



Shakespeare For All: The Spirit of the Houston Shakespeare Festival

By Andrew Tello

No writer in the English language can lay claim to the fame of William Shakespeare, who has amassed a global fanbase in the four centuries since his death. One of those fans, Sidney Berger, loved Shakespeare's work so dearly that he wanted to share his passion with others and turned it into a local tradition: the Houston Shakespeare Festival. Partnering with Miller Outdoor Theatre, the Houston Shakespeare Festival stages classic Shakespearean works for the public to enjoy every summer free of charge.

Despite Shakespeare's fame, admiration for his work is far from universal. In part, that is because most people first encountered Shakespeare as assigned reading in school even though his plays were written to be enjoyed on the stage. Dr. Berger, who joined the University of Houston as the director of the School of Theatre in 1969, claimed, "Far too many people regard his writing as a necessary cultural 'medicine,' a teaspoon which ... if taken occasionally, may serve to maintain a civilized demeanor." Berger wanted to change that perception, and the opportunity to share his passion for The Bard was on the horizon.¹

Photo above: Dean Coutris played Julius Caesar in the 2019 production. The costumes offer a modern-day take on the classic Shakespeare tale.

Photo courtesy of Pin Lim.



Dr. Sidney Berger, director of the of the UH School of Theatre & Dance (1969-2010), speaks with a groups of students.

Photo courtesy of UH Photographs Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



The 1980 program for the festival included its first production of *As You Like It*, with Ryland Merkey as *Touchstone* and Robin Bradley as *Rosalind*, laughing at his feet.

Photo by Jim Caldwell from the August 1980 Houston Shakespeare Festival program.

same at Miller ... only our distractions are sirens, barking dogs, airplanes, and helicopters.”³

On August 8, 1975, the Houston Shakespeare Festival debuted on Miller’s stage. Two shows christened the festival’s first season, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, which ran weekends through August 23rd. The festival’s first season was a joint production between the University of Houston and Miller Outdoor Theatre, with each providing equal funding. That initial season was such a hit that the festival became a mainstay at Miller, which opened its air conditioned, full proscenium theatre stage to the festival staff to entertain those in attendance. Davis pointed out, “There’s just something about seeing [Shakespeare] preformed, in such a professional and wonderful way [that] ... it’s what we’ve come to expect from UH each year.”⁴

In 1977, the festival produced its first tragedy, the ever-famous *Hamlet*. Even though *Hamlet* was his favorite of Shakespeare’s plays, Berger had trepidations about staging it. Those concerns vanished, however, when *Hamlet* proved to be a hit, drawing 3,000-4,000 people. Not only did the play have a large audience, but the people were also “enthusiastic ... [and responded] to *Hamlet* as though it were written last month,” Berger recalled. The resounding success vindicated Berger’s confidence in response to naysayers who thought his efforts were doomed to fail, and the play continued to draw thousands in the years to come.⁵

Much to Do About Something

Miller Outdoor Theatre has been a Houston mainstay for almost one hundred years. Located in Houston’s Museum District in Hermann Park, overlooked by a grassy hill that countless children have rolled down squealing with delight, Miller provides the perfect space for people to enjoy a wonderful performance with the barrier of price removed. It is representative of Houston’s wide array of performing arts. Cissy Segall Davis, the theatre’s managing director, explained, “Houston is probably one of the best cities in the country for the breadth of performing arts and cultural arts organizations that exist in this city [and Miller is] fortunate because we can make those performances available free of charge.” Despite its diversity of productions, spoken word drama was underrepresented on Miller’s stage before the Houston Shakespeare Festival began.²

In August of 1975, a summer heat wave caused Miller to consider taking a temperature-induced sabbatical for two weeks. Sidney Berger saw that as an opportunity to share his passion for Shakespeare via a festival. He found Miller’s unique venue appealing because he believed Shakespeare would have found it familiar. “Imagine the distractions in Shakespeare’s theater performing in broad daylight at three o’clock in the afternoon, with people shouting or carrying on business conversations, horses whinnying and vendors hawking oranges,” Berger remarked. “It’s very much the



Broadway actor Ken Ruta as *Prospero* joins David Wald as *Caliban* in the 2006 production of *The Tempest*. The show was seen as one of the best productions at the HSF under the direction of Dr. Berger.

