How Shakespeare at Winedale Spawned Some of Austin's Best Theatre

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James Ayres didn't set out to create an army of ardent theatre makers. All he was trying to do was help students in a university English course see more of the possibilities within a Shakespeare play through the lens of performance, to learn the play from the inside. But like an experimental drug with unexpected side effects, Ayres' approach yielded not just a slew of students with an expanded sense of the Bard's genius, but a mob that, having tasted the fruit of the Tree of Theatre, craved more.

So they took to Austin's stages, all those young people — many with no theatrical experience beyond what they'd gained through Ayres' course (officially titled The Play Through Performance but almost universally known as Shakespeare at Winedale, for the German farming settlement where Ayres has been exploring Shakespeare's work since 1971). Some auditioned for productions with existing companies. Others — quite a few others — developed their own theatrical vehicles, typically with fellow alumni of Ayres' program. And Austin theatre has never been the same.

Over Shakespeare at Winedale's 34 years, at least 10 theatre troupes have been founded or co-founded by its graduates, among them the Buda Mechanicals, Austin Shakespeare Festival, the Bodian Friction, even Esther's Follies. Like the man who started them, Winedale has become a mecca for innovative theatre, leading in the way in promoting creative collaboration and collective work; in reviving obscure dramas and creating new ones; in making great theatre — the kind that's powerful, that sticks with you your whole life — on a shoestring. They've distinguished themselves with their passion for theatre and conviction in its power to transform lives. Shakespeare at Winedale graduates have made inestimable contributions to the city. And when you factor in the national acclaim for Lipstick Tunes or the fact that among its alumni is a Tony Award-winning director, the program's impact extends from coast to coast.

Sussing out exactly how this one little course came to be responsible for so much creative activity isn't easy. After all, this is a course aimed at nontheatre majors — Ayres points with pride to the classics' aspiring engineers, nurses, attorneys, journalists, etc. — and it requires them to spend weeks in a tiny community 90 miles from Austin, where their classroom/labatory for experimenting with drama is a 19th-century un-air-conditioned hay barn in which they'll toil all day every day, through the hottest days of a Central Texas summer. And they don't just perform the plays, they also make the costumes, hang the lights, sweep the barn, empty the trash cans and when the performances are over and the audience files out of the barn, they hand out lemonade. As initiatives into theatre go, it's pretty grueling. And this inspires people to want to make more theatre how exactly?

Well, Ayres himself might say, as he did in a 1995 interview, that "Like everything else that happens at Winedale, it's a mystery." But for those of us who've been through the program — and here I should own up to having cut some of my theatrical teeth at Winedale, classes of '78 and '80 — it's a mystery for which we've assembled a few clues. The two most obvious can be seen in the names: Shakespeare and Winedale.

The program is centered around the works of the world's premier dramatist, not studying the plays he wrote from a scholarly distance but immersing students in them, to live in these worlds, in those worlds, for weeks. It can be heady, like your first sip of classic champagne from a crystal flute. The world becomes clearer, the genius of Shakespeare readily apparent. You get it. And when you get the guy at the top of the heap, you're getting a lot. You're getting life.

The fact that this is happening in a place removed from the world you live in heightens the experience. There's nothing from your life to distract you — no other school work, no bills, no TV, no movies, no lovers, no parents — so your focus is totally on the plays, on play itself, and the achievements and epiphanies that rise from that can be enjoyed purely for what they are. Yes, the heat can beat you down like an oak with a maillet, but Winedale has a way of smoothing that out: the abundance of grass, the great sheltering trees, the night skies so dark and yet so bright with stars. You're in the country, a wonderful pastoral escape — like a forest in one of Shakespeare's comedies, where all one's problems, from romantic entanglements to genteel political enemies, can be solved.

Now, not every problem is solved when you're at Winedale. (Just ask anyone from a class that had to tackle Cymbeline.) But when you're tackling problems with a bunch of people who are working on them as hard as you are, it brings you close to one another in a way that is rare in most of life. Your reliance on them and theirs on you for forge bonds, as in the best teams or families. When a class achieves a genuine spirit of ensemble, they can turn a play into a dramatic world with a richness of texture that's stunning.

