Shakespeare at Winedale

Diary of a Player

The "Shakespeare at Winedale" program was created in 1970 by UT Department of English Professor James B. "Doc" Ayres, with the intent to teach Shakespeare's plays by having students perform them, thus learning the meaning of the language by using it. Through performance, which takes place on a stage in an old cedar barn, students also grasp more firmly the emotional and psychological states of the characters.

Held every summer for eight weeks in the middle of south-central Texas farmland, the class size ranges from sixteen to twenty-one. The daily regimen is taxing. The heat is withering, as is much of the criticism one receives from one's colleagues. Some participants find the experience exhilarating, others discouraging. Many find it to be both. All find it shattering and ennobling.

Nineteen students participated in the 1987 class of "Shakespeare at Winedale." This is the personal account of one of them.

By John Stokes

June 26, 1987: Upon arrival today I was greeted by the quiet. After one summer session and numerous visits, I've learned to anticipate it: long for it, the shutting off of the engine and the deliberate opening of the car door, to be instantly embraced by the warm air and silence.

I especially needed it today. As always, I spent all day and much of last night getting things in order, packing books and papers that I probably won't get around to reading in my spare time. Have I forgotten already that there is no spare time here? All of us were supposed to be here by 5 p.m., about the time I was just leaving Austin.

Even in the first few hours this evening, the differences between this year and 1984, when I first attended "Shakespeare at Winedale," were evident. Of course, the class is different — more diligent, it seems. The first-night barbecue was less celebrational. Even our mentor Doc's "welcoming" speech at the barn was more devoted to practical specifics and policy.

I am nervous about all of this. I sense greater seriousness in response to greater demands (despite the fact that hardly anyone knew the words to the final stanzas of Twelfth Night, as was requested.) There were better individual scholars here in 1984, but not the overall reading and writing skills that we have now. Zig has a tome the size of a high-school yearbook, with some thirty pages already filled with observations. John White has apparently read everything. Tony is reading the 350-page packet of relevant articles Doc provided for us. Jim, Robert Pelton, Robert Haringa, the list of scholars goes on. Who are these people? How deep is their understanding?

More important still is how well will we work together? How effectively will we cooperate? Discoveries about our characters and their conditions arise from the text; those discoveries are maximized by a concerted effort, as well as by individual experiences. If memory serves me, these questions will be answered within three days.

June 27: Two hours of sleep last night. Rose a little before 6 a.m., after sleeping uneasily on the floor of the cold classroom. It was either that or sweltering upstairs. Air conditioning in the rooms is supposed to be fixed today.

I've always hated rising early, although here it bothers me less. Maybe it's because I don't have any choice in the matter. More likely it's awakening and knowing exactly what has to be done today — work on the plays, scene by scene. When you're in the center of the La Grange/Giddings/Brenham metropolitan triangle, and it's five miles to the nearest town, Round Top (population eighty-seven), there's not much to distract you from studying Shakespeare.

The "first morning" ritual of cleaning the barn went quickly, although I still don't know when a packed-earth floor is considered "clean."

June 30: Three days into Twelfth Night, and all is going smoothly. Took some time to work with Mary on Act II, Scene 4 of King Lear. At this stage I seem capable of conveying only two emotions: anger and frustration.

This morning yielded an intriguing situation for the first of the storm scenes in Lear. The day had been overcast, and when it started to rain lightly, a number of people encouraged me to take advantage of the "storm." I stepped into the field west of Hazel's — a restored nineteenth-century
house that doubled for us as informal rehearsal space — and rendered an all-too-mediocre performance. Yet despite the excess of theatre and absence of soul, the experience provided a certain satisfaction, much like the one feels after a long, brisk walk.

One of the Performing Shakespeare tapes from a series of learning aides provided me with a useful technique. They suggest that rather than saying a speech according to its overall meaning or mood, one should say each line with attention to the immediate thought and intent it contains, so as to lend it the spontaneous quality of everyday speech.

Tonight’s performance of the first act of Twelfth Night was dreadful. Major problem was a lack of concentration. Too many lines dropped and cues forgotten by people who know better. For all that, Doc’s comments were terse and quiet, a far cry from the critical barrages I remembered from three years ago. Perhaps he felt this simply wasn’t worth the time.

July 1: What an awful day. The stage has been dedicated to scenes from Act I of Twelfth Night, and little else. I dread the idea that we now require “direction” from Doc.

Sad news reached us after lunch. Two of the docents here at the Historical Center were in an auto accident down the road. One of them was killed. The effect of such news out here is all the more alarming. The world is smaller here and our perception becomes narrower, more precise. The immediate community numbers about twenty-five, and even the death of strangers is strongly felt.

Shortly after this news, Pelton and I were working on the first of the Antonio-Sebastian scenes from Twelfth Night, in which Sebastian tells Antonio about his sister Viola’s drowning. Listening to him relate this tragedy, I was overcome with such a sense of sympathy toward what had happened only a half-hour before that I could barely speak. I could feel heat at my head’s back rising. Looking down from Sebastian, I delivered Antonio’s line, “‘Alas the day.’” It was correct. The scene was correct. There are moments when the nature of the scene can be realized almost exactly, when the magic occurs, when real life and spontaneous reaction merge to create an experience beyond the play. But must the price be so dear?

July 4: Tonight’s Twelfth Night performance was done in partial costume. Everyone played tonight. We had fun, much as the class did when we made our first break-through with Taming of the Shrew in 1984.

Barn Dance this evening. Afterward we went out to the field with some sparklers and other colorful fireworks some folks had brought back from La Grange, about twenty miles south. Pelton recounted when he