Introduction: Tragedians of the city, little eyases, or rude mechanicals?

ANDREW JAMES HARTLEY

In 1995, I was in the audience of a production of *Macbeth* on the Boston University campus performed by a long-running student company called Stage Troupe. It was loud and silly and frequently ham-fisted, but it boasted a couple of very fine performances, had moments of real insight, and episodes (such as the final Western-style gunfight between Macduff and Macbeth which took place among the audience) that were gloriously entertaining. Thrilled (and surprised to be so), people stood and cheered.

Stage Troupe still exists but, like most student organizations, it has no real archive, no reviews, no carefully preserved prompt books, no institutional memory of the kind one would expect of even the most amateur of community theatres. Students rotate in and out of college every few years, and continuity is elusive so that the brand of theatre they stage becomes even more ephemeral than its counterparts elsewhere. I have searched but failed to find any public record that the *Macbeth* production I once applauded ever took place, let alone any kind of review, description, or serious analysis of the show. This despite the fact that all over the country there are people whose lives were – albeit briefly – touched by this production, people whose ideas about culture generally, about theatre, and about Shakespeare were affected by this now officially forgotten show. That it was uneven, that much of it was predictable and voguish, is less important than the fact that it both manifested and shaped ideas about Shakespeare which the audience, cast, and crew subsequently took out into the world.

College/university productions of Shakespeare (by which I mean those staged at institutions of higher learning attended voluntarily after any compulsory education) emerge out of quite different material and cultural conditions from those elsewhere, being more directly tied to the vagaries of academic life in intellectual, aesthetic, and fiscal terms. Most importantly, their identities hinge on the unique properties of the college or university community which constructs their audience. In

exploring what such productions are and what they might be worth, this collection focuses on what makes them different from both the professional and the amateur models which have received the lion's share of the critical attention.

College and university production (in which category I include shows mounted by student groups, those staged by theatre/drama departments and other productions involving faculty oversight) is a crucial index of what Shakespeare has become, since it shapes the numerous students who experience the plays as both active participants and audiences. For many students, their theatrical encounters with Shakespeare in college – whether as company members or audiences – will be especially formative, particularly if they live in one of the many parts of the world where the professional staging of Shakespeare is rare or prohibitively expensive. Campus productions may be the only Shakespeare those people ever see live.

And it isn't just the students themselves who experience these productions. College and university companies (particularly in the United States) are often the only game in town, so the Shakespeare they offer reaches beyond the literal campus and into the larger community, particularly through the friends and family of the students involved, people dragooned into the audience to show their support who might never willingly darken the door of a Shakespeare theatre at any other time. Coupled with the transient nature of the student population – the constant revolving door which propels freshmen into seniors and out – this makes the audience of the college or university show demographically quite different from that of the average professional or community theatre model.

The work on stage is different too, though generalization about the nature of that work is not possible. What can be said about campus Shakespeare is that the conditions around its production are unique in various ways. Consider funding, for instance. Student groups may work close to community theatre/amateur dramatics models in terms of shoestring budgets and a non-profit *esprit de corps*, but they also may have access to grants from specific departments, awards taken from student activity fees, and access to buildings, playing spaces, and other resources lent to them gratis by the school or subsections thereof because their host institutions see such activity as essentially a Good Thing. Theatre department productions, by contrast, often have far greater budgetary reach, technology, and facilities than all but the best-endowed professional theatrical outfits, and their production

Figure I.1 Paulina visits Hermione's prison in UNC Charlotte's lavish theatre department production of *The Winter's Tale*. Directed and photographed by James Vesce.

values are often correspondingly high (see Fig. I.1). Rehearsal periods for departmental shows tend to follow professional models and Equity standards in ways many small companies – despite their "professional" status – simply cannot afford, and the same is true of available resources such as set, light, costume, and other design and production elements, where a fully supported departmental show often outshines its professional counterparts. Given the variety of college and university productions, it would be absurd to make claims for their quality compared to that of professional companies, but it is equally clear that any assumption that they are necessarily inferior is often simply wrong.

What the departmental production's access to the resources of money, time, theatre, construction and rehearsal facilities, personnel, and so forth means, at least in principle, is that the show might escape the tyranny of the box office; its success is not evaluated according to its profit margins because the company is not in constant danger of bankruptcy as is often the case off campus. Many professional companies in the United States constantly struggle with balancing work they find exciting or innovative with tamer fare which is often drab, formulaic, or predictable, because they live in terror of losing ticket sales. Likewise,

many US companies operate largely on income generated from corporate sponsors and from increasingly elderly populations whose notions of Shakespeare and of theatre generally are often perceived to be at odds with the artists driving the company. A university theatre department, by contrast, puts on productions as part of its core mission, and box office income is a comparatively small part of its operating budget. In these days of vocational education and business model administration, the department might feel its existence under threat, but the key element in its survival will be student enrollment, not how many people came to see its production of *Othello*. Without needing to play it safe for reasons of fiscal survival, departmental productions are therefore free – at least in principle – to take more adventurous or experimental approaches to staging Shakespeare than many professional companies would dare.