And once you've done it, you realize that you can do it again. You can create a world from a script. You can sew costumes, even if you've never sewn before. You can light a stage. You can make a prop from a rusty chest and fire. And forging piles of money to do it doesn't matter. What matters is the will to do it and the desire to play and the willingness to give up what you are for the sake of everyone else. As Shanna Smith ('84-'85) put it, "Winedale forces you to see that you really can do anything that you put your mind to. Since many people leave Winedale with theatre on their brain, it's a natural step to think, 'Why can't I produce a play? I know all the necessary elements and how to do them, so why not do it?'

And so they do. They started 30 years ago, and they're still at it, the latest Winedale-inspired project making its debut next week. Former students banded together under the name Poor Tom Productions and staging a free cabaret performance of The Two Gentlemen of Verona July 18-Aug. 1 at the Dog & Duck Pub. (To learn more, visit www.poortom.org.)

Also, much of what makes Winedale what it is can't be acceded back "in the world" — the rural setting, the round-the-clock camaraderie, the lack of distractions, and, of course, Ayres himself — or, as nearly everyone calls him, Doc — whose knowledge, vision, and singular character has everything to do with the program's success. The history of Winedale-inspired efforts is littered with the illustrations of those who learned that the hard way — one such is recounted in these pages by James Loehman, classes of '83 and '84 and, since Ayres passed him the baton in 2000, director of the program. Still, the lessons of Winedale endure: the value of play, the power in the collective spirit, and the sense of possibilities. There's a reason that John Barlow, who won a Tony for his direction of Urinetown: The Musical, says, "I like to think that everything that I do in the theatre today and since I first went to Winedale in 1980 is rooted in the spirit of collaboration and invention that Winedale fostered."

These pages contain tributes to Shakespeare at Winedale and Doc from the people whose lives have been altered by them.\n\n36 | THE AUSTIN CHRONICLE | JULY 23, 2004
When I was an undergrad at UT, I'd been kicked out of the theatre department because I was deaf and had a sometimes-mild, sometimes-severe speech impediment. It was Doc who saved me from the humiliation of that rejection. It was Doc who told me that I had as much right as anyone to be up on that stage performing the language of Shakespeare. It was Doc who put me up there and gave me the roles that he thought suited my soul and helped me struggle through the doing. It was Doc who inspired so much of the ethos of accommodation that informs Actual Live, Austin, the performance group of people with disabilities that I co-founded with Chris Stailling and Celia Hughes.

In 1976, I helped found Esther's Follies. That summer there were only 24 or so Winedaleans at Esther's, but by the fall eight out of 14 people on that stage were refugees from Winedale. Esther's was in an old pool hall then, and the only way you could enter was in the back from the alley. The old stage, like the existing one, was fronted by a window, but we didn't have too many chairs, so most people sat on the floor. We did have a bar but no liquor license. Doc had heard about Esther's and knew that a lot of us were invited, so he dropped by to catch a show. He loved it, got into it, and joined. We used all of the various back doors we had been using to get into the Winedales in such various-sounding territory as Winedale, became the way Esther's caught fire. I don't know if they still work that way today. But I hope so.

Terri Gallaway, '72-75, '80

I don't think Esther's Follies was its most inspired, early days (1977-1979) would have worked at all without Shakespeare at Winedale. There were anywhere between six and 24 or more Winedalers in the troupe back then, maybe more — it tended to expand and contract weekly, sometimes reaching as many as 40 players. They brought a kind of invention and flexibility to the group. We were used to working in groups, with no appointed directors, just everyone pitching in with ideas, and taking big roles and trusting — well, most of the time the group knew the material, along with the group. We all had grown by studying Shakespeare in such rough-sounding territory as Winedale, became the way Esther's caught fire. I don't know if they still work that way today. But I hope so.

Alice Goudy, '73-75

I started writing plays while an undergrad, and professor Frank Whigham suggested I apply to Shakespeare at Winedale, more as a crash course in theatre than a study of Shakespeare. I went to be "Interviewed" by Doc, but instead of asking me questions Doc just said, "Tell me about yourself," then sat there, silent as a stone, more than an interview. Nothing from Doc not a "thanks for your time," not an invitation to continue, just a polite smile more, perhaps, than anything else. I got up and went to the bar, had a drink, and thought, "Fuck it, I'll see how this guy can handle it." I started telling Doc about every book I ever read, every drink I'd ever had, almost all of them. I started telling Doc about every book I ever read, every drink I'd ever had. Doc just kept on talking. I started telling Doc about every book I ever read, every drink I'd ever had. Doc just kept on talking. When Doc told me that he had put some of these talks down in a book, I thought that was the end of it. I started telling Doc about every book I ever read, every drink I'd ever had. Doc just kept on talking. I started telling Doc about every book I ever read, every drink I'd ever had.