Photo courtesy of the Miller Outdoor Theatre.



In the 2018 production of *Hamlet*, actor Shannon Hill became the first woman to play the title character in the festival's forty-three-year history. Photo by Pin Lim.

With the success of *Hamlet*, a tragedy joined the festival's repertoire alongside a comedy, creating a dichotomy in tone and a chance to see the same actors take on widely different roles. "The fun for a theatre company," said Jack Young, the festival's current artistic director, "is here's this guy playing this serious role in a very dramatic play one night, and the next night he's ... the young lover in the comedy."⁶ That added layer of immersion provided a critical connection to the audience.

Shakespeare's seventeenth-century audiences included nobility, apprentices, and regular people, whom Ira Black, cultural affairs director for *KLEF's On the Town*, described as "a rich human soup of working-people: artisans, tradesmen, housewives, mariners, country cousins, and foreign merchants."⁷ In short, with the exception of royalty, the audiences were just as diverse as the people who attend the Houston performances. With that in mind, the Shakespeare Festival seeks to be inclusive, and Young wants to make sure that the audience members see themselves when they attend the festival.

One way that happens is through casting choices. For example, in 2018, actor Shannon Hill became the first woman in the festival's history to play the traditionally male titular main character in *Hamlet*. Traditionally Caucasian roles are played by actors of color who represent the ethnic diversity found in Houston. The cast's diversity is crucial because "for many children, this is the first exposure they have to the performing arts, and the first place they may see themselves reflected on stage," Davis noted.⁸ Even humor is altered to better connect Shakespeare's meaning with the audience. If a play has a joke comparing two cities, a

personal connection is made with the audience when they know the cities because, as Young explained, "If you do a joke about Dallas and Houston, everyone's going to lose their senses." That method of making Shakespeare more accessible appealed to Berger, as it made The Bard's works more inviting to the largest possible audience.⁹

Shakespeare's work provides ample ground to be reimagined, and reevaluated even now, four centuries later. Davis commented that the festival's work is "a wonderful way to educate all of us, with some extraordinary ... works of art that have stood the test of time." The festival, she added "is making sure that [Shakespeare] stays relevant in today's world. And that's critical, so that people will continue to want to read it, understand it, [and] grapple with the issues that Shakespeare presents in his own lovely and wonderful way."¹⁰



Seth Gilliam as *Othello* (left) with Jack Young as *Iago* (right) appeared in the 2010 production of *Othello*. Young serves as the festival's current artistic director. Photo by Pin Lim.

Over forty-five seasons, the Houston Shakespeare Festival has staged ninety productions of thirty-one different titles. *As You Like It* and *Hamlet* have each appeared on stage six times over the years. Several of the comedies have been produced five times, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, *Comedy of Errors*, and *The Tempest*.¹¹

The shows also represent the cumulative efforts of hundreds of individuals who worked tirelessly to bring Shakespeare to the stage, including directors Cecil J. Pickett and Carolyn Houston Boone. Pickett taught theatre at UH



Miller Outdoor Theatre in Hermann Park has been home to the Houston Shakespeare Festival since its inception in the 1970s.

Photo courtesy of Miller Outdoor Theatre.

from 1970-88 and had an illustrious career as an acting coach and mentor to pupils such as Brett Cullen, Dennis Quaid, and Robert Wuhl. Boone is a thirty-year theatre career veteran. She received her MFA in English from Sam Houston State University and MFA in theatre at UH, where she served as director of the Houston Shakespeare Festival for twelve years and taught for twenty-four years before retiring in 2020.¹² Their commitment to excellence and theatre arts helped to cement the Houston Shakespeare Festival's long-standing legacy.