Productions which come from or are supported by theatre/drama departments often involve faculty in direction, design, and production, while the actors are generally students (see Fig. I.2).[1] This creates a dynamic quite unlike anything in the amateur or professional world, and marries fledgling talent with skilled oversight and aesthetic control. Such productions also take place within what one assumes is an intellectual environment, one in which real dramaturgical involvement in production – as supplied by faculty from English, history, or theatre, say – is far more common than in companies off campus. Even where there is no such dramaturgical component, it is fair to assume that the company shares some investment in an academic sense of what Shakespeare is or might be, some of which is absorbed from classes. As such, campus productions might inhabit a middle ground between the world of the theatre and that of academia which is less common elsewhere, though how such a middle ground might be manifested and with what qualitative results will vary considerably.

That many of the productions discussed in this collection fall short in various ways of the caliber of work staged elsewhere, I freely concede, but even such a concession deserves scrutiny. Sometimes what might be considered deficiency has a different kind of currency, different underpinning ideas, different approaches to the execution of the performance which represent not merely deficiency but difference in ideological or methodological strategy that is no less interesting or

[1] A common exception is in the use of faculty or local professionals to play older characters, though these are usually in supporting roles.

Figure I.2 Kelly Mizell-Ryan works with students during rehearsals for a cross-gendered moment in UNC Charlotte's *Shrew Project*. Photograph by Andrew Hartley (co-director).

valuable for being marginal. Student-driven casts bring different assumptions to a production of *Romeo and Juliet*, say, than do older actors and (often considerably older) directors in ways which might generate fascinating and urgent productions. My own department recently staged the play with a very young and inexperienced cast, and while the show had certain predictable deficiencies, I learned a great deal from watching these particular actors grappling with the play's ideas of love and social hierarchy. That the production brought the various middle and high school audiences which attended it to their feet, cheering enthusiastically, was unexpected and telling. These were young people who saw themselves – or something very like themselves – in a text they had considered moldering and alien, and much of that association came very simply from the age of the principal players (see Fig. I.3). That those principal players were directed, dressed, and lit by skilled faculty with the resources of the department at their fingertips made for a unique dynamic, one many of those in the audience now associate with what Shakespeare on stage *is*.

Figure I.3 The *Shrew Project* on tour in Charlotte high schools. Photograph by Kelly Ryan (co-director).

It is one of the casual anti-intellectualisms of contemporary culture that leaving university is referenced as joining the "real world," as if what happens on campus is some kind of protected space, cut off from the hard realities (usually economic) of life after school. I reject the dismissal of college as somehow "unreal," particularly in the face of increasing pressures for college to engage that "real world" more directly all the time through the denigration of anything which does not lead directly to employment, but I accept that college life is different from what comes after. The nature of those differences varies tremendously from school to school and student to student, but for most of those attending college or university these are especially important years, a formative time when one's identity develops radically. For many students this is the first time they have been away from home, and their classes, their peers, and their experiences present them with new stimuli, new fault lines and contradictions which their new environment invites them to explore. Much of what they experience during this time they will not experience again, and most will emerge changed by all they have gone through. While this might not be their final intellectual or emotional "growth spurt," it will, for most, be a vital developmental period the like of which they will not experience again.

Of course their Shakespeare will be different from what they might have done or seen in high school. Of course it will be different from what they do or experience in their forties, or their sixties. But as this time inevitably molds their sense of who they are, it also inevitably molds their sense of Shakespeare and what his work might be on stage.

Yet the phenomenon is remarkably under-examined, and there is currently no book-length study on the subject. Michael Dobson's excellent *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance*[2] does not consider college and university production, and most Shakespeareans who have written about performance in higher education have done so from an expressly pedagogical viewpoint – how to use theatrical approaches in the literature classroom – one this collection will touch only occasionally and in different terms.