Lana Lesley, '91, '93

The first year after I was at Winedale, I was lucky enough to be part of a group that put on John Ford's The Taming of the Shrew in the Utopia Theater at UT. There were a number of Winedale alumni — Steve Price, Rob Jeffrey, Bill Michna, Bill Friedman, Brian Foster, Shari Gray, and the late Alan Fear — Kathy Catlin was the female lead, and the group was directed by an Englishman, Robert O'Hara. It was an exciting group of people, but somehow it all just worked, and we were able to get a lot of Winedale working methods integrated into the show.

The next year I had an experience that made me realize how difficult it is to recreate Winedale outside of Winedale. I worked on a show that took place in a nuclear power plant, with much of the experience dependent on the environment, the isolation, the guidance of the audience, and the group of former Winedale alumni that put on the show. They helped me see how much different Winedale was from a more traditional production process but also how much of what I learned at Winedale could be applied in other situations.

James Loehlin, '83-'84, current director
My Weeztah Days

A CASE STUDY OF ONE POST-WINEDEALE COMPANY
BY CLAYTON STROMBERGER

When I hear the Winedales of today talk passionately about their new theatre troupe, I think of that bitter-sweet moment in "Hello Young Lovers" – which I know only from the Mel Torme rendition, so it's with his undulating voice in my head – when the lonely protagonist, after cheering on the young lovers to follow their star and the brave and faithful to true,implies that the time has come to find someone to love. "All of my memories are happy tonight. I had a love of my own, like yours..."

I did indeed have a love of my own; a sweet little theatre company called the Weezkah Players. For 3½ years, I was a Weezkah – or "Weezy-ZAWY" as dear old John Bustin would draw in his theatre reviews on AM radio. We appeared from nowhere one winter day in 1987, did seven productions of neglected masterpieces and oddball classics, mostly staged in beaten-up UT auditoriums, then vanished into the mist of time in 1990. I have the pictures, but sometimes it all seems like a dream.

Sing it, Mel: "I know how it feels to have wings at your heels and fly down the street in a trance..."

I don't think I'll ever have as much fun on a stage or work with more amazing people. I called my old co-director Martin Regan, now a much loved drama teacher at Georgetown High School, to ask what she remembers from our Weezkah salad days. "We weren't really known for doing the traditional realistic style of theatre," Monica recalled. "We weren't known at all, to be honest."

The Weezkaths delighted in a quirky anonymity. It was right there in our name: nonsequitur, nasty, a bit of an eyepatch-wearing -er. "What's a 'Weezkah'?" we were often asked. When short on time we would say vaguely that the name came from an obscure Norse god. Some people thought of Dr. Seuss. One night an audience member excitedly informed us that in the Gypsy language, "viza" meant "root." That was perfect! Screenplay! Or was it "tree?" I'm afraid I've forgotten. One way, after seeing half of our repertoire, announced that "Weezkah! must mean 'play with a desk,' as some of our plays featured a desk. One desk. Often the stage, as Monica reminded me."

I don't remember the desk too clearly, but I do recall an entire family with hair made of cotton-covered toilet paper rolls, a guy zap-ping people with a giant cardboard lightning bolt, an ostrich laying across a big bare stage, a chorus line of black-faced people in lab dancing with forks and kites and Lawrence Welk's zippy "Calamity," a sudden gust of wind blowing open the great stage leading doors of the Utopia Theater during the intermezzo scene of Measure for Measure. The trash about our troupe's name is that one night Monica and I were pouring over Trevor Nunn's brilliant 1979 Macbeth and distinctly heard Ian McKellen blurt out "Weezkah!" (Rent it yourself if you don't believe me! It's just after Duncan's body is discovered.) This promptly became a running gag every time we watched the video. When we were looking for a name that was unpretentious and invited curiosity, "Weezkah!" fit the bill. "Players" was an homage to the ensemble spirit of Winedale. (Notice how many groups on these pages have "Players" in their name?)

