and no direction. They would teach us the basics of speaking verse, and the idea was you'd bring your own costume; if you carried a prop on, it was up to you to get it, and we would do these plays basically unrehearsed: we'd get one run-through and then we'd do it. A lot of it was awful, but there were whole sections of it that were just glorious, and it was usually the sections that these five

improvisational actors were doing. So they had the precision of Shakespeare with the instincts of professional improvisators.

I worked with them for a long time, and that's where I came up with the idea that the director or direction and rehearsal can actually be a detriment to the purity of the moment of performance and to the play itself. And then I had this opportunity to direct for this little company down here in Atlanta. But I couldn't because I was going to go to Europe to see some great theater companies, and she was going to let me do it when I got back.

When I got back to Atlanta, she goes, "Well, I know I said you could direct a play, but I'm moving to New York, so, I'm sorry." And I said, "You're moving to New York? What about the play?" "What about it? I'm not here, there won't be any company; that's it." I said, "What about the company?" "You mean this rack of costumes?" I said, "Well you've been in existence for three years, you've got a grant history." "Yeah, actually I even have a grant. We got a grant for a thousand dollars to do *As You Like It*." And I said, "Well, I'll do that." She goes, "Well, I'm going to be gone." "Well, what about the company?" And she said, "You can have it." Then she said, "But it owes me \$2,000." [Laughs] "OK, so the company owes you \$2,000, I've got a \$1,000 grant coming in, but I can direct this play." "Yes, sure." "Let's do that, Lisa." So I bought me a typewriter to start with, and then she taught me how to write a report for the government because I had to rewrite the grant application, and then she was gone and I produced *As You Like It* at the back of Seven Stages Theater.

Modern directors are entirely likely to completely miss that because, um, well because they're modern directors and they haven't done all the damn plays and they're musing about doing, "Well, King John could be like W, he could be George Bush."

What I knew is that I didn't know anything about Shakespeare—very little about it—and I knew that I didn't want to impose anything. I wanted to do the play in such a way that the play could teach me what it wanted to do. I had a really good actor as Rosalind; it was kind of a mixed bag after that. Not very many people came to the back room of Seven Stages, but then we used to drink at Manual's Tavern [a popular neighborhood bar owned by local politician

Manuel Maloof], and I said, "This is where we ought to do Shakespeare. This is where the real people are. This is the right atmosphere." Everybody laughed. I kept saying that for a week or two and finally somebody said, "Well, I can make that happen. I'm Manual Maloof's campaign director and we need some entertainment for a fund-raiser he's doing. You guys want to do your Shakespeare play for us?" I said, "Shakespeare in the back of Manual's Tavern? Sure." So we closed at Seven Stages and we set it up in the back room of Manual's Tavern. We did four nights and got a little blurb in the Wall Street Journal because that's where The Wall Street Journal's stringer used to write. I thought that was cool.

After we closed it, I got a call from Entertainment Tonight and CNN and then Current Events, and then when CBS called and said, "Tell me about this play y'all are doing." I said, "Well, it closed last night—but we're doing it again next week, yes, we are!" [Laughs]. "Could I have your phone number?" Then I talked Maloof into letting me set it back up, and we did get covered by CNN and CBS and The New York Times. They let me do it every year.

When was this?

1985. We did five comedies, one a year up until 1990, and that's when we moved into here. And I will say that in that environment—it only seated like 114 people—the audience was very, very close, we couldn't ignore them and so we acknowledged them and we kind of fell into what I would call an Elizabethan aesthetic. But I also had caught the interest of Dr. Gretchen Schulz at Oxford College Emory University [a nationally known Shakespearean scholar, she ended up serving on the Atlanta Shakespeare Company board, published study guides for the plays and provided educational programs for teachers and students in the Atlanta area; she recently retired from her post at Emory]. She said, "Jeff, Jeff, this is exactly the way it was at the Globe." So she started to explain to me that at the Globe, there was no fourth wall, at the Globe the actors and audience could see each other, at the Globe—I mean, it just went on and on.

I was also getting trashed in the press for being a huckster and a charlatan who was doing these plays without any real respect or training...

Like Shakespeare himself.

Yeah, really. So I started talking about the Elizabethan performance reality.