A Mid-August Night's Dream

Miller's unique stage presents challenges that a traditional theatre does not. Young affirmed that, "Miller's outdoor theatre is fifty-five feet wide," and that is "almost fifty percent wider than a Broadway theatre." The distance from the stage to the thousands of audience members on the hill must also be considered when staging a production there. To ensure attendees can see what is happening on the stage, the actors make accommodations in how they walk, talk,



The cast of Much Ado About Nothing performs in one of two comedies staged during the 2010 season.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Shakespeare Festival.

and deliver their lines. Because they must consider so many factors, Young looks upon them as the marines of acting. And yet, the actors represent only one piece of what it takes to produce the performances.¹³

In planning the festival, Cori Stevenson, the director of outreach, revealed, "We tend to think in two- to three-year blocks ... because the number of plays available is limited." The seeds of the next festival are planted before the previous year's festival closes. The two productions are designed to be performed in repertory, and the plays alternate. Stevenson explained, "Shakespeare's company had multiple plays memorized and performed a different show each night. Houston Shakespeare Festival follows in this tradition of rep, and we load, tech, and perform two full productions on a very tight time schedule."¹¹ It is a difficult process that the festival achieves by working with the technical staff at Miller Outdoor Theatre like a well-oiled machine.



Cissy Segall Davis has been managing director at Miller Outdoor Theatre since 2008.

Photo by Lynne Lane.

The festival begins the last week of July and runs through early August. Performances typically start at 8:15 p.m., when the sun starts to set and the heat begins to fade, the stage lights rise, and a summer breeze floats over the hill. This timetable also allows the company to finish the performance before the area's sound ordinances take effect at 11:00 p.m.

This outdoor experience has made Shakespeare accessible and exciting for people from all generations who might not attend a formal indoor production. For example, Stevenson recalled bringing her children to the festival and how they laid on a blanket, rolled down the hill, and just had fun even if they were not necessarily paying attention to Shakespeare's work on the stage. Davis observed, "It's that magic moment when [a] spark comes to that child," a spark that might change their life. That kind of positive experience illustrates how fun acting and theatre can be, which is important because young people will be the ones to carry on the legacy of Shakespeare and the Houston Shakespeare Festival in the future.¹⁵

Perhaps What Glistens May Be Gold

Sidney Berger retired from the festival in 2007 and from teaching in 2010. At the time, he reflected on his work with the festival, saying, "It's been a love affair of 35 years and Shakespeare enriches me. Every time I work on his plays,



Dr. Robert Shimko is the fourth and current director of the University of Houston School of Theatre & Dance and executive director of the Houston Shakespeare Festival.

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston School of Theatre & Dance.

they enrich me as a human being and an artist.” He passed away on February 15, 2013, but the legacy he left the city is alive and well in the festival he founded.¹⁶

Traditionally, the director of the University of Houston School of Theatre & Dance also serves as the executive director of the Houston Shakespeare Festival. Those who have held that position since Berger’s retirement include Steven Wallace (2008-13), Jim Johnson (2014-16), and Robert Shimko, who took the helm in 2016. Shimko is also the festival’s literary director and head of the university’s BFA



Andrew Love as Romeo and Jessica Boone as Juliet in the 2007 production.

Photo courtesy of Houston Shakespeare Festival.



The Houston Shakespeare Festival’s founder, Dr. Sidney Berger, center, had a passion for Shakespeare that enriched the lives of Houstonians.

Photo courtesy of UH Theatre Department.

program in Playwriting and Dramaturgy. Since 2015, Jack Young has served as the Houston Shakespeare Festival’s artistic director and head of UH’s professional actor training program, as well as a professor of Acting and Movement.¹⁷

At the heart of the festival is a love – a love for the works of William Shakespeare – but so is the desire to enrich the community. Executive director Dr. Robert Shimko reflects on the festival’s contribution to Houstonians: “I see HSF as a public good, not unlike a city library. Just as anyone should be able to check out a book for free, I think people ought to be able to see professionally produced theatre for free because it benefits us all to have more exposure to great works of art.”¹⁸ Staged each summer in partnership between the University of Houston and Miller Outdoor Theatre, the Houston Shakespeare Festival is a unique event in a distinctive venue, unrivaled anywhere in the country. □

Andrew Tello is a senior at the University of Houston pursuing a double major in history and English. He plans to graduate in 2022 and attend graduate school. A lover of the written word, world history, and all things peppermint, he dreams of writing more books than there are stars in the night’s sky.