

PROJECT SHAKESPEARE



Sun Mee Chomet as Julia, Valeri Mudek as Silvia in the Guthrie's production of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*

The first thing I remember is the sandwiches. I must have been about 15 at the time, and I was sitting at the back of the Northcott Theatre in Exeter with the rest of my O-Level English Literature class, waiting for *Much Ado About Nothing* to begin. As the curtain rose, we unwrapped the tin foil in our laps and munched through our packed lunches as Beatrice and Benedick did their stuff.

Much Ado wasn't one of my favourites, but something about Shakespeare's language did start to stick with me at school. It wasn't so much the words' meaning as their rhythm.

I couldn't have told you what an iambic pentameter was if you'd held me up at gunpoint, but I did find it very easy to remember long extracts from the big speeches in *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*, and just as easy to regurgitate those extracts when exam time came around. I started to understand that there was beauty in the music Shakespeare's writing made, and began reciting it in my head for the sheer pleasure of hearing how perfectly each syllable fell into place.

By the time I was 20, it was even possible to imagine going to see one

of the plays for fun. I spent the next ten years living in either Plymouth or Tonbridge, where theatre-going opportunities were limited, but caught a *Hamlet* here or a *Lear* there whenever the opportunity presented itself. I'd see whatever notable Shakespeare films emerged too – Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, McKellen's *Richard III* – but never strayed much beyond the Bard's Greatest Hits.

Fast forward to February 2003, by which time I was 44 years old and back in London after an eight-year break from the city. I was determined to make the

most of London's cultural life this time around, and so I started going to the theatre once a week. Often, the best play on offer happened to be one of Shakespeare's. Within the space of a year, I saw Antony Sher as Iago at the Trafalgar Studios, Adrian Lester's magnificent *Henry V* at the National and Trevor Nunn's revelatory *Hamlet* at the Old Vic with a 23-year-old Ben Whishaw in the title role. I was hooked.

Melvyn Bragg's recommendation on Radio 4 persuaded me to buy Frank Kermode's book *Shakespeare's Language*, and I took to reading the relevant chapter before I went to see each new play. Did you know that The Bastard Faulconbridge's mocking little speech about love in *King John* ("Drawn in the flattering table of her eye!") is the only rhymed verse in the whole play, and that its structure mimics a popular form of Elizabethan love poetry? Nor did I till I read Kermode, but his book's full of insights like that.

Somewhere around June 2004, I heard a critic on Radio 4's *Saturday Review* casually claim that she must have "seen all Shakespeare's plays" by now. The thought of being a Shakespeare completist hadn't struck me before, but I did a quick totting-up exercise on my fingers and

discovered that I'd already seen – live, on stage, no cheating – 14 of the 38 plays which the Royal Shakespeare Company considers canon. I thought it might take me a couple of decades to see the other 24 at that point, but I knew from the old dears that I'd seen tottering down the steps at the National that theatre-going was one of the few pleasures you could extend into old age. It seemed a pleasing little quest to take into my dotage.

I made my stately progress through *Twelfth Night* at the Albery, *Julius Caesar* at The Barbican, *Richard II* at the Old Vic and so on, racking up one new play every three months or so, and then an RSC news story turbo-charged the whole process. The company announced that it would be staging all of Shakespeare's plays in its coming season, starting with *Romeo & Juliet* in April 2006, and closing with Ian McKellen's *King Lear* 12 months later. Maybe this wasn't going to take 20 years after all.

Lord, the RSC's Complete Works season was good. I saw over 20 of the its productions, and I can honestly say that only one of them really disappointed me. I had five long weekends in Stratford during the course of the

year, seeing three or four plays on each trip and mopping up the remainder when those productions came to London. The RSC was clearly on cracking form, with everyone from the box office staff to the ladies in the souvenir shop anxious to discuss the productions they'd seen and advise you on what to see next.

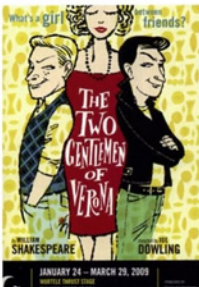
Everywhere you looked in Stratford that year, there were fresh sparks being struck. The Histories Cycle at the splendid new Courtyard Theatre staged all eight plays with the same ensemble cast, producing an unforgettable performance from Jonathan Slinger as *Richard III*. Patrick Stewart played Prospero in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, and then dashed next door to the Swan to play Anthony, his voice cracking and breaking with the strain as Harriet Walter's Cleopatra manoeuvred around him with maddening ease. We saw *Love's Labours Lost* reinterpreted as a version of The Beatles' Maharishi soujourn, watched *Henry VIII* played out just yards from where Shakespeare's bones are buried and marvelled at Judi Dench's singing voice in the *Merry Wives* panto. There was Ian McKellen's *Lear*, F Murray Abraham's *Shylock*, David Warner's *Falstaff* and Tamsin Greig's *Beatrice*. It was a triumph and a treat. ➔

← Thanks to the RSC, I started 2008 with just five plays left to see. I cantered through the first three, seeing *Measure for Measure* at the National, *Troilus & Cressida* at the Barbican and *All's Well at the Theatre Royal* in Bury St Edmunds. But the final two plays on my list, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Two Noble Kinsmen*, proved more difficult. If I'd still had a dozen plays left to see, I'd have been content to return to my previous slow pace, but with the finishing line in sight any further delay seemed intolerable. The RSC had given these two plays just one performance each in the course of its 12-month season, so I knew they would not be easy to find.