Little did I know—actually I didn't make this connection until a few years back—that my training as a street performer was ideal for this. Because, fundamentally, as a street performer—and this is something I did learn early on—when you don't do the setup properly, you don't get the payoff. And if you're performing for your living, what that means is you don't get food. You don't get food, you're hungry. I mean, it's really that simple.

From the beginning, we never really had any inspired support for us. I attracted, for the longest time, and still do, dysfunctional single people with advanced degrees who think we're wonderful, but none of those rich financiers or political muscle who can really get something done. We've had to earn it every step of the way. So our contract, if you will, is with the audience, not with the funders, not with the critics, not with the intelligentsia. It's people, regular, normal people. I come back to that time and time again because, for my money, great art will speak to everyone. A guy up the street at the other Shakespeare festival, he meant it as an insult but it didn't come out that way to me, said, "At the Atlanta Shakespeare Tavern, anybody can enjoy that." [Laughs]

Which is the idea.

Yeah, that's what I'm going for.

I had my theories, too, of why the British do what they do and how the Americans are copying what the British are doing, and it doesn't really have resonance with us, and it has led to an elitist theater. The worst part about it is the funders, the people who are charged with funding us, don't care for [elitist theater]. I even heard one of them say, "I'll give you the damn money, just don't make me sit through that crap." And really it shouldn't be that way. Shakespeare can move anyone. And it's a shame that so much...

"All that crap," meaning Shakespeare in general?

I guess this is somebody who had sat through one too many productions where the digression

from the original material was too extreme and it left that person feeling stupid.

Ever been to the Tate or Museum of Modern Art in New York?

Yeah.

OK, so a lot of times you can look at a piece of art and go, “What the hell is that? My God, that’s art?” Sometimes you can walk up to it and you can read the story about what the artist was thinking and then you can go, “Wow! Yeah! Now I get it.” Well, you know there are some jokes that are funny after they’re explained to you, [he leans in close] but a really great joke needs no explanation. And really great art needs no explanation. And you don’t have to conceptualize it.

Now, I’m not saying that it’s wrong to do that or anything bad about that. I’ve seen phenomenal conceptual Shakespeare in my time. That’s the exception rather than the rule. Very often I see theater created by theater people—dare I say it?—for other theater people. I’ll quote Dominic Dromgoole of the Globe, where he says that modern Shakespeare, modern theater has digressed to become a dialogue among the director and the design team and the critic to which the audience is privileged to be a witness.

That’s not what I’m about. And I’ve got the bad reviews to prove it. I tend to make a great first and second impression, and then after that it’s like, “What’s up, what’s new? Show me something innovative. What’s your take?” I don’t have a take.

Actually, when I started I meant to let the plays teach me enough so I could monkey with them, but I’ve never gotten past that. The plays keep talking to me. There’s more there, even to the point where I’ve done the play five or six times in some cases. I am not in the least bit interested setting it in the Wild West or on a spaceship or these other kinds of things.

To the canon then. Did you set out to do the entire canon, or was it a point where you’re kind of going—and I was looking at the posters down there [in the lobby]—was it a point of going, “We’ve done *Pericles* but not *King John* and if we get *Timon* in, we’re there”?

Well, it was two years ago when I just went through the list of plays, and I thought, “Wow! There aren’t very many we haven’t done.” Then I counted them and there were four that we hadn’t done before I found out about *Edward III*. So then the question was, What do you want to do, Jeff? Do you want to do one a year for four years, which is, you know [long pause] timid [laughs], or do you just want to do them all in a single year? I decided I just want to get them all done in a year.

What four were they?

They were *Coriolanus*, *Henry VIII*, *Timon of Athens*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.

You’d done *King John*?

We’ve done *King John*. We’ve done it twice. Good play.

A lot of people can't get their head around *King John*, and it made perfect sense to us. Again, it comes down to the instructive nature of the histories, which is to demonstrate and show the Englishmen watching them what their job is as Englishmen. You have two things about *King John* that befuddle modern directors. Number one is you've got this great play going and the guy just dies. What's that about, he just dies? They bring him out in a chair and he just dies, there's no drama to it at all. What's that about? Well, you've got to understand, it isn't just a guy, it's the f****g king. The king! There's only one king, God's ordained, head of the top of the being, right there, and you're watching his last breath. Hello! That's a big deal. That would be like every night you're doing a musical or something and some real pregnant woman walks across the stage and actually gives f****g birth on the stage. Modern people would go nuts over that. So that's a big deal.

