

FORCE OF WILL

ARTICLE AND INTERVIEWS BY CHARLES NEY



"Age cannot wither her": Dan Snook and Sara Surrey in *Antony and Cleopatra*, directed by Darko Tresnjak at California's Old Globe.

Tickets are selling like hotcakes at America's festival theatres—
whose leaders, it turns out, are counting on our love affair
with **W.S.** to last indefinitely

IS THERE TOO MUCH SHAKESPEARE ON AMERICAN STAGES?

Not enough? How are companies devoted to his works interpreting the plays? And what do these theatres' leaders see in the cards for the future of their special repertory?

These are some of the questions I had in mind when I set out last May, bolstered by a grant from Texas State University, to visit 10 Shakespeare theatres scattered across the American landscape. Along the way I saw 25 productions and talked to dozens of directors, dramaturgs, artistic directors and other theatre staff.

In addition, I attended the Shakespeare Theatre Association of America's annual conference in Vancouver, B.C., where I talked to still more artistic directors and managers. The theme of the conference was "Roots to the Future: A Retreat Forward," and its participants—representing 91 STAA member theatres and another 25 associate members—discussed everything from their companies' original missions to projections of where these theatres might be headed in the next several years.

There were only a handful of Shakespeare festival theatres when the U.S. resident theatre movement began in earnest in the early 1960s. Now there are more than 170, representing an incredible diversity not only in geographic location but also in resources, audience composition and programming. Annual budgets range from \$25,000 to over \$20 million annually. Some organizations only mount one production a summer. Some maintain an exclusively Shakespearean repertoire, while others include a range of classics, musicals, even the latest global fare, in extensive seasons.

There is a dizzying array of approaches and contexts as well. At Shenandoah Shakespeare's Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton, Va., audiences see Shakespeare performed indoors using simulated lighting and other original practices from the 16th century. Similarly devoted to original practices, Richmond Shakespeare Festival performs in a 500-year-old Tudor house, disassembled in England, shipped over and reassembled in Virginia.

At the other end of the spectrum are innovators and challengers of "tradition," such as New York City's Judith Shakespeare Company, where artistic director Joanne Zipay subjects the plays to gender explorations, with women comprising at least 50 percent of every cast. Co-productions are important at theatres like the Idaho Shakespeare Festival and Cleveland's Great Lakes Theater Festival. There is even a theatre that performs English-Russian bilingual Shakespeare—the Foothill Theatre/Sierra Shakespeare Festival in Nevada City, Calif. An actor-centered approach is favored at places like Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, Mass.

The founding of new companies does not seem to have slowed in recent years. Theatres such as Chesapeake Shakespeare Company of Baltimore, Md., Shakespeare Ventures in Fairfield, Conn., and Missouri's Shakespeare Festival of St. Louis are less than five years old. These upstarts join the ranks of the older pioneers: Ashland's Oregon Shakespeare Festival is celebrating its 70th anniversary; San Diego's Old Globe was also founded in 1935; the New York Shakespeare Festival dates to 1954, Colorado Shakespeare to 1958 and the Utah Shakespearean Festival to 1961.

Physical settings vary. Several festivals are located on college campuses, with differing relationships to the university. Some have substantial real estate holdings and are major regional theatre centers; others, like the festival entities at New York's Public Theater and San Diego's Old Globe, are part of a larger not-for-profit theatre organization.

In spite of this diversity, I discerned a similar tone in the tragedies and histories pro-



FRED C. ADAMS and R. SCOTT PHILLIPS, founding executive producer and managing director, Utah Shakespearean Festival, Cedar City

FRED C. ADAMS

What is your biggest challenge today?



R. SCOTT PHILLIPS

PHILLIPS: The biggest threat to any company like this is the cost of supporting the sheer number of actors it takes to do Shakespeare. That's why more and more plays are being done with five or six characters.

ADAMS: It's the new Shakespeare fad. Twenty years ago, it was setting Shakespeare on a cruise liner. Now it's, "What's the fewest number of people we can use and get away with it?"

So what are some of your solutions for sustaining yourselves financially?

PHILLIPS: We have so many audience members asking for musicals as part of the total experience, and there's the ability to increase our revenues by doing that.

ADAMS: If you dangle a musical and John Q. Public comes and hears about *Taming of the Shrew*, maybe he'll say, "Let's stay over and see that too."

PHILLIPS: Fred maintained from the very beginning that this company would not spend money that hadn't been made the previous year. Only twice in our 43-year history have we actually been in the red. Right now we have a budget just under \$6 million that we have to raise annually.

ADAMS: And we're not a subsidized theatre, despite being located on a campus.

PHILLIPS: In fact, we're working on ways—not to eliminate our role within the university—but to minimize it.

ADAMS: It's a difficult thing to have a \$6-million organization sitting in the middle of a campus. We're a great image-building and recruitment tool for them. But at the same time we're a bit of a worry to them.

How much of your budget is supported through ticket sales?