Browsing in my local Borders one day, I saw the first issue of this magazine, and noticed it had a long list of coming Shakespeare productions round the world in its rear pages. This confirmed that there were no prospects in Britain, but I did spot four productions of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* scheduled for various American cities. I like to get over to the States once a year anyway, so I started to think about planning my next holiday around what I was now calling Project Shakespeare. A quick flurry of e-mails with Malcolm Barnes, *Shakespeare Scene's* publisher, established that a

Boulder, Colorado, company called The Upstart Crow was planning to stage *Two Noble Kinsmen* in February 2009. That fitted in nicely with the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis' run of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* the same month, so I set the two dates in my diary and started looking for a flight.

The Guthrie in Minneapolis has a long history with



Shakespeare, staging nearly 50 productions since its 1963 launch, but it had never tackled *Two Gentlemen of Verona* before. The building is like a smaller version of London's National Theatre, with three auditoriums of various sizes, and director Joe Dowling was giving the play 70 performances in its flagship 1,100-seat Wurtele auditorium.

I took my seat there on Valentine's night, and drank in the set before me. It



was dressed as a 1950s TV studio, the conceit being that a live broadcast of the play was just about to be staged there. Dowling had commissioned some original 1950s-style pop songs to break up the action, and book-ended the evening with a couple of energetic dance routines.

My heart sank as the first of these began, because I feared this might be a sign I was about to see one of those productions that has so little faith in Shakespeare that it leaves barely a line of his text in the play. I'd seen a *Cymbeline* like that at the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith, and a *Merry Wives* in Stratford, and both were so rotten that I'd felt obliged to see the two plays again in more satisfying productions before I could tick them off my list. Had I come all this way just to watch something that



wasn't really Shakespeare at all?

I needn't have worried. In fact, the Guthrie's cast steered a perfect course between treating Shakespeare too reverentially – and hence squeezing all the life out of him – and forgetting why they wanted to stage his work in the first place. All the actors spoke the verse well, ensuring they communicated its meaning and never gabbling. Lance and Speed, the two clowns of the piece, were given enough licence to make the most of every laugh the roles offered, drawing on vintage vaudeville performers to time their lines and work the audience.

The production didn't duck the difficult scene near the end where Proteus threatens to rape Silvia

("I'll force thee yield to my desire"), but it did soften it in quite a clever way by having him address the second half of his apology to her rather than to Valentine. It also underlined the play's central theme of male friendship nicely by having Proteus and Valentine make their final exit together, arms round one another's shoulders, as the two women were left forgotten on the stage behind them. Valeri Mudek as Silvia gave Julia a consoling little pat on the arm, and then led them off to follow.

If I had to single one actor out, it would be Jim Lichtscheidl as Lance, the comic servant originally played by Will Kemp, the specialist clown in Shakespeare's own company. You've only got to read Lance's entrance speech on the printed page

to imagine Groucho Marx using it to baffle Margaret Dumont: "This shoe is my father. No, this left shoe is my father. No, no, this left shoe is my mother."

Lance's scenes with Randy Reyes' Speed were played like Abbott & Costello's cross-talk routines, and all the more effective for it. As Guthrie language coach Andrew Wade pointed out in his programme notes, the techniques needed to make an audience laugh don't really change over the centuries, and Kemp himself may well have employed a few of the same tricks Lichtscheidl and Reyes used 400 years later.

The other comic star of the evening was Lance's dog, Crab (aka The Only Dog in Shakespeare), played here by an Airedale called Wyatt, who gave the audience a spectacularly glum look at every new idiocy from his master.

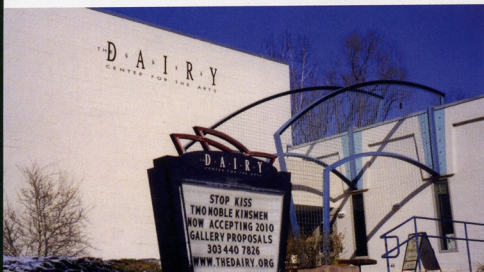
It was a great evening, and won a huge round of applause and cheers from the packed audience at each of the two performances I saw. The theatre full of teenagers – average age about 15 – bussed in for Monday's schools matinee enjoyed it just as much as the adults had on Saturday night. There wasn't a sandwich in sight.

A week later, I was at the Dairy Arts Center in ➡

← Boulder, Colorado, for *Two Noble Kinsmen*. The Upstart Crow, I discovered, was a community theatre group, with far less money to spend than the Guthrie, a much smaller room to stage their productions in and a very different attitude to the play they'd taken on.