The other thing is that you have a king who's basically well-intentioned and of noble birth, but he is subject to the foibles of his own nature; and who upholds the honor of the nation is the bastard to the lowborn. So, what we're showing here is even if you're a bastard, even if you're a lowborn, the weight and honor of the integrity of the entire nation and the success of who we are as a people depends on you. That's a big message. Modern directors are entirely likely to completely miss that because, um, well because they're modern directors and they haven't done all the damn plays and they're musing about doing, "Well, King John could be like W, he could be George Bush. That's right, that's right. And H.W. could be..." You know? They come up with all these kinds of approaches, and they get further and further away from what's going on so you miss that thing in the play.

So, yes, we did *King John* and I loved the production so much I brought it back for a three-peat, which is a repertoire thing, just because I was showing off and I thought it's good showing off. I did the same thing with *Richard II* and a couple of others where we probably could have made more money doing *Midsummer Night's Dream*, but I stuck them in the repertoire.

So the four, you decided to get through those in one year.

Yeah, and I made that decision, and then somebody said, what about *Edward III*? And I said, "What?" And they handed me the Riverside. It's in the new Riverside and has been since 1998, and I had it in my office but hadn't bothered to read it. I started to read it and I thought, "S***, this is Shakespeare." And I go back and read the introduction and they finally conclude it's one person and it's Shakespeare. I start reading it out loud and I go, "It's Shakespeare. I have to do this."

So I decided to put that into the rep as well. I did get a single sponsor who gave some serious money that I leveraged as a matching challenge, and I raised \$100,000 to do this project over this past year. It hasn't been enough, so I need to do some more fund-raising. But we got them all done in one year because that's actually much more my nature as opposed to trying to slip one in, unbeknownst—"This is the play no one wants to see."

The other thing is that the company is at a pivotal place. We're strangling in our current facility because we don't have the capacity to make more money. On the times we could sell more tickets, we could sell a lot more tickets, but I don't have room to do that. I've done all kinds of

things to do as many performances in that room as possible and we average about 250 performances a year in there, 51 weeks a year, 12–14 productions. We’ve done 11-show weeks where we’re doing Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday matinees, and we’re doing Thursday,

I do have a pet theory, which is that the Folio act structure is also the rehearsal schedule. No academic would ever support me on this because I have no other basis except the fact that for 10 years I’ve been basing our rehearsal schedule off the Folio act schedule, the way the Folio acts break.

Friday, Saturday, Sunday evenings, and we’re doing Friday and Sunday late nights. We’re doing all kinds of stuff in an effort to get more out of what we’ve got. But we can’t do it. So we’ve got to grow because I’ve got these people on health insurance, which keeps ratcheting up. Health insurance costs have gone up 41 percent in the last five years. It’s just rapacious and they don’t care what my tickets cost. They don’t care that I’m trying to keep it affordable. It’s pay it or don’t; pay it or die.

So I’ve got to have a bigger place and I knew we were going to get to the point where we’ll have to, to a greater degree, program to the money. In America, people will say, if you want to succeed, find out what your audience wants and give them that. I’m here to tell you that the largest audience wants *Romeo and Juliet*, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Christmas Carol*, and the *Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*. For an adventurous thing you can throw in *Taming of the Shrew*, and that’s pretty much it. Every four years, you can do a *Hamlet*. And that’s it, because that’s what they think of as Shakespeare.

There is a very robust business plan to be made on the first-time ticket buyer, and those are the only titles that I need. And I don’t really need much of a company to keep that going. But that’s not who we are and that’s not what I want to be. We want to do the whole canon. We want to be more than that. So, we’ve got to expand, but I do know that we’re at a pivotal point with one theater space that we’re going to have to program more and more of that. So this last year I really wanted to reach out to the übergeeks in my audience, and I really wanted to sound the horn to say, “We’re the company that does it all.” I wanted to solidify those relationships to those people who care the most about the whole rep.

And I will say this. [During] *Coriolanus*, one night I came in the back door, there were less than a hundred people in that house, but by the time I got to the lobby I had \$4,700 in my pocket. People were slipping me checks saying, “Thank you for doing this work.” They’d gotten my e-mails and they knew that we needed to do that.

