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*Darius de Haas, Shaina Taub, Naomi Plerre, and the company of "As You Like It" at the Delacorte Theatre. (Photo by Joan Marcus)*

# Why Keep Doing Shakespeare? Maybe That's the Wrong Question

*From the Public Works 'As You Like It' to upstart crowd's 'King John' at Oregon Shakes to 'Mother Lear' at Brooklyn Botanic Garden, the Bard remains powerful currency; it's how it's spent that matters.*

**BY ROB WEINERT-KENDT**

**Does the American theatre have a Shakespeare problem?** As I write this, the nation's theatre season listings for 2022-23 [are pouring in](#), and as ever there are plenty of familiar titles from the Bard on the calendar, and not just at the 22 of TCG's current 579 member theatres who have [Shakespeare in their names](#) (that's not including the Public Theater, which mostly only uses its former New York Shakespeare Festival brand on [tax filings](#) but whose DNA is as intertwined with Shakespeare, I would argue, as is London's National Theatre).

Of course, my question assumes that a proliferation of Shakespeare is somehow in itself a problem: surfeit rather than happy abundance; glut, not glory.

This was on my mind as I listened to Brian James Polak's excellent [Subtext podcast conversation with Madeline Sayet](#), who as a Mohegan Shakespeare scholar voices a familiar conundrum faced by people of color who've fallen sincerely in love with the Bard's work, only to realize they aren't always welcome in it, at least according to tradition. These same folks begin to question, as Sayet does, the outsized weight Shakespeare's plays are given in the academic canon and in professional productions at all levels, and the way they're often wielded as a universal standard of theatrical and linguistic excellence, very often implicitly or explicitly in diminishing contrast to the work and aesthetics of women and non-Europeans. As Sayet puts it succinctly, "The arc of my relationship with Shakespeare is so much from it being a thing that brings me joy to a thing that gives me sort of authority, then to a thing that I start to question."

I think back to a conversation I had [with the great actor Derrick Lee Weeden](#), whose Othello at Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 1999 was definitive for me, and who recalled,

“For years, as a younger actor, I read reviews by people like John Simon that we, African-Americans, shouldn’t be doing Shakespeare. My sense of dealing with that is to say, Hey, we have a tradition. My mother speaks English in a wonderful way; you hear phrases that are directly Shakespearean phrases, the semantics and everything. That’s what my ear hears.” Or to a more recent conversation with Carl Cofield, chair of grad acting at NYU Tisch, in which [he recalled that his way into Shakespeare](#) was to hear the Bard’s verse as a kind of hip-hop (and vice versa); or one with [Debra Ann Byrd](#), artistic director of Arizona’s Southwest Shakespeare, who said that a large part of her comfort with Shakespeare’s language comes from hearing the language of the King James Bible in Black churches.

Laurie Woolery, director of the Public Theater’s [Public Works program](#), which stages (mostly) Shakespeare adaptations on Central Park’s Delacorte Stage featuring a mix of Equity actors and non-professional community members, told me recently that her route into this canon, as a Latina who had been made to feel this work wasn’t for her, and that she was “not smart enough” for Shakespeare, was chiefly through the TV films the BBC made in the 1970s and ’80s, which she checked out from the UCLA library when she was a student there. (Her heartening, jubilant Public Works adaptation of *As You Like It* with songwriter Shaina Taub is now [at the Delacorte through Sept. 11.](#))

I consider it an unalloyed good that within my lifetime, folks traditionally excluded from Shakespeare performance and production have heartily and fully claimed his work as their own, and have been just as heartily embraced by audiences and critics, proving beyond doubt that these plays can speak through them, and more importantly, that *they* can speak through these plays in their own distinctive voices, from Raul Julia’s Petruchio to Randall Duk Kim’s Hamlet, from Lisa Wolpe’s Shylock to Danielle Brooks’s Beatrice.

But should they have to? Should Shakespeare’s plays remain the bar you must clear to be considered theatre literate? It’s a huge question, and one answer, paradoxically enough, can be found in new productions of his work, some of which take liberties with the text, others which keep the text intact but mess critically and creatively with point of view and context, and all of which essentially take his work for granted—both in the sense that, sure, Shakespeare is foundational, indispensable even, and in the sense that yeah, he’s just there, like, whatever.





*The company of upstart crow collective's "Bring Down the House," a co-production with Seattle Shakespeare Festival in 2017.*

This became clear in my conversation with [Rosa Joshi](#), one of the co-founders of [upstart crow collective](#), a Seattle-based company that stages classical works with all women and non-binary casts of diverse backgrounds, whose production of Shakespeare's seldom-performed *King John* just started performances at [Oregon Shakespeare Festival](#). We were talking about how, for all her love of Western classics, she has had to "unlearn" a lot of the ways white instructors have taught them to her over the years, and that while classical work inarguably requires craft and rigor, that craft can take many forms and sounds, not to mention genders, body types, and cultural backgrounds.

