



June 16, 1996

All Shakespeare, All the Time

By Barry Singer

Forget Jane Austen, with all due respect. Jane has been having a nice run, but in America, more than ever, William Shakespeare still rules. The Shakespeare boom in film and TV dwarfs the Austen craze by at least a half-dozen projects. (Coming this year: Billy Crystal and Robin Williams in a "Hamlet" directed by Kenneth Branagh.) The tormented spirits of Lear, Macbeth, Romeo and his Juliet are generating an awful lot of television drama, by everyone from Spelling to Bochco. Shakespeare has even become the language of contemporary literary criticism: Ophelia as victimized virgin, Othello as, well, "the Moor."

It's wonderful and strange how often, and where, Shakespeare turns up across America, his characters infinitely malleable, his themes permanently pertinent. And so, as one especially devoted keeper of the flame, the Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival, inaugurates its 41st season of free performances in Central Park (with a television star, Andrew Braugher of "Homicide," playing Henry V), we offer up 24 hours in the life of Shakespeare in America: Thursday, March 14, the eve of the Ides of March and the festival's first formal day of business for the production that begins this week.

"'Tis true: there's magic in the web of it." "OTHELLO" (ACT 3, SCENE 4) 12:36 A.M. The Internet: www.shakespeare.com. Shakespeare's newest conquest, the Internet, surges with a "Today in Shakespeare History" page, scholarly search links and 10 clamorous chat rooms bursting with late-night E-missives. A query from mattboettg@aol.com: "Was Shakespeare bisexual?" The response from rclay@mars.superlink.net: "I think Shakespeare was basically drawn to women, but for one time in his life fell in love without knowing it with the young, seductive Earl of Southampton, his patron. I think it scared him to death."

"Wherefore art thou, Romeo?" "ROMEO AND JULIET" (3.4) 1:03 A.M. Country Music Television. It's a video of the last song that the late Selena recorded, "A Boy Like That," from the new all-star compilation, "The Songs of West Side Story." Gangs of Romeo and Juliet dancers strut as the Latina singer raps - New Jack-country united with Broadway by way of the Bard.

"(A tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning heard)" "THE TEMPEST" (1.1) 2:12 A.M. Petaluma, Calif. Out back in his garage, Fred Curchack, a performance artist, rehearses his one-man versions of "The Tempest" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" juggling dolls, masks, a ventriloquist's dummy, a flashlight, a floor lamp and, for explosive effect, two hyperfueled cigarette lighters. "I like to think of my stuff as the best Shakespeare that can be carried in one suitcase," Curchack says.

"As if I did but only chew his name." "MEASURE FOR MEASURE" (2.4) 5:20 A.M. River Rouge, Mich. At the plant just outside Detroit where Bazooka Joe comics are printed, "Joe Meets William Shakespeare" is on press for a fresh run. Bazooka has wrapped its gum in this comic since 1991.

"The children must be practised well to this, or they'll ne'er do't." "THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR" (4.4) 10:30 A.M. Washington. The final day fo the 15th Annual Secondary School Shakespeare Festival at the Folger Shakespeare Library. The theater is packed with whooping teenagers in doublets and velvet capes. Frenetic Eleanor Roosevelt High School International Thespians from Greenbelt, Md., blast through their 15-minute "Hamlet." They are followed by a troupe from Washington's own School Without Walls in "The Two Gentlemen of Verona," fronted by Elvia Southerland, 18, in a soul-bearing performance.

"And all the secrets of our camp I'll show." "ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL" (4.1) 12:15 P.M. Bakersfield, Calif. For Camp Shakespeare, this is already an exceptional day: 18 new applications have just turned up in Michael Flachmann's mail. Last summer, 105 teen-agers and adults attended Flachmann's camps. "We lived Shakespeare, breathed Shakespeare," one alumnus wrote. "Camp Shakespeare is my drug of choice," proclaimed another.

"You played once i' the university, you say?" "HAMLET" (3.3) 1:32 P.M. Tuscaloosa, Ala. Lynn Jennings, a 22-year-old aspiring Renaissance-studies graduate student, has arrived for lunch at the Globe restaurant. According to her host, Gary Taylor, a professor in the University of Alabama's English department, there are only a handful of black professors in North America currently teaching Shakespeare on the college level. Jennings, who is black, is being courted by a half-dozen top-level graduate programs, including Taylor's.

