

# Shakespeare Times Six

*Text and photos*  
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Armed with a thorough understanding of the material and their professor's faith in their creative ability, a group of OU students gives the Bard's lines a few contemporary twists.





*Imagine* the audience's surprise—and the professor's—when at the end of a classroom production of scenes from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, a student stands and acts the role of the teacher, parodying the teacher's own comments heard earlier in the term. The pseudo-professor then calls for another version of the same scene, which the ensemble of players quickly delivers, going through five more variations, six in all, with a different interpretation in each.

For 40 years students in my senior Shakespeare class have had the option of bringing the text to life for their classmates. Teams of approximately 10 students study and write about dramatic history, critical theory, and video and movie productions as background for their own renditions in front of the class. Customarily, a group practices for 40 to 60 hours to put on a serious hour-long production that emphasizes the quality of words and lines with admirable freshness of voice and economy of stagecraft.

To achieve their successes, the students explore a major branch of Shakespeare scholarship that focuses on the creative decisions that readers, producers, directors and actors have made over centuries in their interpretations of plays for stage, video and screen. At their best, these integrate scholarly explorations about cultural issues, character motive and figurative and rhetorical language.

By the end of the fall 2004 semester, only one performance remained in this class after a series of imaginative shows, including *Henry the Fifth*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Measure for Measure*. A small group of three had decided to present Shakespeare's pastoral romance, *The Winter's Tale*, but their number swelled to 15 by the time they began their prepa-

rations: Jeremy Bales, Ashlie Cornelius, Tracy Davis, Matt Flowers, Megan Gesing, B. J. Johnson, Jieun Lee, Kyle Lowry, Melissa Mooney, Katy Pruitt, Barbara Richardson, Chauncey Shillow and Sarah Stanislav.

Having seen and performed in successful productions throughout the semester, they decided to take a different approach to the assignment. For their subject they chose the demanding final



Cowboy King Leontes (B.J. Johnson) welcomes Queen Hermione (Melissa Mooney) back into his arms in this western adaptation of *The Winter's Tale*.

scene of *The Winter's Tale*. This conclusion restores a wronged wife to her repentant husband, King Leontes, who has thought for 16 years that his jealous cruelty had killed his wife, Queen Hermione. Courtiers accompany Leontes to an art gallery, where he views a veiled, newly painted statue of his wife. When the cover is drawn back, he complains that the statue is realistic, yet she was not "as much wrinkled, nothing/ So aged as this

seems." Moving forward, he tries to touch the supposedly wet paint and exclaims:

O thus she stood,  
Even with such life of majesty—warm  
life

As now it coldly stands—when first I  
wooded her!

The courtier Paulina commands, "all stand still," and summons, "Music, awake her." The seeming statue of the Queen descends, and the King rejoices, "O, she's warm!" and embraces her.

How did this resurrection play in the classroom? The first staging was traditional, the scene poignant when music plays and Hermione steps forward, the royal couple kiss, a pair of courtiers join in matrimony, and the cast walks off in final joy quickly followed by applause.

As I started to stand to direct discussion, a student (wearing a tie) peremptorily took over. Following the script the group wrote and that I saw later, he calls for some lines to be repeated and then begins asking questions as he organizes the players into a second performance in a classroom style. In the midst of a freewheeling debate about isolation, a cell phone rings, which leads the betied student to muse about performers who had cut off the ear of someone whose phone interrupted their scene. Amongst further readings and comment on the lines, the professorial student complains that

the group had missed "one of the main themes in this scene . . . This play is about movement. Hermione personifies the theme. She transitions from free movement to stone, to free movement again." Next, they perform the scene as an interpretative dance, for which six readers provide the text as a background for the seven dancers.

At the conclusion of this skit, the directing student muses that he wants "a





Students introduce the Bard to Bob Fosse during the production's grand finale, complete with top hats and jazz hands.

little taste of the west." Hearing this, the performers leave the stage, enthusiastically returning in western gear to present the second half of Shakespeare's scene as a jamboree.

The cast concludes with proud smiles, but the professorial student complains that this wasn't what was really meant when the play was labeled a "pastoral" romance. Instead, he claims, "The drama of this scene needs to be intensified." Responding to calls for "more feeling," the play becomes a soap opera with one character fainting on stage to reinforce the most touching lines.