ADAMS: Slightly over 80 percent. We sell tickets a year ahead, which gives us lots of working capital. But that means we have to commit to next year's season before we even



"How long a time lies in one little word!"

David Conrad, left, Maria Kelly and Michael Earle in *Richard II* at the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, directed by Paul Mullins.

know how this one is going to go. Last year we printed 50,000 brochures, then yanked every one of them because we had to rethink our season. Last year's ticket sales were in the dumps, so instead of doing Molière's *School for Wives* this year, we ended up doing *Forever Plaid*. A major sell-out in some ways, you know? But we had to do it.

On the other hand, I don't want to bring in some television hot-shot just because he'll sell a lot of tickets. That's not the reason you bring an actor in. The audience loves them and buys tickets to see them. But the next year if you don't bring someone in who is even more known, the audiences won't come back. They're celebrity-shopping, not committed to the play.

What is the vision for the future?

PHILLIPS: We're in the middle of building the Utah Shakespearean Festival Centre for the Performing Arts through a \$52-million capital campaign. We hope that within 24 to 36 months we'll be breaking ground on a theatre. There will be a third theatre dedicated to staging new plays, for the "Shakespeares of tomorrow."

ADAMS: There will never be an American *Hamlet* if we don't start encouraging writers.



TIMOTHY BOND,
associate artistic director,
Oregon Shakespeare
Festival, Ashland

As a director, how do you approach Shakespeare?

I'm interested in intimate cross-cultural approaches to the text. The first show I directed was *Twelfth Night*, and we explored the Islamic setting of the play in Illyria. I think I was successful in creating that world through costuming and casting multiculturally. But after working through all the multicultural issues, ultimately we were still dealing with the interior of those characters and their relationships. That's what I came to understand very late in the process.

Still, the great interest that I have in American Shakespeare is reaching a multicultural audience. It doesn't matter if I set the play in one country or another. It is going to be peopled with enough of a variety of ethnicities and races that whoever comes to the play will see themselves in the world of the play—physically, on stage.

Why is that so important?

Because it seems to me that as you cast these classic plays in one race or another,



"Who is Sylvia?" John Hoogenakker, center, with the company of Illinois Shakespeare Festival's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, directed by Jessica Kubzansky.

duced across the country this past season. A *King John* in Chicago, a *Macbeth* in Washington, D.C., and Montgomery, Ala., a *Henry VI* cycle in Ashland, an *Antony & Cleopatra* in San Diego and Colorado, a *Titus Andronicus* in Montgomery, a *Richard II* in New Jersey—all seemed to aspire to encapsulate and comment on the political divide that currently plagues the country. Some of these productions had a cutting-edge sensibility; a couple of them were updated to recent time periods. But regardless of approach, the allusions to our present political landscape were inescapable: street posters and graffiti, turntables, crooked staircases and other scenic devices that telescoped political divisions; raked Plexiglass stages with fluorescent lights shining upward in starkly barren rooms; retracting tables magically appearing out of the floor and transforming a banquet into a corporate board meeting. The theatrical metaphors were bold and clear.

Comedies, always a major staple of Shakespearean fare, provided audiences a hearty release. Utah's *Taming of the Shrew* had an Elizabethan flair and was the best staging of the play I've ever seen; the Public Theater's *Much Ado About Nothing* in Central Park was smartly set in between the world wars in a remote Italy; Colorado's *The Comedy of Errors* hilariously transposed the play to Napoleonic New Orleans; and Illinois's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* took an anachronistic tack, skillfully interweaving period touches with contemporary detail.

Even though the economic climate for theatre has been difficult the last couple of years, a number of companies are planning to build new theatres, expand their complexes or renovate existing facilities. Festivals in Utah, New Jersey, Washington, D.C., and Colorado were in the middle of, or planning to initiate, capital campaigns for building expansion. Programming additions were on tap as well: San Diego's Old Globe was reconstituting its summer Shakespeare repertory after an absence of almost two decades; Utah and Oregon have been increasing their number of Actors' Equity Association contracts. Then there is the new National Endowment for the Arts initiative "Shakespeare in American Communities," which (in addition to sponsoring Alabama Shakespeare Festival's recent high-profile tour of U.S. military bases) is providing support for several companies to increase outreach programs to schools.

On the other side of the coin, everywhere I went I heard reports of reductions in artistic staff and unearned income support. Festivals in Alabama, Illinois and Colorado have experienced substantive government cutbacks. In that third state, for example, there have been significant decreases in state funding for the University of Colorado's system (a \$12-million cut) and at the Boulder campus's College of Arts & Sciences (\$1 million), prompting Colorado Shakespeare Festival producing artistic director Richard Devin to downsize last season's budget by \$100,000. Although I listened to many accounts of economic problems, one of the worst stories was from Alabama, where the state's former annual contribution of \$800,000 to the Alabama Shakespeare Festival has been cut to zero.

