



## Into Thin Air

SHAKESPEARE ON THE SQUARE BRINGS THE BARD'S ENGLISH TO THE HEART OF DOWNTOWN KNOXVILLE

BY KIERON BARRY / PHOTOS BY SHAWN POYNTER



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**THE CALL-TIME** for today's rehearsal, seven o'clock, came and went half an hour ago, but thanks to a bit of business with a photographer from another paper, things are behind schedule. Daylight, still sluicing through the high windows of the rehearsal room-cum-basketball court, illuminates the waiting actors in a tableau of creative idleness.

Around two dozen members of the cast and crew of Tennessee Stage Company are here in the final week of rehearsal for the twin productions of *Love's Labors Lost* (the company has adapted the British spelling) and *The Merchant of Venice* that form the company's 18th Shakespeare on the Square season. Tonight, perhaps on account of the photographer, some actors are in jeans and T-shirts, and some are in doublet and hose. Most exhibit that curious type of nervous, self-conscious boredom traditionally found only in show business and the military.

Portia, sitting on the floor with her bare arms hugging her knees, runs silently through her lines. Oblivious to the hubbub around her, lips moving swiftly, head gently nodding, her eyes narrow as if she's trying to thread a needle at dusk.

At the far end of the hall, the King of Navarre is shooting hoops in his socks. All smirky mischief.

**BELOW:** Greg Congleton and Amy Hubbard rehearse in the basketball court. **RIGHT:** Kevin Velasco, Ken Mayfield, Tom Parkhill, and Amy Hubbard perform.

he pads around imaginary opponents at half-speed, occasionally pausing to run a hand through his Corleone-sleek hair.

Alone at a small table, contemplative, serious but not aloof, sits Shylock. Aged maybe halfway between Hamlet and Lear, he studies the text, now and then stroking his thick beard. Seeing me, he ambles over and introduces himself as Bruce Borin.

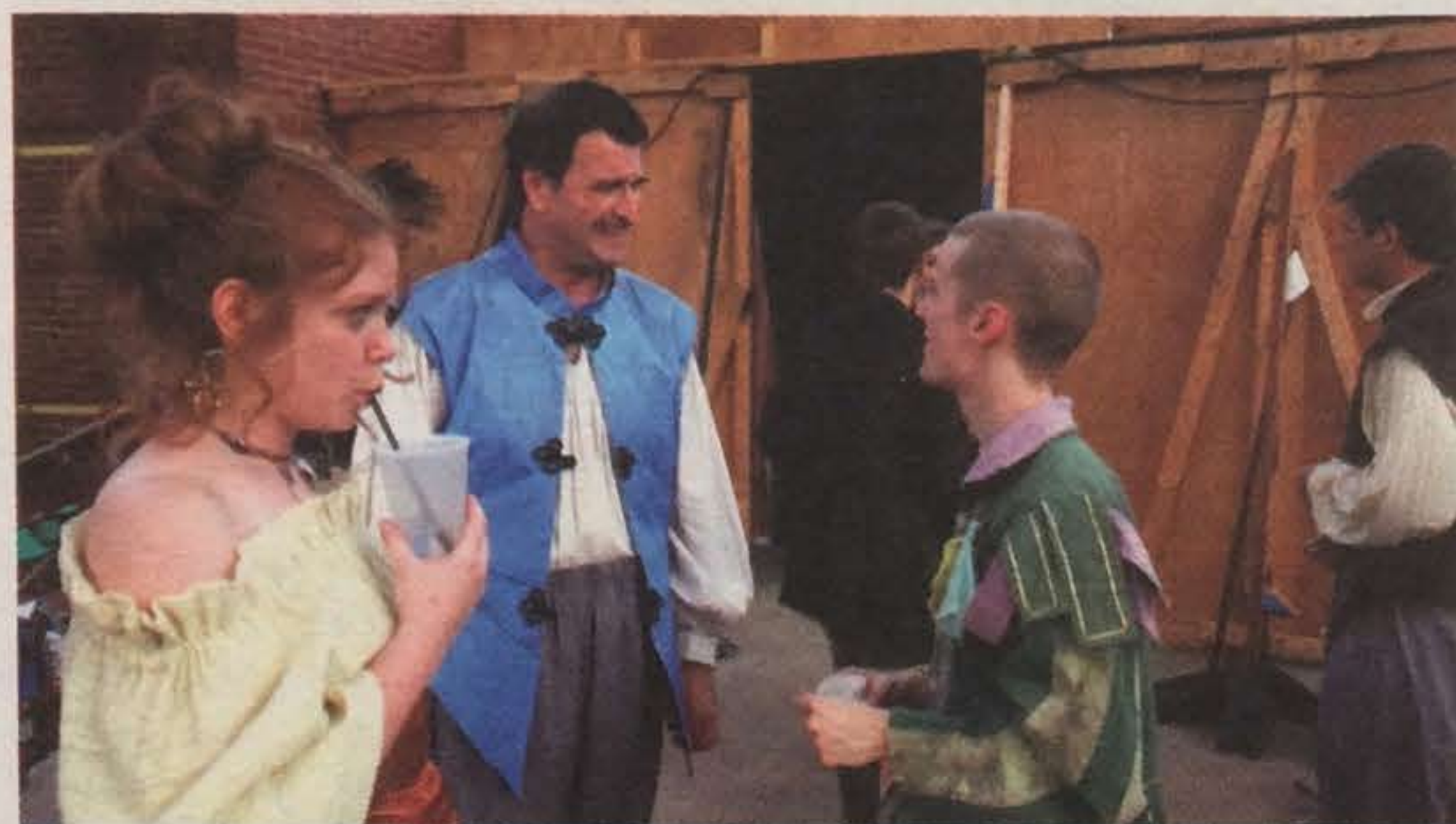
When he hears I'm English, Borin tells me of his visit to the reconstructed Globe Theatre in London a few years ago. As an actor he was permitted, he informs me, to stand alone for a few moments on the raised stage, looking out at the wooden "O"; the thatched rim; the sharp tiers of wattle-and-daub; and the groundlings' pitch, now silent and empty. Separated by just 400 years and a few paces from the possessor of perhaps the greatest mind in history, Borin found himself unable to take it all in, and instead settled for a few heady gulps of Shakespearean air. "It was," he says, "the greatest moment of my life." He smiles, and asks me exactly where in England I'm from.