I’ve got no big money anywhere. I don’t have a Winton Blount, I don’t have a Melita Hayes, I don’t have anybody who’s doing that for us. But I do have a large group of people—not as big as it should be—but I only have about 1,200 to 1,400 geeks, and then there’s a bunch of other people who come a little bit and a mass of people who are happy to come the first time and bring grandmother for her birthday to see *All’s Well That Ends Well*. And it works because we’re very unpretentious about our presentation. And we’re consistent with what we deliver.

You answered my question about *Edward III*, which was, Why? There’s a whole apocrypha out there. Ed-

***mund Ironside* was attributed to Shakespeare at one point.**

Well, I'm happy to look at it. I'm not as well read as one might imagine; I don't have time to go digging.

When they train people for the Federal Reserves to spot counterfeit bills, they lock them in a room six days a week for six weeks, and they only let them handle real money. They don't show them any fakes. Graduation day, they put some fakes in there, and they can knock them off like that [snaps his fingers]. After spending all that time with the real money, they can spot the fake. That's the way I feel we are. I've got these smarty-pants academics coming in here and I will say with some authority that *Edward III* is Shakespeare, and they'll go, "Well, how do you know that?" And they look down their nose at it. And I'll lead with, "Have you ever heard it spoken?" They normally haven't. "Well, I have, actually, a number of times, a couple of dozen, because I produced it and I actually spoke the text, so take it from someone who's spoken more Shakespeare text live on stage for money than you've ever met in your life, this is the real deal." So, if I encounter the real deal, I feel pretty good about jumping in on it.

Now, *Double Falsehood*, none of us, even on the first reading—we just said no. Not only the way it's plotted but everything about it, the very coarse nature of it didn't speak to us. And after they got into it—I wasn't here for half of the rehearsal process because I was doing a tour in London—they started leading to this 18th century approach to theater, much more melodramatic, and that seemed to ring true, so we really went completely with that. We've made, I believe, an entertaining piece of theater. The RSC is doing *Cardenio* at the moment and they're using part of the *Double Falsehood* script with some other stuff. I really wish I had seen that because they take themselves so seriously. It would have been interesting to see how they could make that thing work, although they may be able to because they are the RSC.

You mentioned the ones that everybody wants to see, like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*. But after you had done every play at least once, were there any real surprises for you, something you didn't expect to work but did?

Do you mean was I surprised by the response or surprised by the play?

Either way. Both.

Well, the most shocking one for me, I think, was probably *Richard II*. I'd heard it was a great play, but every time I read it, all I got was all this unrelenting, irregularized verse structure. I'd done *Henry IV, Part One*, before I'd gotten to do *Richard II*. We did a *Henry V* before I'd gotten to do *Richard II*. *Richard II* seemed to be humorless. I'd also seen a production of it in France that was very moving but had huge concept elements to it and there was no humor in it. And I didn't understand the nature of that play.

Then when it came time to actually do it, somehow there was a connection to a chord of what that period in English history meant to the Elizabethans. In many ways when they looked back to their history, [it was] the same as us looking at the Wild West, Marshal Dillon, and those kinds of mythic figures. So this is a mythic kind of a thing. Then the progression from the opening sequence of the banishment and the almost fight in that soaring language to the end

where you had all those lords throwing their gauntlets down left and right and center, how funny and hilarious it was when we got to that. Then at the very end of it when Henry Bolingbroke keeps saying, "Good aunt, please stand up, stand up, stand up!" It was hysterical, they were rolling in the f****g aisle. I had seen a production of that and it wasn't funny at all. And it was like, clearly it's funny. I mean this is funny.

So you start it in one place and then it was very, very funny and it made an amazing segue into the *Henry IV* plays. Jeff McKerley played Richard II, and he had done a lot of clowns for me, but I'd never seen his dramatic work to that degree, and it was probably the best Shakespeare performance, certainly one of the top one, two, or three that we've had here, and that I've ever seen anywhere. He just so clearly illustrated for me, and I guess it crystalized in every sense of the way, the entire chain of being that the Elizabethans believed in or lived by, where someone started at the absolute pinnacle of it and at the very end of the play, he was at the extreme bottom of society, that whole journey through there. So I guess the clarity and the power and the mastery of that play was a shock to me. And then how that set a standard going into the *Henry IV* plays, and then we were doing the entire Henriad, and we did all four of those plays in repertoire in about six weeks.