"First to possess his books." "THE TEMPEST" (3.2) 3:58 P.M. A Chicago suburb. A first edition of Shakespeare's first published folio of plays was recently sold to an anonymous buyer for more than \$1 million. Abel Berland, a real-estate executive, is one of the few private owners of a complete set of all four original folio editions. That's why Berland has again hurried home early today - to free the folios from their cases and bask in their company. "It's a pleasure not many are ever privileged to know," he acknowledges humbly.

"O Romeo. ... Deny they father and refuse thy name." "ROMEO AND JULIET" (2.2) 4:09 P.M. Pacific Palisades, Calif. Tony Lucca and Keri Russell are in rehearsal for "Mailbu Shores," Aaron Spelling's newest primetime soap opera - "a 'Romeo and Juliet' of the Pacific Coast Highway," as he puts it. "I can't imagine soap operas without the inspiration of 'Hamlet' and 'King Lear,'" Spelling insists.

"Speak the speech, I pray you." "HAMLET" (3.2) 6:20 P.M. New York. Since Patrick Stewart's and Ralph Fiennes's wildly successful recent Broadway appearances as Prospero and Hamlet, respectively, the National Shakespeare Company's weekly scene class here on West 51st Street has witnessed a notable uptick in demand. Tonight, Romeo and Juliet spy each other at the Capulets' party as if for the first time. And there's Marc Antony (Michael Siracusano) yet again over Caesar's dead body (Gary Bryan Budoff).

"... and film the ulcerous place." "HAMLET" (3.4) 7:16 P.M. Bethel, Conn. The audience is watching Laurence Fishburne and Kenneth Branagh in "Othello" at the Bethel Cinema. With Branagh shooting "Hamlet" and several other movie biggies tackling Shakespeare - Al Pacino recently finished "Looking for Richard," his docu-cinema-verite take on "Richard III" - what conclusions can be drawn from this Shakespeare film frenzy? "Stars'll do Shakespeare cheap, for the prestige," says one studio executive. "And there's no royalties to pay. Shakespeare's dead, you know."

"...the lash, of film. ..." "ROMEO AND JULIET" (1.4) 7:20 P.M. Brooklyn. From the set of his new (non-Shakespeare) movie, Pacino offers his view of Shakespeare and his boom: "What Branagh's done was great, but there's still a wall of prejudice in this country against Shakespeare. You still gotta lift the wall, you know? 'Cause there's still plenty of resistance! To the language especially, you know?"

"What news, then, in your paper?" "THE TWO GENTLEMEN" OF VERONA" (3.1) 9:06 P.M. Washington. Two recent news events - the reattribution of an Elizabethan elegy to Shakespeare and the reconstruction of the Bard's Globe Theater on its original London site - have shoved Shakespeare back into the headlines. In her dressing room at the Shakespeare Theater, DeAnn Mears, as the Countess of Rousillon in "All's Well That Ends Well," catches up with The Washington Post during a break from tonight's performance.

"To sleep: perchance to ..." "HAMLET" (3.1) 11:57 P.M. Maui, Hawaii. For the vacationing Douglas Hughes, this has been an especially lovely day in terms of Shakespeare. At about 7 A.M., he was awakened by a phone call from George C. Wolfe, producer in chief at the New York Shakespeare Festival, who offered Hughes the job of directing "Henry V." Hughes, 40, was once an usher at the festival's Delacorte Theater in Central Park and had his first professional acting gig there as well. "Doug was a spear carrier!" Wolfe exults, "which makes his return here all the more apt. That's what all this newfound interest in Shakespeare is really about - returning him to the people, lifting Shakespeare down from his icon status, the altar of cultural elitism."

And so, in his hotel room Hughes sleeps, to dream perchance of Shakespeare and King Henry and George Wolfe's popu-culture vision for the Bard and America. On the beach, in Maui.

Photos: CURCHACK: (DOUG MENUEZ/SABA, FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES); SOUTHERLAND: (DAVID BURNETT/CONTACT, FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES); BERLAND: (SAUL LIEBERMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES); LUCCA AND RUSSELL: (LAUREN GREENFIELD/SYGMA, FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES); SIRACUSANO AND BUDOFF: (SCOTT THODE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES); BETHEL CINEMA: (EDWARD KEATING/THE NEW YORK TIMES); MEARS: (DAVID BURNETT/CONTACT, FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)