**I ALWAYS FEEL** slightly embarrassed when admitting I was born in Stratford-upon-Avon. Most Americans I meet seem to have even more admiration for Shakespeare than I do, and their generous instinct on learning of this fluke of my birth is to assume I am a *de facto* expert on the subject, as if England is a tranquil cottage paradise of foamy beer and cricket pitches in which Her Majesty's humble subjects lavish as much care on Shakespeare's eternal flame as they do on the Wimbledon lawns.

Yet the American language is closer to Shakespeare's than are my own drawing vowels, themselves a 19th-century affectation conceived as yet another attempt by the middle classes to attract attention. Today's American English is bouncy, confident, malleable, unsnobbish and thrillingly rhythmic. It acts—much as did the Elizabethan tongue—as blotting paper to every influence from the nearest port. And many of the best recent Shakespearean performances, research, and projects—including the new Globe itself, the vision of Sam Wanamaker—have



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**BACKSTAGE:** Casey Smith, Tom Parkhill, Sean Dietz, and Ken Mayfield.

taken place through the good offices of American enthusiasm and ability.

Anyone curious as to what England today is really like should bypass *Henry V*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and even *Notting Hill*, and instead listen to The Streets' album *Original Pirate Material*, which perfectly illustrates the deadening sprawl of the post-industrial sceptered isle—everyone cramped yet everyone isolated in a decaying urban hinterland. Or Shane Meadows' film *This Is England*, a precise snapshot of a fading culture and a spent superpower

captured in its fitful, muddy twilight.

Our chief legacy is language, and it's impossible to speak it without standing in the shadow of the Bard. His contribution is, in the strictest sense, unbelievable. On an average day, *The New York Times*, for example, will—proper nouns aside—express itself with just 600 different words. This is a miserable trickle of a canal compared to the Atlantic width of Shakespeare's 17,000-word vocabulary (some 10 percent of which he invented, including such everyday staples as "excite-

ment," "bubble," and "gossip").

Michael Golebiewski, director of *The Merchant of Venice*, is proof that this rich heritage is still alive and well. As he gives notes to his actors—and later, when speaking to me—his passion for the plays puts my own fumbling fondness to shame. *Merchant* was his first experience of Shakespeare when, as a student, he jumped in at the deep end as Shylock. Since then he has acted in or directed 23 Shakespeare productions. His motivation is straightforward. "Why not involve yourself with the best plots, the best storylines ever? And why not just keep trying to retell them?"

Even for a free event, audiences of several hundred night after night are impressive in a city of Knoxville's size. "That's the thing we talk about," he says. "How many closet Shakespeare fans there are out there. They come from everywhere."