Monica and I were pals long before either of us had gone to Winedale, but that experience certainly propelled us toward Weezkahdom. How else would we have become obsessed with Shakespeare? What else would have led us to travel to England with young James Leechman, when we saw 21 plays in 21 days? Winedalean performances influenced us as well. I met future Tony-winner John Rando at Winedale, where he was a riveting Hamlet, and from his directorial debut in 1984 with Brecht's 'Feast of the End Time' and the role I saw how to take a large space – this was the Dougherty Arts Center – and make it more intimate by placing chairs on the stage. We did that later in the cavernous Utopia. That was also the year I was briefly involved in the failed attempt by a large group of Winedaleans to stage a direct-to-cameras production of The Night of the Burning Dust in tiny Calhoun 100. (It collapsed as a big, tear-eyed gathering – ironically enough – right in front of Dr. Ayers' locked office in the basement of Calhoun Hall.)

As Monica and I puzzled over how to launch our theatrical adventure, I thought of Calhoun 100 as a space for our first production. You had to be a student group to use it for free, so we formed a student group: But since we weren't students – hadn't been for years! John Stokoe, a Winedale friend who was a grad student, became the first and only president of the Weezkah Players and one of its core performers.

We rounded up every loose Winedale we could find who seemed to have the Weezkah spirit and dove headfirst into Richard Binsley Sheridan's great farce The Critic. Everyone had a talent to contribute, from costumes to set painting, and serendipity brought us some wonderful inspirations, such as Monica's vinyl record of the 1981 Overture that shipped at the peak moment of the common-kiss finale, which we played during Mr. Puff's frantic efforts to stop up the great "Spanish Armada sequence" collapsing around him.

We had our day jobs; we were young, we loved every minute – except for perhaps the Friday night of our debut weekend, when no one came. Not a soul. We polished our noses out of the Calhoun curtains at 7:30pm to see rows of empty seats staring back at us. It was like something out of Spinal Tap. We waited 10 more minutes, then the cast happily went off to Trudy's to host and hoister. Monica and I separately went home to mild nervous breakdowns. It got better after that.

Monica and I played roles and took turns directing, encouraging the Winedale spirit of improvisation and collaboration. Wonderful people came our way including many folk who are still mainstays on the local scene: lovely Margaret Hoard, who cracked us all up in Sheridan's parody of the Ophelia mad scene; the amazing Leslie Bonnell, who cut loose as a designer on The Coward-Shaw-Gilbert Show. Barry Miller, now an Equity actor, who had the distinction of being in every Weezkah production; and Robert Pierson, who created his first wild-haired pseudo-scientists for our production of The Memorandum, Thach Havel's satire on an absurd new bureaucratic language called Prydepe. For that production, I put up cryptic posters on campus saying "Do you know Prydepe yet?" and "Prydepe will soon be acquired for all official communications," followed by a second series advertising the performance dates as "Prydepe classes" put on by the Weezkah Players, with the play info in small print. No one came to learn Prydepe, though I was told that some UT students had been inquiring unenthusiastically about whether this new directive would affect their ability to graduate on time.

I think I did all this in the spirit of leaving crumbs. I wanted it to be a treat for people to find up.

I see now that my post-Winedale theatre experience, and the subsequent work as an elementary school teacher, was mostly about this – about discovering, stumbling upon, uncovering, to your delight, something precious and wonderful. It connected me to the times when I was a kid and would go to see plays. There was the woods near our house just so I could find my way home. I had stumbled upon Winedale as a young head for a journalism career was lucky enough to get accepted to the program, and I drove out there not knowing what the barn would look like or how to play a singing gravel-digger in Hamlet. I found out.

The final step, as Doc taught us, was always sharing your discoveries with others. As Weezkahs we discovered these great plays and found what we were capable of in bringing them to life; the audience discovered us, tucked away somewhere on campus. We all learned from one another, and many of us found our lives molded in new directions.

"Not ends but beginnings," as Doc loves to say. Hear him: Weezkah!
Being a Winedaler Without the Class

Leslie Bonnell

Winedale changed my life and I never even went!