The leader stands again, quiets everyone with "All right, all right. I'm giving you one more chance to get this right. We need a grand finale . . . something with pizzazz . . . something with . . ." Before he can finish, the group takes off on the line "We know exactly what to do." In the

style of *A Chorus Line*, the players don top hats and begin singing and dancing to music from *West Side Story*, with Shakespeare's scene rewritten to fit "America":

Someone please speak in this gallery;  
 Open your beak in this gallery!  
 Try not to freak in this gallery.  
 She's so unique in this gallery!  
 After four stanzas, the music changes to "I Feel Pretty" with improvised lines concluding:  
 She was lovely, and was loving  
 But unluckily was wronged.  
 Jealousy caused her not to live too long. (da da da duh da duhda)  
 Hermione, Hermione  
 Is dead and gone,  
 But she'll be back by the time that I finish this song. (da da duh da da DAH!)  
 This version ends with "jazz hands" to

much applause and laughter on the part of the audience who had seen the show teased through so many revisions.

Postmodern theory inspired the direction the students took with the play. Rather than a tidy homogenous production, they aimed at showing meaning as anarchic and fragmentary. Their guide here might have been Jean Baudrillard, who claimed that postmodernism marks a culture composed "of disparate fragmentary experiences and images that constantly bombard the individual in music, video, television, advertising and other forms of electronic media."

However, deviating from much contemporary machine-gunning of images, the succession of scenes recalled varied issues reviewed through the term: the reliability and value for acting of the text's printed punctuation, the flexibility of gender and rank in roles, the adaptability



of Shakespeare's plays to other literary genres, the rich variety of interpretations in theatres and studies from Shakespeare's time to the present. While the quick succession of scenes, repeated in six different forms, had a dazzling hysteria of images, the performers aimed to display art as acknowledging itself as art.

Thus they went to extremes, as a painter might use strong colors to achieve dramatic effects. Usurping authority and expectation, they drew on avant-garde scholarship, fervent energy and daring movement to shape their interpretations.

One of the student performers, Matthew Flowers, later explained their willingness to take a chance on their own

being the end of a difficult semester, I believe the group wanted to make the class laugh, not only at us but also at themselves. Thirdly, and more or less the fail-safe, we wanted to convey the sense that we had worked hard and were willing to go over the top."

To achieve their purpose, these students chose one of the events in Shakespeare hardest to pull off successfully. The final scene of *The Winter's Tale* takes resurrection and forgiveness imagery to the edge, and audiences often smile in disbelief. Yet, Shakespeare created this part of the plot in contrast to the romance he used as a source, in which the wife simply dies when abused, and the hus-

spouse who so loves her husband that she defends herself well, lives patiently alone for 16 years and forgives his old wrongs freely.

Was Shakespeare imitating or mocking a rival theatre, those at court where the fancy pageants with elaborate scenery and machines accomplished colorful physical transformations? To entertain the monarch, mountains rose from flat stages, rocks split to reveal glowing tabernacles, trees opened to reveal beautiful women, and ugly monsters fled when gilded knights descended on clouds.

The OU students rightly heard an ironic message in Shakespeare's version restoring the King and Queen's marriage, a plot carried over the top, as though he is challenging the court productions to come to grips with real rather than mechanical transformations. Whatever spiritual values we acknowledge, his solution fits his theatre, which has minimum technology and only cast-off costumes. Changes principally occur in hearts.

The simplicity of the students' sets and their nominal props continue this minimalist attention to externals. Instead of dependence on the technology of a so-called "smart classroom," the smart players working in a simple room concentrated on freshness of approach to the inherited materials. Thus they carried on the spirit of Shakespeare's own ingenious tampering with his sources and achievement on an almost bare stage.

The students' variations on this scene give it multiple forms in which smiles and joy appear not only in the scenes but also in the ensemble that has put them together. Destabilizing the text from a monolithic interpretation, their work brings out a new range of meanings, summarizing in one class time more productions of a play than usually seen in a lifetime.

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Responding to calls for "more feeling" the cast goes into soap opera mode for their fifth interpretation of the Shakespeare classic. From left are Katy Pruitt, Sarah Stanislav, Jeremy Bales, Ashlie Cornelius, Matthew Flowers, Megan Gesing and B.J. Johnson.

abilities and creativity: "We obviously needed to do the scene in a way that showcased our ability to interpret and deliver the words of Shakespeare; after all, if we couldn't accomplish that, then we had no right to deviate from traditional methods," he said. "Secondly, it

band lives to fall in love with their daughter and later commits suicide in shame. Instead of that dark conclusion, Shakespeare interpolated material from Ovid's *Pygmalion*, who brings to life a model of a woman he loves. Shakespeare's statue is more subtle and independent, a