"A walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more."
— from 'Macbeth'

Above: A pre-performance circle loosens up actors in the '70s. The tradition endures among new classes as well.

At right: The converted barn about 70 miles east of Austin near Round Top. Ima Hogg, the daughter of a Texas governor, restored the old homes on the Winddale property and donated the land to the University of Texas.
at Vinedale

VINDALE — This summer, in an old, done-wrong wooden shed on a dark and windy hillside across a dirt road from the town of Oregon, the annual summer festival "Shakespeare at Vinedale" will begin.

In the middle of it all, there is a man who has lived in this shed for the past 19 years. He is 74 years old and he is about to play his 19th season of Shakespeare with a group of actors and actresses from around the country.

The man's name is Mark Rylance. He plays the role of Shakespeare himself in "The Two Gentlemen of Verona." The play is set in a small town in England where love and death play out on stage.

Rylance has been performing Shakespeare for over 30 years, but this is his first time playing in front of an audience at Vinedale. He says he is excited to bring his skills to this new venue.

"It's a new challenge for me," he says. "I've never played in front of a live audience before. It's going to be fun to see how it goes."

Rylance is not the only one new to the festival this year. Several other actors and actresses have joined him for this summer's performances.

"We have a lot of new faces this year," says the festival's artistic director, Mary Murphy. "It's always exciting to see new talent take the stage."

The festival runs through Labor Day and features a variety of plays, including "Romeo and Juliet," "The Tempest," and "The Winter's Tale."

Tickets are available online and at the box office at the festival grounds. For more information, visit the festival's website at shakespeareatvinedale.com.
contended from the previous page

Almost 600 students have been a part of Shakespeare's teaching world in that barn, either for a summer or a few weekends in the spring. Several hundred of them are planning to return to Winedale Aug. 19 for a 25th anniversary reunion, which will include a banquet and a performance of A Midsummer Night's Dream by former students. (This summer's performances and the reunion are dedicated to the memory of Donald Britton, a member of the first summer class, who died last year.)

For those Winedale veterans, what of that experience remains years later? What kind of teacher has Ayres been in their lives? This summer, many of those who were young once find themselves pondering their translations.

One who can be counted on for the reunion is Dolly Brekke of San Antonio. As always, she’ll bring her two children to see the plays. Teenagers now — and in the running to be the first “legacy” students, she jokes — her kids have grown up seeing plays here, and it’s changed their lives, too.

They’ll never be intimidated by Shakespeare,” Brekke says. “They will remember plays, specific scenes, specific lines because of the way they were done out there.”

Brekke was with the first caravan of English students who drove out to Winedale on a chilly Saturday in fall 1969, as an experiment. Ayres recently had met Ima Hogg, the governor’s daughter, who restored the Winedale property’s old homes and donated the land to the university at a reception out there, and she’d suggested to do some Shakespeare in the old barn. Ayres had a curiosity about what a program of Shakespeare was meant to be performed not dissected in a classroom, so he took her up on the suggestion.

“I feel really proud to have been part of the original group, in spite of the fact that I was a freshman,” Brekke says, adding her: “We had no idea that it was going to turn into something that would last 25 years and longer. We just went out there as a faith in Dr. Ayres and what he was about. We made it up as we went along.”

They came back in the spring and then in the summer. They began with epidural burlap fed bags and black tights. “When we got to velvet,” recalls early student Jerald Hoope, “the theater doctor had a terrific thought we were hot stuff.” The stage was an empty space on a golden-orange clay floor, and anywhere in the barn was fair game for a scene, from the huge, rough-hewn cedar crossbeams to the high shelves on the back roof. They handed off postures for their performances to milk truck drivers on the county blacktop. They had no idea where all of this was headed, but what it was for. They couldn’t sleep, so they stayed up all night doing improvisations.

“Something about that barn is magic,” Brekke says. “It turns you into someone else. You drop all your anxieties, pressures, worries. When you step into it, you’re transformed. It’s like the Globe — a place that exists outside of time.”

Ayres was in his late 80s then, and he played on stage with his students like an older man big brother and gave them like an obsessed baseball coach. Some evenings, the Teutonic-German cotton farmers and their owners came by and watched scenes. Later, that night, longhorns and local folks drank Pearl and danced at the old Wagner’s Store across the road. Some of Brekke’s favorite memories, she says, are from when the elderly Miss Ima came by to watch in the evenings, sitting in front of the stage in her wheelchair and reading along with a magnifying glass in her script, commenting in a loud voice to her nurse, “My, that boy is very good, isn’t he?” or “I believe that young lady has had some dance training.”

Most of the early veterans have remained close friends, Brekke says. The program has grown and changed, but last year she said the same thing.

“The friends I met in 1968 are my friends today,” says Jayne Noble, now a reporter for The Dallas Morning News. “They’re the closest I’ve ever met. It’s living with people on a day-to-day basis and creating something together, and you don’t do that in another classroom, even when you’re collaborating on something, you still go home at night to your family, your other life.”

The “swooshing unsaneness” of Winedale is still with Mark Rouller, a 1983 student who is now a specialist in the field of computer-automated reasoning in Los Angeles. He’ll be flying out for the reunion with girlfriend Claire Shabo, also a Winedale veteran.

“Part of what was amazing to me is that we were encouraged to invent,” Rouller recalls. “’Everyday life, the world doesn’t really work that way, you just want to be the same. They want a product output at certain pre-determined intervals.”

Shabo, an interior designer, agrees. “There’s a direct connection to my life now” she says. “I know how much energy it takes to do something.”

“Nothing else in my life has awakened me at 5 a.m. to push me to do downstair and get to work,” Shabo says. “The day I started my own business, it was the most arduous thing I ever done, but I knew I could do it because I’d done it before. In a way, Winedale builds self-confidence, and in a way it sets up higher expectations of yourself for the rest of your life.”

At the reunion, visitors will hear former students swapping combat stories of sorts and reminiscing. But one thing they never forget is that Winedale is still going strong and that a viral illness the summer before the reunion is sharing Shakespeare’s words in an intimate, direct way with an audience.

“I always try to get people to go out there,” Brekke says. “It’s very difficult to make people understand that you’re going into a barn on a sweltering afternoon in Texas and watching people doing Shakespeare. That sounds like hell. It sounds like the worst thing you could possibly do! But I tell them, ‘You gotta see it. You gotta go out there!’ You can’t believe it until you’ve seen it. You’ve gotta go out there and believe it. You’ve gotta go out there and believe it.”

“Meet the students and talk to them about how hard they’ve worked,” she says.