America in the past 50 years. It always seemed to be the role of the jailer's daughter which drew the most attention and, after watching the Boulder production, I could see why. She's the only character in the play which its authors have bothered to flesh out

to Brauneis-Krull after her matinee performance the following day, and she confessed that she'd argued strongly for the company to stage *Two Noble Kinsmen* precisely because she was determined to nab the jailer's daughter role for herself.



Inevitably, as with any amateur company, some of the actors were better than others, but overall the company acquitted itself well, and I'm very glad to have had a chance to see this elusive play. When the writing flagged – which it does at times – I was able to amuse myself by counting the now-familiar phrases which even this most obscure work has helped cement into the English language: “Go whistle”; “The fat’s in the fire”; “He’ll be the death of her”; “Thereby hangs a tale”; “Sleep like a top”.

Where the Guthrie had framed *Two Gentlemen of Verona* above all as a stonking good night out, Upstart Crow director Richard Bell was offering *Two Noble Kinsmen* in a straight-up, uncut version. For this most minor of Shakespeare's works – he wrote only about half the play, the rest being penned by John Fletcher – that was a brave decision. But, even here, there were unexpected treasures to be discovered.

I'd read a little about the production history of the play on the flight from Minneapolis, and learned it had received only about a dozen noteworthy productions here or in

properly, the only one who drives the action through her own will at all, and is simply far more alive than anyone else on stage.

Small wonder, then, that actresses through the ages have seen her descent into madness as a chance to shine all the brighter in some fairly dowdy surroundings. The Upstart Crow's Kate Brauneis-Krull certainly seized the role with both hands, delivering a charming and cheekily sexy performance. There was something particularly effective in the way she turned her head to indicate a child's wide-eyed wonder at each new spectacle presented to her in the later stages of the play. I spoke

And, now, here I am back in London. Am I sick to death of Shakespeare after seeing 57 productions of his plays in the past six years? Not a bit of it. I already have tickets for Jude Law's *Hamlet*, Greg Hicks' *Julius Caesar* and Michael Boyd's *As You Like It* later this year, and I'll continue to see every interesting new production within reach for as long as I can totter about. I do need a new project though, so I think I might tackle August Wilson's ten-play Pittsburgh

Cycle next. I've only seen two of those so far...



Paul Slade

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Ten of the Best.

Paul Slade selects ten of the most memorable productions from his six-year quest.

Henry V, National Theatre, London. June 2003.

I'd have followed Henry to the gates of Hell after hearing Adrian Lester's magnificent delivery of the play's two most stirring speeches. Any Frenchmen in the audience must have been glad to get out of the auditorium alive.

Hamlet, Old Vic, London. June 2004.

Ben Wishaw was just 23 when Trevor Nunn entrusted him with this role, but the gamble paid off handsomely. A young Hamlet meant a younger Gertrude and Claudius too, and that made their avowed sexual passion feel much more real.

Macbeth, Wilton's, London. February 2005.

Of Joint set this promenade production in an African dictatorship,

with extras dressed as soldiers bullying us round the derelict music hall. The banquet scene packed everyone tightly round the action, then had Banquo's ghost burst out two feet from our faces.

Henry IV, National Theatre, London. May 2005.

Michael Gambon's Falstaff was at the edge of the stage when someone in the audience laughed loudly and suddenly for no reason. He turned immediately, pointed his sword at the offender and raised his eyebrows in silent warning: "Just watch it, that's all".

As You Like It, Novello, London. May 2006.

It's a play that never fails to make me feel happy. Lia Williams and Amanda Harris were so beautiful, charming and witty as Rosalind and Celia that I left the theatre with a huge, soppy grin on my face.

Henry VIII, Holy Trinity Church, Stratford. August 2006.

Seeing one of the plays just yards from Shakespeare's grave sends a real shiver up the spine. The RSC gave us an effective and enjoyable staging, but the real star was the venue itself.

Love's Labour's Lost, Swan Theatre, Stratford. August 2006.

Washington Shakespeare Theatre Co re-imagined

Shakespeare's three young lords as Beatles-style rock musicians in search of transcendental peace at a Maharishi retreat. Far from being gimmicky, this transposition enhanced the play enormously.

Richard III, Courtyard Theatre, Stratford. January 2007.

The single greatest performance of the RSC's History Cycle was Jonathan Slinger's seductive and sinister Richard III. When Lady Anne spat into Richard's face, Slinger calmly wiped it from his cheek with one finger and sucked it laviciously into his own mouth.

Romeo & Juliet, Middle Temple Hall, London. September 2008.

Another case of the venue out-shining a perfectly good production. In this case, we were seated in the 16th Century hall where *Twelfth Night* had its premiere in 1602 – perhaps with Shakespeare himself in the cast.

Two Gentlemen of Verona, Guthrie Theatre Minneapolis. February 2009.

Music, dancing and some expert comic performances made this production a cracking good night out. Shakespeare knew full well that one of his jobs was to entertain the punters, and I think he would have approved.