Tom Parkhill, artistic director of the company and director of *Love's Labors Lost*, agrees. A likeable, energetic actor-manager in the tradition of Henry Irving, Parkhill recalls being caught unawares

by the popularity of Shakespeare in East Tennessee. "When we started the Tennessee Stage Company our intention was to be a repertory company with some Shakespeare stuffed in. Then we started summer Shakespeare, and it took over the company. It became the one thing we did that struck a chord, that brought in big audiences. There weren't opportunities to see Shakespeare plays when I was growing up in Knoxville. So this filled a niche that people obviously thought was missing."

So far, the company has done yeoman's service to over half the plays with no signs of slowing down. But it hasn't survived without a struggle, and the sapping chore of asking for money—antithetical to any artistic nature—is a task of Sisyphean endlessness. A combination of audience donations, business sponsorship, and a modest amount of state and local government funding help to keep the shows going. "Essentially we spend the year with our hand out," says Parkhill.

Playing outdoors is often

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overwhelmingly difficult for actors, and Shakespeare is generally viewed as tough for both actors and audiences.

Parkhill agrees the first is a big obstacle. "It's very difficult. The sound doesn't come back; you don't hear yourself. And if an actor turns his head, even just slightly, you don't hear anything they say, so you can't hear your cue. For an actor it's the worst possible scenario," he says with undisguised relish. "The response from the audience, though, has been awesome. That's why we keep battling."

On the second point, Parkhill admits that the plays are linguistically challenging. "We tried to streamline the plots and subplots so the story is clear, and tried to cut away the language that is difficult for a modern audience."

And it's not just the difficult language that prompts the directors to wield their scissors. "A four-hour show outside in the heat is not nearly as exciting as a two-hour show," offers Golebiewski.

And with more outdoor bars and cafes now on Market Square than ever before, it's increasingly hard to engage the non-captive audience. "Our biggest challenge is the fact that all those patios up and

down the street have people laughing and drinking," Parkhill says. "But that's not unlike how the crowd would have been in Shakespeare's time."

And as today's audience mirrors the Elizabethan crowds, so, too, do the actors embrace the exuberant, semi-exaggerated style that so pleased the groundlings. "We stage the plays in a broad, physical way that's at least within spitting distance of what we imagine Shakespeare's style would have been like," Parkhill says. Sure enough, there are pratfalls, double-takes, funny voices, and silly walks.

Some things have changed. Sensibilities and mores are somewhat different today, and *The Merchant of Venice* in particular continues to attract a degree of controversy for its portrayal of the Jewish Shylock. The directors are all too conscious of this. In Shakespeare's time, when Shylock is ordered to become a Christian at the end of the play, "everybody would have cheered," suggests Golebiewski. "That's not an American sentiment," he adds, perhaps a little generously.

The production's solution to this

<b>WHO</b> Tennessee Stage Company's Shakespeare on the Square: <i>Love's Labor's Lost</i> and <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>
<b>WHERE</b> Market Square
<b>WHEN</b> Thursdays-Sundays through August 17, 7 p.m.
<b>HOW MUCH</b> Free Call (865) 546-4280 or visit tennesseestage.com

problem is to present the work as a genre piece in a contemporary setting among warring criminal gangs. "It's a crime story," Golebiewski says. "What you have is different factions, and the Jews are just another faction."

But the plays are wider and taller than any piffing hullabaloo of the moment, and Golebiewski sums up their timeless appeal. "The universal storylines that Shakespeare wrote are going to be bringing people out forever," he says. "As long as there are human beings that borrow

money, fall in love, and do desperate things, there'll always be an audience for Shakespeare."

**THE REHEARSAL** now over, the space is nothing more than a basketball court once more. Beneath the myriad of quiet hums in the room lies the patient, echoing silence detectable only in the moments after a high-spirited flurry of departures. A clumsy pile of props and costumes lies in one corner, and the sole movement in the room is the gentle spin of dust caught in the evening's gray radiance. Of all the art forms, theater is both the most ephemeral and the most enduring. Every great performance is lost to those who were not present on that particular evening, and indeed to many who were. However, something fragile in it survives to take its place in the anonymous confusion of our collective memory, an intangible grain of silt in the ever-deepening coastal shelf around our lonely islands of light. Shakespeare writes: "But these our actors, as I foretold you, were all spirits and are melted into air, into thin air." True, yet a flicker of their anxious magic remains. ☉