So that was the one that I had no inkling of the real power that was there until I actually saw it enacted.

Did you not direct that?

I directed it. But I read the play, and I don't like to read them anymore, hardly. [Laughs] It's good, we've done them all, so I don't need to read them as much. I read the play and I give everybody the right part, and then the real fun begins just investigating how it all works.

Now I do have a pet theory, which is that the Folio act structure is also the rehearsal schedule. No academic would ever support me on this because I have no other basis except the fact that for 10 years I've been basing our rehearsal schedule off the Folio act schedule, the way the Folio acts break. I haven't heard anybody give me a compelling reason for why they're broken up the way they are in the Folio. But when I was doing *Richard II*, I'm looking at the pages, and

You asked what were the surprises. As we were doing these last plays, I kept expecting to get up to the clunker, to get to the one that really had nothing to offer and there's a reason the play is never done, and I never found that.

there's like three pages [for] Act IV, and it's just the one scene, the gauntlet scene. And I go, "Well, there goes my theory. There's no way in the world this is going to take 4 1/2 hours." Well, it took 4 1/2 hours. It did and at the end of it, I just said, "Well, there it is." That validated it for me.

And I've noticed over the years there is never a battle and a party. There are certain kinds of scenes that even for Shakespeare ate up huge amounts of rehearsal time, and you never have two of them in a single act. He always put the act break in such ways that you only have to deal with one of them in there. And if you look at the way the acts are broken up and you get to a huge section and you'll realize that it'll be Orlando and Rosalind. Rosalind probably lived in Orlando's household, and they could do that bit

themselves, then bring that part in so that when they're putting it together in the one day they didn't have to do that.

Just think about what they had to do in the day: the sun comes up, you've got to wake up in the morning, you've got to milk your goats, milk your cow, got to stuff something in your face, got to kiss your wife, got to walk out the door, got to take care of some kind of business, show up at the theater and then you only have a certain amount of daylight before the show starts, and the show is going to take you almost to sundown and then you're done. So your rehearsal schedule is going to be 4 1/2 to five hours max. And if it's a show you know, you don't have to rehearse before you perform that day so you can rehearse something else. Then I saw Shakespeare in Love and it just made perfect sense. He writes an act, they rehearse an act. I don't know if he was doing it that way, but certainly having five rehearsals made sense of a brand-new play that nobody had ever done. Five rehearsals seem to me to be about the right amount.

Now, in my case, we do five rehearsals and then we do a work-through, and then we do a run-through, then we do the tech and the dress, then we open.

And you do your rehearsals based on the acts?

Yeah, that's generally how I've done it in the past several years. We rehearse anywhere from 20 to 45 hours for a play. A play we've done before, less than 20 perhaps. A big play with combat stuff, maybe 65 or 70 hours. Other companies will rehearse 120, 200 hours. Mind-numbing.

So Richard II blew you away, what about the audience, was there any play that...

Timon of Athens was an extraordinary experience. We had the right actor in Maurice Ralston doing that. When I picked the director, I said I think Maurice needs to play this part, because he's the only person I'd want to hear complain to that degree. But that one in recent memory certainly was quite a revelation.

And actually a lot of people will tell you that this season has been a revelation because *Two Noble Kinsmen* was enormously popular and very successful, and people want to see that more and more, they want to see it in the repertoires. And again I had the two right actors for that.

Does this mean that the entire canon is going to be more of your repertoire as you go forward?

I want it to be. I really want it to be. I think the closer we get to Shakespeare's own business model, the more successful we will be. And I think that the current mode of operations for modern theaters of rehearsing four to five weeks and doing the same play every day for four to five and six weeks is deadly. I think having a standing company that has a number of plays in the repertoire for very short runs is the way to not only keep it fresh but to find new depths and an extraordinary level of possibility in the performance of it. And I think that audiences would respond to that over time.