In the late Eighties, I worked at the Waldenbooks tucked back in the row of stores that is now the Wildcatter. I had a job at Waldenbooks, but I was also working at the Winedale Theater. I was a costume designer for the theater and I got to work on a lot of different productions. I met a lot of interesting people and I had a lot of fun. I still go to the theater occasionally and I enjoy seeing the performances. I try to support the theater as much as I can.

I started going to Winedale as an audience member, and then I started working there. I've been a part of the theater since I was a child. It's a big family and it's a great place to work. I've made a lot of friends there and I've learned a lot from the other performers. I love being a part of the theater and I hope to continue to be a part of it for many years to come.

I went to high school and then I went to college. After college, I worked as a costume designer for a few years. Then I decided to go to Winedale and I've been there ever since. I love being a part of the theater and I hope to continue to be a part of it for many years to come.

I love being a part of the theater and I love being with the people. It's a great place to work and I'm glad I'm a part of it.
began to think that I really couldn't contribute properly to our company unless I too spent a summer sweating in the barn. But my colleagues convinced me that probably wasn't the case – I'd already absorbed the Winedale spirit in just about any way that mattered. I suspect they're right, but even now I regret that I never went through that experience.

I was always drawn to Winedale because of the fierce, raw spirit in every performance. Even when the acting wasn't at a professional level (whatever that means), each play was infused with this deep, passionate intention and attention by all the people on stage. It was palpable. The students cared so much about what they were doing and poured everything into it. The commitment was infectious. Subconsciously, it set a standard for me that has had a profound effect on my work as a professional theatre artist. I've always sought that same level of personal investment and care for what was happening onstage. I was also instinctively drawn to the Winedale methodology: Everyone builds the set, makes the costumes, serves the food; everyone is responsible for every moment onstage. Despite Doc's leadership, the Winedale experience really is a collective one. It led me to believe early on that a collective approach to art-making is the way to go.

The other aspect of Winedale that remains so compelling to me is the huge sense of community. Every arts group talks about “community” these days, but few actually embody that idea in the deep way that Winedale does. The bonds between Winedalers across the years are intense. My family's connection to the annual pilgrimage to see the plays and eat food together and share in the long tradition was equally intense; and shared by other families, I'm sure. —Sarah Richardson

Shakespeare at Winedale Outreach

THE NEXT GENERATION FINDS ITS ‘MUSE OF FIRE’

The Winedale family tree is about to get a whole lot bigger.

For the first time in its 34-year history, the UT Shakespeare at Winedale program is offering an ongoing outreach program designed to share with young people – particularly those from schools in low-income and underserved communities, both urban and rural – the powerful experience of studying Shakespeare through performance.

A “whole new generation is finding its muse of fire,” is a century-old hay barn in the country. Come out to Winedale some spring or summer Monday next year, and you’ll see kids ages 8 to 13 from all over the state, radiant in their improvised costumes, leaping onstage to perform fully realized scenes from A Midsummer Night’s Dream at The Repertory of Mental and speaking Shakespeare's original language with a fluency and passion that is often astounding. They're even teaching the college kids and performing a bit or two about how to play Shakespeare.

Since last August, when Shakespeare at Winedale Outreach was officially launched – thanks to a grant from the Houston Endowment and donations from individuals – more than 500 students have participated in the program, through yearlong school residencies, classroom workshops, Saturday sessions on the UT campus, special trips to Winedale, or stays at Camp Shakespeare, a two-week residential summer camp that is Winedale founder Jim Ayres’ latest innovation. As coordinator, I’ve had the pleasure of seeing all this firsthand.

This fall my position goes from half-time to full-time, in the hopes of expanding this service to teach the lives of more young students across Texas. Meanwhile, the spirit of Winedale’s patron saint – Midsummer’s night – continues to spread, already reaching far and wide. As one of the newest Winedalers, a fourth grader named Jennifer from Langford Elementary in Southeast Austin, wrote this May about her moment in the barn:

“When our scene was over, I was very excited. I went to find my mom, and along the way everybody was telling me I was really good. I felt really proud when I got home, and I wanted to perform again and again.”

For more information on Shakespeare at Winedale Outreach, call 412-4726, e-mail shakespeare-at-winedale@uarts.edu, or visit www.shakespeare-winedale.org.