



LOOKING BACK WITH JAMES BLACK

INTERIM ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

The Alley's Interim Artistic Director James Black has been working at the Alley for over thirty years as a member of the Resident Acting Company and a frequent director. During the season he curated as Interim Artistic Director, we are delighted to present a series of essays from him about his career and his memories of the Alley.

The 2018-19 Hubbard Stage season begins with Shakespeare. Many things in theater begin with Shakespeare. Myself included.

Not only did I learn to truly act by speaking his words, but his plays appear, like a talisman, at key moments in my life. He's been a dependable presence at crossroads, a "splendid spur," with his "goose pen" seeming to point the way.

In 1977, after two busy years in an exceptional high school theater department (thank you, Mrs. Angelo), I won a drama scholarship to Sam Houston State University. Although I enjoyed and excelled in my theater studies (and those late 70's department parties), I neglected my other classes and by the end of my sophomore year, I found myself under academic suspension. Not daring to limp home in defeat, I stayed in Huntsville, worked various odd jobs and planned my next move. Maybe theater wasn't right for me? I had also harbored a secret desire to be a motorcycle cop. Electra Glide

in blue. Maybe a Criminal Justice degree?

Then, a close friend and fellow Bearcat theater major somehow found himself affiliated with the Texas Renaissance Festival with whom he negotiated a contract to produce Shakespeare on their outdoor "Globe Stage." He proposed a ninety minute version of *Hamlet*, divided into three thirty minute segments, to play during the course of the day. He gathered a group of SHSU theater alums, myself included (thank you, Bill Gelber), and we went to work. I was to play several roles including the Player King. No set, just simple improvised Elizabethan costumes, a wooden "O," and those magical words. We performed in an atmosphere that would have been familiar to Shakespeare himself – an outdoor festival with its cacophony of sound – a blend of distant music, drunken revelers, brawls, tradesmen hawking their goods, and occasional cries of exotic animals. Not exactly the

solemn setting for highbrow drama, but it worked because that was the very world in which these plays were born and meant to be performed. In the open and for all. Speaking that language outdoors, communicating against the odds, using those long lines of thought and description to grab and hold attention, taught me more than any class or textbook could ever have hoped to. College could wait.

In addition to those valuable lessons being learned, there was another extraordinary event taking place – for the first time, I was getting paid to be an actor! Because of the Bard, a childhood dream went from being an unsuccessful academic pursuit to becoming a vocation. OK, it was more of a temp job, but it was a start.

The Renaissance Festival shows were a hit and over the next two years we presented *Taming of the Shrew* and *Henry V*. That success led to an audition and subsequent long association as an actor with The Houston Shakespeare Festival (thank you, Dr. Berger and Charles Krohn) where over six summers I had the privilege of playing such complex and rewarding characters as Iago, Brutus, Coriolanus, Petruchio, and Sir Toby Belch, once again in the challenging but authentic setting of Miller Outdoor Theater.

In those salad days, my early resume had a dozen Shakespeare credits before anything else. But by apprenticing in his world, I had acquired an invaluable



Top: James Black performing at the Houston Renaissance Festival in 1982.
Bottom: Chris Hutchison and James Black in *As You Like It*, 2015. Photo by John Everett.

and versatile skill set that not only served Shakespeare but all authors, classic and contemporary. I learned to appreciate the individual musicality of each playwright's voice. It gave me a respect for the text and it taught me to push through long lines to the end of a thought. It also instilled me with a confidence to embrace heightened language.

Shakespeare then marched me directly into the local Houston theater scene, where I debuted in *Measure for Measure* at Main Street Theater (thank you, Becky Udden). His plays have continued to be a touchstone for me here at the Alley, as well, where I've played in productions of *Measure for*



Scott Rabinowitz and James Black in *Macbeth*, 1993.
Photo by Jim Caldwell.

Measure, Macbeth, Comedy of Errors, Hamlet, Othello, Much Ado About Nothing, Twelfth Night, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and As You Like It.

But of my many edifying encounters with Shakespeare, the most memorable would no doubt be the Alley's co-production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, done with the Moving Theater, run by the brother and sister team of Corin and Vanessa Redgrave. (It was this trip to Texas that would take Vanessa to the Ransom Center where she would discover a play that would take me to London and Broadway. More on that soon.)

Every night I would find myself (unbelievably) sharing the stage with Ms. Redgrave. I was Dolabella, she was Cleopatra and she would launch into the "I dream'd there was an Emperor Antony" speech and every night she would make me forget I was in the play with her. I would become audience, standing

there, completely out of character, inappropriate smile on my face, and bask in the close proximity of her effortless virtuosity. I had several two or three syllable interjections during the speech and sometimes I said them on time and sometimes they were late, depending on how mesmerized I was.

One night after a particularly brilliant performance, I had to acknowledge what I had just witnessed and I knocked on her dressing room door. "I thought the speech was extraordinary this evening." She turned to me and said, "It was, wasn't it?"

But there was no ego or arrogance in her statement. It was amazement. It was awe. I knew what she meant. There was a moment of silence between us, a mutual acknowledgement that we actors are simple conduits for this titanic genius. We're the lucky instruments that get to play these monumental notes. And on some nights the music takes over and we fly.

Every emotion that one will encounter during the course of a lifetime has been expressed and debated by Shakespeare in his simple yet eloquent verse.

His comprehension of a common and universal humanity is why, as Ben Johnson said,

"He was not of an age, but for all time."

Thank you, William Shakespeare.