I'm really looking forward to the day that I have a Shakespeare Tavern app. When you want to know what's playing at the Shakespeare Tavern, you tap the button on your phone and it will give you two or three options you have in a two- or three-day period. One of the problems

nowadays with repertoire is people want their marketing in a bullet and it can't be complicated. If you're doing a different show on Thursday than you're doing on Friday or Saturday, you're screwed before you even start. They don't care, they're just going to move on and do something else. "Well, let's go see *Pirates of the Caribbean* because we know it's here at that time." Social media holds out a fair amount of promise in that we don't have to print large grids, and if we can get them all trained up, we'll just get that Tavern app; you can just punch in the button and you'll see what's playing.

The other thing we do is we sell the brand of what we're doing more so than just the play.

I was thinking that one advantage you've got is you could do four different plays a week and get return audiences because you do food.

Well, that's part of it. The fact is there are not enough restaurants around here to support an organization this size, so we have to do the food. I don't make anything on the food; I do make on the beverage sales. My food lady is a separate business, but we're negotiating that for the future. Also, if you look at Ashland, if you look at the RSC, if you look at Alabama, the ability to have two or three plays in a three-day period is huge. We did have someone fly here from London to see *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Edward III* because that completed his canon, and we had them coming from all over the country to see these plays because they could complete their canon.

The reason I'm here.

Yeah, yeah. Sorry you missed *Edward III*.

I know.

A flawed play, but worth seeing once or twice.

If you do it again, I'll get here.

We will do it again when we do the history evolution series, which would be the second year after we have our new theater space. We'd have to be very strong financially to do that.

We talked about the successes. Any of the plays that you were disappointed in? And not in the productions, but the plays when you saw them on stage.

[10-second pause] You know, the playwright has never let me down.

Other than *Edward III*.

Edward III I think is certainly worth watching once or twice, more out of just a curiosity aspect. It has a place. It's a piece of art that requires context. It's like that piece of modern art where you look at it and go "What?" and then you read about the context and you go "Oh, I get it. Oooh cool." If you really put yourself in the idea of what it meant to be an Elizabethan and you understand who Edward the Black Prince was to your nation and you get to see him as a teenager earn his spurs, that's a big deal. That's like watching George Washington chop down the damn cherry tree, and the idea that you can experience that is a big deal. It's also a very early part of your history, so in the context of the whole history cycle it's actually very interesting. But as a play itself, visually it's not particularly exciting, and structurally it lacks mastery. You can certainly tell it's Shakespeare, there's some really good stuff in it, but it doesn't soar and you've got to want it to do it. The same director doing *Double Falsehood* did *Edward III*;

with *Double Falsehood* the material wasn't up to it, so he took it somewhere to make it an evening of entertainment, but he played *Edward III* straight as an arrow. I'm very proud of that production.

But the playwright has never let me down. We've had productions that were less successful than others over the many years we've done them. Actually, that was one of the big surprises. You asked what were the surprises. As we were doing these last plays, I kept expecting to get up to the clunker, to get to the one that really had nothing to offer and there's a reason the

Drew Reeves played Edward III and he also played Richard III two years ago. So he's up there and he's honking on Lady Constance and he's saying, "I've got to have you, I've got to have your body, you've got to sleep with me, I can't stand it, I love everything about you," I swear you could see his left shoulder come up.

play is never done, and I never found that. *Henry VIII* was satisfying in its own way. *Timon of Athens* was enormously satisfying. I actually [directed] *Henry* because I thought that was going to be the worst of the four. I [directed] *Coriolanus* because I thought it was the best of the four, and I had *Two Noble Kinsmen*—actually two or three people have been telling me to do that for years—and I took a big chance on giving that to Troy Willis because he's not an experienced director but, like myself, he's really big on allowing the play to become what it wants to be, not what he thinks it should be. And that play had a lot to offer, in particular with those two guys together. If I didn't have those two actors, it might have been a stinker.

The playwright has never let me down, and that's surprising in and of itself.

The modern conceit where you have the concept people who are going to do a different concept for each play, one of their ideas is "I have the same actors, the same theater, the same audience, I have to do a different treatment for each of these plays." That presupposes something that I

think is deeply flawed. It presupposes that of the three Shakespeare titles you have, they're somehow all the same. Shakespeare had the same actors, the same costumes, the same set, the same audience, and his job was to get those people to come back day after day after day. If you commit to his solutions, you're in good hands.

