August 12, 1991

Dr. James Ayres and
The Shakespeare at Winedale Company
P.O. Box 11
Round Top, TX 78954

Dear "Doc" and Company:

Again, many thanks for the warm hospitality and three very enjoyable Shakespearean experiences this weekend. And a special thanks to Gloria for the archival material which is now being entered into the World Shakespeare Bibliography.

I have spent the morning putting some of my impressions about my Winedale experience into an essay I am writing on "Shakespeare in Texas" for Shakespeare Quarterly; also, I have been asked to contribute an essay on Winedale 1991 (and four other TX festivals) to a forthcoming book (Greenwood Press) on Shakespeare Festivals around the world. While I'm doing this it may be useful to share some of my perceptions with you, which Dr. Ayers asked me to do.

First of all, as I said in my SQ essay, of the eight festivals I have seen in Texas (plus another in Oklahoma), the Winedale company told the story of the 3 plays with the greatest verve and clarity. While other companies and individual actors frequently allowed special effects, well-tried actors' tricks, and esp. the subtleties of modern, realistic acting to intrude on the text, you were so firmly grounded in the language and the inherently dramatic situation that little other embellishment was needed. Here I thought your relative theatrical inexperience worked very well for you: you were truly involved in the art of make believe and story telling. Though it could be argued that many of your characterizations were caricatures (esp. in the cross-gender casting), I found this actually liberating because it became readily apparent "why" WS used that particular character to help advance the plot. I found this especially true of the various "low life" characters in Measure and the rustics in both LLL and WT; too often modern actors try to create a "whole" character in these delicious minor roles and end up obscuring "the argument of the play." I very much appreciated the way each of you took the stage, quickly and (mostly) clearly defined why you had to be there, and got quickly off so the next action could proceed.

I also admired the confidence with which you spoke the language. I have heard an enormous amount and variety of verse speaking this summer, and I found that most of you at any given time could hold your own against even professional actors (some technical expertise in such areas as diction, voice placement, coloration, etc. aside). It was always absolutely clear that you understood both what you were saying and why you were saying it (a claim I can't make for every actor I heard this summer, including some Equity pros). I especially like the way you invariably made the audience your
acting partners: the more I'm around him, the more I'm convinced that Shakespeare is almost exclusively a "direct address" freak and you made his language work well by taking it directly to the audience. (By way of contrast, I saw Houston's Merchant of Venice: there was a scene in which--for some unexplicable reason --Bassanio and Gratiano literally wrestled with each other during a scene...I still haven't got a clue what they were saying...and I've spent the summer reading the play and its literature in preparation for a production I'm directing next month!)

Having now built you up with great praise for your language skills, I'd now like to offer some things you might want to consider about how to speak even more effectively. There were times, I must admit, I was not as engaged with the particulars of the text as I might have been (some of it may have had to do with the free beer and the hot weather!). First, what WS says about not "sawing the air too much with your hands" is great advice, especially for young actors. Use all gently because given the choice between listening to difficult language and watching an actor's hands and arms, an audience will always choose the latter because our eye is drawn to movement (and light colors): when we start watching because attention has been drawn by movement, then we invariably stop listening unless the gesture specifically supports the words. This is not to say you must be Hermoine-like statues up there: suit the action to the word and vice versa...but always ask yourself: "Do I need this movement/gesture to help make my point?" Here's an exercise you might find useful: sit in a dark theatre, your hands firmly grasping the chair bottom, and do your lines.

Also, while I admired the passion with which you collectively spoke, there were times when you allowed the size of the emotion to carry the message. I never doubted "how" you felt at a given moment; there were times, however, when I wasn't quite sure "why" felt that way because your emotional intensity sometimes obscured your vocal clarity (and thus the specific words). There has been a general tendency for actors to play WS more "cooly" lately, and I found it refreshing to see actors who cared passionately about their situations, but it was often at the expense of the language. Try to vary vocal attacks so that individual phrases stand out. Also, watch that very human tendency to resort only to anger at moments of conflict: some twenty years of directing and working with young actors has taught me that "anger" is always the easiest choice for an actor to make. Try other strategies for "getting your way." As wonderful as I thought Paulina was, for instance, I would liked to have seen her use her wit and caustic humor as much as her ire to score her points with Leontes and the court. Ditto for Rosaline in LLL: she was pretty tart in her final admonitions to Berowne---would he come back after a year's reflection to someone that shrewish? On the other hand, there were some marvelous moments when actors went for all the emotion they could muster: Leontes' "I have too much believed mine own suspicion" was a superb moment of catharsis; the reunion between Isabella and Claudio at the end of MM was as emotionally charged and genuinely moving as any I've seen. I guess the moral of the story is: save the biggest emotions for the biggest moments...otherwise, don't tear a passion to tatters. (I think one of the things Shakespeare teaches us in his plays is that emotional