"For me it's really important to approach the work knowing that it takes skill and craft, but then to have a healthy irreverence about it—not to put it up on a pedestal," said Joshi. Hand in hand with a lack of preciousness about the text, she added, goes a kind of irreverence toward oneself: "You also have to have the humility to know that this work will live on beyond your production. There's no ideal *King John*; we're doing this version for this audience now."

Of course, most audiences don't have an ideal *King John* in their head at all, as they've never seen nor read this knotty drama of succession and betrayal—what Joshi calls one of

Shakespeare's "political war" plays, in contrast with the more common term "history play," admittedly quite a misleading descriptor for the Bard's heavily embroidered, editorializing dramas of English royalty. This lack of familiarity is one reason upstart crow took this play on as [their inaugural project back in 2006](#); they also anthologized the little-seen *Henry VI* plays as *Bring Down the House*, whose 2020 run at OSF was foreshortened by COVID. Audiences don't bring as much "baggage" to less familiar plays, she said, "like, 'What are they doing to *Hamlet*?' It gives us a little bit more leeway. We're also just really fascinated by these plays."

Indeed, Joshi makes a strong case for the contemporary relevance of *King John*'s tale of naked, strategic machinations among leaders and their back-stabbing would-be successors. Like many plays in this vein, these are dramas about power and who, if anyone, deserves it and why. The way upstart crow stages this work is also about power and who deserves it: They keep the text intact (with trims), but deliver it via bodies whose distance from the roles as they were written makes its own statement on gender, patriarchy, and power.

"By having those bodies onstage, how do we see the patriarchy exposed?" Joshi said. "We often say we're not performing in drag. But you become aware of how gender is performed, and look at male behavior that otherwise might seem very normal, and ask, why do men behave that way? We're making room for people who have been marginalized, letting them own the space, and saying, these stories can be about us if we bring ourselves to them. We are occupying these classics, literally, with our bodies."

On the question of the outsized space Shakespeare takes up, and the pedestal his work is often placed on, Joshi made a distinction. "Saying this work *can* be for you is very different from saying it *must* be for you. If it doesn't speak to you, there shouldn't be elitism about it—that if you don't understand it, there's something wrong with you. But as someone who loves classical work, to tell me I don't have a place in it is as harmful as being forced to do it."



Courtney Walsh in “Mother Lear” at Brooklyn Botanic Garden. (Photo by Lauren Matley)

**There’s another, possibly complementary way to think of Shakespeare’s plays, especially the better known ones:** as narrative scaffolding. As with many a repurposed myth or fairy tale, familiarity is the currency that buys the license to play—indeed, one can often find more freedom within a familiar story than in a new play in which everything must be introduced and explained.

For the Bay Area-based company [We Players](#), Shakespeare has provided pretext as much as text: They have staged a *Hamlet* on Alcatraz, a *Macbeth* at Fort Point, a *Julius Caesar* at the Music Concourse in Golden Gate Park. Their newest work, *Mother Lear*, which played earlier this month at a San Francisco park and is now [running at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden through Sunday, Aug. 28](#), is a two-character piece in which an aging scholar with dementia communicates to her middle-aged daughter exclusively via the text of *King Lear*.

“The piece was inspired by my own experience with my grandmother, who had dementia for 10 years,” said Ava Roy, who founded We Players and who developed *Mother Lear* with her co-star, Courtney Walsh. Roy recalled that her grandmother “lost English before she lost Italian, and lost words altogether before she lost music. That’s pretty common, that people are left with music even after they no longer have access to language.”

Shakespeare's text, of course, is its own kind of music, and that is how it functions for the aging scholar and her daughter, not coincidentally named Cordelia: as a lingua franca and a life raft they can both cling to when all other words abandon them. Though the roughly hour-long play doesn't contain the full text or story of *King Lear*, it does draw a direct line between the play's depiction of parent-child communication and those who deal with memory care for aging parents. Roy said that, while *Mother Lear* is conceived to be modular and movable and is not tailored specifically to Brooklyn Botanic Garden, she and her associate producer Britt Lauer were overjoyed to learn that the Garden has programming for caregivers whose patients are dealing with dementia, including [memory walks](#). At Wednesday night's preview performance, she said that half the audience for *Mother Lear* would be caregivers associated with the Garden's memory care program. Roy added enthusiastically, "There's a wonderful woman, Joanne D'Auria, who has my alternative dream job: She's a horticultural therapist."

The text of *Mother Lear*, Roy said, is about 90 percent Shakespeare, with the rest comprising some contemporary side conversations around the mother-daughter situation. And what there is of *King Lear* is mostly an embroidery of what resonates with these two characters' relationship. Writing the play, as Roy described it, sounds almost like a flipping through a Rolodex.

"Everything is in Shakespeare," said Roy. "So it was such a joy to set out to say, 'Well, what do we want to say in the scene as we're writing the piece?' We'd look for it, and it was all there. It almost began to seem like magic." That ties back to one of the play's themes, of course: that what we're left with, the common ground that binds us to ourselves and to each other, is often stories that have been handed down. As Roy put it, "It's often the music or poetry of great artists who've come before us who can support us when our own words fail, when we lack the language."