Hell, that was good. I've said that before but I've never said it quite that way.

Having done all the plays, have you found more interrelationships among the plays, like this reminds you of that?

Oh, yeah. In *Edward III*, Drew Reeves played Edward III and he also played Richard III two years ago. So he's up there and he's honking on Lady Constance and he's saying, "I've got to have you, I've got to have your body, you've got to sleep with me, I can't stand it, I love everything about you," I swear you could see his left shoulder come up. [Laughs] It was a prototype for Lady Anne and [Richard].

Another one I noticed in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. It was an a-ha! moment for me. You have the

jailor's daughter gone nuts and she's running around, she's singing her songs left, right, and center, and she comes up and says to her keeper, "I can sing a hundred songs." And he goes, "I know lady." It's a motif that when I saw it in *Two Noble Kinsmen* I realized, "Oh! When someone's insane, you should always agree with everything they say." You see that in *Hamlet* with Polonius agreeing that it's a camel back, this, that, and the other, and everybody agreeing with whatever Ophelia said, but it's also in *Two Noble Kinsmen* and I think it's in a couple of other places.

Lear.

It's in *Lear* and it's in, to a lesser degree, *McB*. So that was an a-ha! moment because I'd actually never put that together until I saw it in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.

And certainly there had to be that moment for me, I guess it was in *Henry IV, Part Two*, that's when I really became aware of the fact that the history plays—now, intellectually I knew this, I'd read that the queen had funded tours of these plays so that the English people could learn of their history and learn what was expected of them as citizens. *Henry IV, Part Two*, structurally that kind of wanders a bit before he finds out what he wants to do, but what he wants to do finally is he goes to the countryside and you're starting to deal with these justices and people like that, and that's when I realized that these plays were instructional, and that was a major motivation of the actors performing them. That became the key to a lot of the histories for me. It really made the Henry Sixes make a whole lot more sense when I realized there was a purposeful intent to show for the audience "we had a terrible time in our history and this is why." It's because the lords quibbled behind the king's back. What a good king he is, you can see he's a good king, and then not only the lords did it, but their servants did it because their lords did it. And it cascaded throughout society and then what we got was Richard the Third, running around in the world where all the men are dead and nobody can stop him. So they showed the horrors of what would happen if, along the line, anybody didn't do their duty.

I've heard people say that *Henry VI* can't be played because there's no central hero in it. I had Daniel Parvis, who'd come out of my apprentice program, play him as a teen-age boy who was earnest and, oh God! he just broke your heart. Every time he'd get these terrible things thrown at him and he's making exactly the right decision and then he leaves the stage and some smart-ass lord undercuts it by being petty and cheap. Or he'll get right to the brink and not see, doesn't know something that the audience knows, it drove us nuts. He did a phenomenal job as Henry VI going through those plays, demonstrated for us what a great king we had, but we didn't hold up our end of the bargain, and that's why we got Richard III. That was a revelation for me.

The plot devices, over and over we see that a lot.

There are times when it really is better to make a big hairy man play the woman's part. So few directors are willing to do it. I've done it from time to time. Audrey in *As You Like It* is my favorite. I've had some good Audreys, some great Audreys, but my favorite was a 310-pound man with hair coming out all over the place in a wig and a giant dress. God, it was funny! It just made all the sense in the world. Every time I see the *Taming of the Shrew* and some poor lady has to spend 2 1/2 hours waiting for her five lines as the widow in the last act, I go, "The Pedant! Put the Pedant in a dress! Trust me." But even here, we always wind up putting an apprentice in it because we never have enough roles for the women. Put a middle-age man in a

dress and he doesn't even have to shave; it will be funny.

Most people want to talk about Shakespeare productions in terms of traditional versus conceptual but it's a lot more complicated than that, though I do like to keep the conversation real. I remember once my mother called me up on the phone and said she'd just seen a production of *The Tempest* and she wanted to know who the naked men were. I said, "What?" "The naked men, who are the naked men?" "You mean Caliban?" "No, I know who Caliban is, who are the naked men? I saw *The Tempest* and they had all these naked men on this giant rope pulling on something off stage." [Laughs] I said, "Well, you need to go talk to the director and say your son runs a Shakespeare company and you know there are no naked men in this play and what were they thinking?"