Part of the scholarly void on this subject is about the fragmentary nature of the archive (something Peter Holland addresses in the first chapter) as well as its essentially idiosyncratic nature. What I have tried to present here, therefore, is a historically and culturally diverse examination of what is an essentially local phenomenon, one whose productions are rarely reviewed by major journals or newspapers. Some of these productions have gone on to influence core tenants and assumptions at major companies such as the Royal Shakespeare Company (as Michael Cordner demonstrates), while others, though they have failed to create such impressive ripples elsewhere, embodied for a time approaches to and ideas about Shakespeare which could only find voice in the particular conditions of higher education. Some were mounted by theatre departments, some by established groups with long histories and faculty oversight, others by ad hoc student organizations. As the chapters by Mark Pilkinton, Yu Jin Ko, and others show, each production grew out of particular environmental conditions largely different from those in either the professional theatre or in the world of amateur dramatics, and – since their sense of and relationship to their audience mirror this unique positioning – they have different things to say than we might expect from those other theatrical worlds. The expertise of their execution varies wildly, of course, but that fact need not detract from their interest value as representations of a specifically material Shakespeare, a Shakespeare rooted in the particularities of

[2] Michael Dobson, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

university culture, and uniquely positioned to play a formative role in the lives of those who build and experience it.

Since higher education in its modern form is a largely twentieth-century phenomenon, the weight of the collection focuses on the comparatively recent, grounding the book in the conditions which have generated the present most immediately, though we begin with chapters that reach further back in time so as to anchor the volume as a whole. In addition to scrutinizing the last century or so, the collection takes a global perspective, including essays that speak to countries with a strong tradition of college Shakespeare, such as Germany, India, China, and Malaysia, though the particularities of each are, of course, unique. Each chapter has a slightly different angle of thrust, some primarily historical (Pilkinton, Yong/Lee, and Jansohn, for instance), some theoretical (Heron and Worthen), some rooted in issues of gender, sexual orientation, or race (Green, Thomas, and Multani), others in cultural and economic conditions (Menzer). Some, like Bessell and Conkie, offer worm's-eye views of productions (from inside and outside the rehearsal room), while others take a broader, more sociological perspective (Stevens, Low). All consider performance an end in itself, not simply a tool for use in the classroom. All seek to extrapolate larger ideas about the nature of college and university Shakespeare and what it might mean out of the locally and temporally limited subject matter which they are scrutinizing, while also acknowledging that broad statements are difficult to make based on these curiously particular samples. The very fact of college and university production being invisible outside the immediate community of the staging means that the productions take place not in a vacuum but in a discursive space that is unusually separate from larger trends in theatre practice. The results are often idiosyncratic, and the discontinuity between one production and the next, even within a single company, renders terms like "house style" problematic at best.

Overall the collection will attempt to answer such broad questions as what *is* college and university Shakespeare, and what makes it different from other available forms of staging? How does it uniquely manifest larger cultural concerns, assumptions, and prejudices, and how is it shaped by the pedagogical dimension of its academic context? How do such productions subvert or confirm ideas about theatre in general and Shakespeare in particular that are disseminated through the larger culture in complex and unexamined ways, and what is the relationship

of those ideas to their equivalents on the professional stage? What notions of authority are in play in higher education stagings, what notions of ownership, and what notions of audience? Who is college or university production finally *for* and what are its consequences, particularly in the light of its special ephemerality?

In short, the collection seeks to bring the variety of recent Shakespeare scholarship to bear on a subset of the field that has been minimally studied, and in ways which are comprehensive, while serving the essential diversity of the subject matter. It is, of course, merely a beginning, and I hope that the book will open the door to future studies which will continue to draw this fascinating field out of the wings where its nature and implications can be examined further.

1 *Campus Shakespeare: fragments of a history, fragments of a concept*

PETER HOLLAND

I

It begins with a series of absences, of performances that nearly were, of stagings that might have been, of productions that should have taken place. Campus Shakespeare seems to have taken much longer to gather momentum than one might have expected. The early nearlys and not-quites and perhapses are themselves interesting, but they signal an absence where we might have expected to find more. Given the lack of archival research on the topic so far, I suppose, even anticipate, that more will appear. Wouldn't you have thought that the universities would have been performing Shakespeare frequently and consistently through the late eighteenth century? But there are only fragments of such a narrative to report – and mostly a narrative of fragments of plays, excerpts used for specific ends, more often speeches for student-orators to make their mouths and brains work than scenes for student-actors. And the oddities of the history point firmly towards the what and the why of current practice, what makes campus Shakespeare what it now is.

Yet the history of the fragments can conveniently begin with a performance at a university in a play by Shakespeare before going on to mention briefly a number of kinds of presences of Shakespeare at the two universities. I name and number these fragments precisely because of their discontinuities.

1 A student-actor in Shakespeare

It is Polonius, of course, or, first in print, Corambis who, as Hamlet knows or, in the First Folio, Hamlet will ask, 'played in the university'. Corambis is proud of his reputation, 'I was counted a good actor', but