Public Works' Laurie Woolery echoed much of this when she talked to me about why Shakespeare plays make a sound foundation for the expansive populist pageantry of Public Works, which began in 2013 with founder [Lear deBessonnet](#)'s staging of *The Tempest* and has since blossomed into a year-round program involving the Public's long-term relationships with [eight social service organizations](#) around the city, and which culminates in free summer performances at the Delacorte. One of the special joys of Public Works productions is that you will see a mix of military veterans, formerly incarcerated folks,



retirees from Brownsville, domestic workers from all five boroughs, and children chiefly from under-resourced neighborhoods, acting, dancing, and singing alongside Broadway veterans like Ato Blankson-Wood and Rebecca Naomi Jones. This links directly back to Woolery's years working with Cornerstone Theater Company, the seminal community-building powerhouse that was similarly *formative of my own sensibility*. Though Cornerstone also branched out beautifully to commission new work (and tailor old work to local settings), when they looked for large-cast pageantry, they often turned to the Bard, as with their national bridge show in 1991, *a take on The Winter's Tale*.

And at the theatre founded by *Joe Papp*, what other theatrical texts besides Shakespeare's comedies and romances could suffice to bring all these walks of humanity together for an evening's entertainment in the park? (This isn't entirely a rhetorical question; Woolery sounded very open to ideas outside of Shakespeare, pointing out that even within the Bard's canon, the number of plays that can really justify casts of dozens—the current *As You Like It* has more than 70 performers on the Delacorte stage each night—isn't large.) Turning Shakespeare's work into musical theatre is, after all, its own storied tradition, from Rodgers and Hart's *The Boys From Syracuse* to Galt McDermot and John Guare's rollicking *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.



Laurie Woolery. (Photo by Tammy Shell)

“They’re really good plays, so to adapt them and attach music to them—it kind of is a shortcut,” said Woolery. “You know the play is going to work dramaturgically, and then your job is to not get in the way of the storytelling.” And these aren’t mere narrative shells



to be filled: “He writes about the human condition—about large emotions and injustice, love and violence and betrayal and vengeance and isolation and separation and lost families and reunification and healing and forgiveness. All the things that we’re all still dealing with now. To be able to bring those into 2022 feels like—well, a great night at the theatre.”

I can testify to this personally: I relished deBessonnet’s early efforts with Todd Almond on *The Tempest*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *The Odyssey*. The two made an engagingly sweet-and-sour pair, Almond’s often jaundiced commentary blending with deBessonnet’s openhearted, demotic approach, and from the start the community casting gave me bracing, entirely welcome Cornerstone flashbacks. Then composer Shaina Taub brought her wry but bubbly genius to *Twelfth Night*, adapted with Kwame Kwei-Armeh, and then to *As You Like It*, with Woolery, which on my second viewing last week feels like a triumphant realization of all that Public Works aspires to do, and demonstrably does.

I first saw it in 2017 and took along my 8-year-old son, hoping to expose him to his first Shakespeare in a fun, user-friendly version. I enjoyed it well enough, but my experience was a bit colored by his relative indifference; I think he was just too young, and definitely too romance-averse, for a full embrace. He’s 13 now, and when I took him back to see the new staging recently, he was all in, delighted both by the Shakespearean complications and by Taub’s songs, which include a boy-band parody, a horny hoedown, and a stunning “I want” song for Orlando, “The Man I’m Supposed to Be,” nailed with absolute conviction by Blankson-Wood. (My son insisted I track down a recording online, which [does exist with Taub singing all the parts](#); a full cast album is also apparently in the works.)

There’s something about seeing new generations spark to this work, on both sides of the footlights. To watch my son delight, not just in a purported “classic” but at the undeniable talents of young performers who look and talk more like New York City than Elizabethan England, indeed to have one of his first Shakespeare experiences be not only lavishly produced but matter-of-factly multiracial and queer (here Touchstone pursues Andy, not Audrey, and Sylvia is a shepherdess with the hots for Phebe), helps explain my own answer to the question of whether Shakespeare is worth doing, which is: It’s not really the right question. The work attributed to a single Elizabethan poet-dramatist has come to mean something much more than the mere scribblings of one historical person, and indeed it no longer belongs, if it ever really did, either to him or to the elitist Western tradition and the

self-proclaimed experts who have deified him and would encase him in glass if they could. With respect, fuck that. Shakespeare belongs to us all, not the other way around.

And the things that belong us, we are free to find new ways to use. As Karen Daniels, the new artistic director of D.C.'s Folger Theatre and Library, told my colleague J.R. Pierce [last year](#), "There's a lot of power in the word Shakespeare. I don't always know if it's deserved, but it's there. So let's work with it...We have a unique opportunity to make him whatever we want going forward. I feel like we could take the strengths of Shakespeare, but use them as a jumping-off point to really build our own bards, and to give him some company. He's been lonely and cold up there for a while."

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