From New Jersey to Oregon, there are reports that even while attendance is high, season subscriptions are falling—mainly, many observers believe, because contemporary

audiences refuse to commit to tickets ahead of time. As Utah founding executive producer Fred Adams tells it, "Last year our box office looked at week-to-week sales, and 35 percent of all seats sold within a given week were bought within 48 hours of the performance. That's terrifying. Five years ago, 30–35 percent of our season was sold a year in advance. Now that number is down to about 18 percent."

Another challenge is that peopling Shakespeare's large-cast plays can be expensive, and many of the Shakespeare theatres I went to see are dependent upon liaisons with MFA training programs. MFA actors flesh out professional casts at Alabama Shakespeare Festival, the Old Globe, D.C.'s Shakespeare Theatre, Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, the Utah Shakespearean Festival, Colorado Shakespeare and Illinois Shakespeare—most of these, in fact, have training programs directly associated with the companies. Many go out to college campuses on an unofficial fall audition circuit, enticing the best talent.

Although burdened with present difficulties, most were hopeful about future prospects. Younger theatres tended to be concerned with their survival, while older organizations wondered who would lead them in the next stage of their history. Artistic directors puzzled over ways to create productions increasingly reflective of the fabric of this country. They voiced the need to recruit more diverse audiences and make the work more relevant to their communities. Artistic directors and managers wondered how to find time for returning to "vision" when the constant demands for producing a season consume their time.

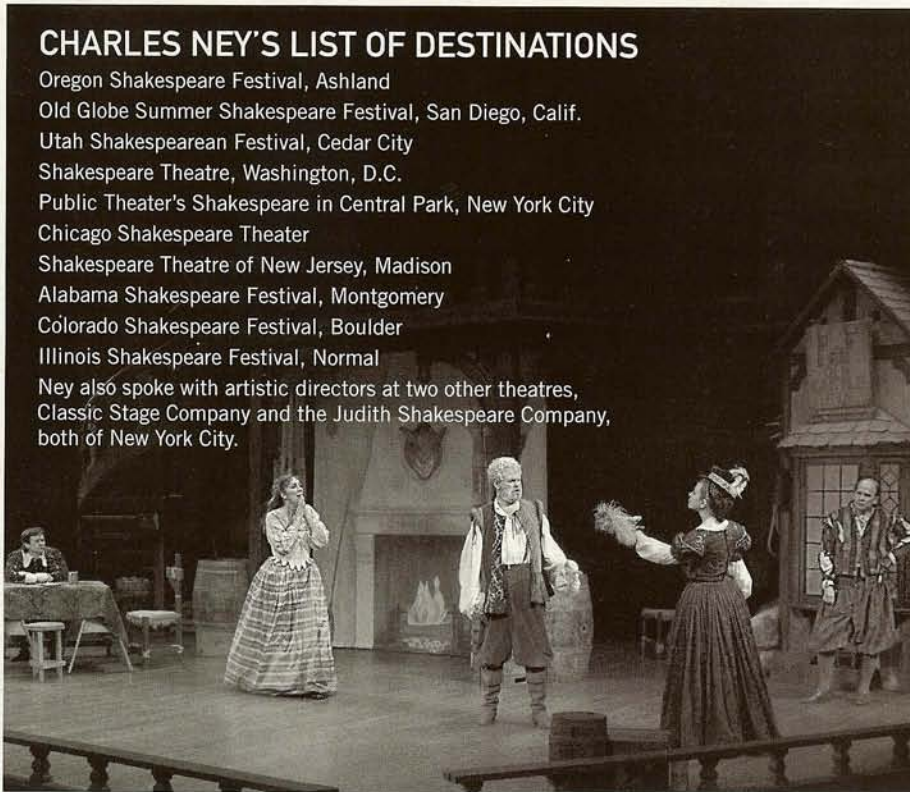
"I think you'll find that the Americans will soon be known for their Shakespeare in a way that the Brits used to be known for it 20 years ago," asserted Shakespeare & Company's Tina Packer, casting an experienced eye on the Bard's future. "I've seen a growing and a strengthening—it's like Americans are throwing off the shackles of the English hegemony. They're not afraid anymore. They're saying, 'We know. We love this playwright. We're doing him. And our voice is equally valid. And we do not have to sound like the British when we are doing it, and we do not have to think like the British when we're doing it.' The exchange is on a much more equal footing." **AT**

Charles Ney is the author of an upcoming book, Directing Shakespeare in America: 21st Century Perspectives. He is a professor at Texas State University—San Marcos.

CHARLES NEY'S LIST OF DESTINATIONS

Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland
 Old Globe Summer Shakespeare Festival, San Diego, Calif.
 Utah Shakespearean Festival, Cedar City
 Shakespeare Theatre, Washington, D.C.
 Public Theater's Shakespeare in Central Park, New York City
 Chicago Shakespeare Theater
 Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, Madison
 Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Montgomery
 Colorado Shakespeare Festival, Boulder
 Illinois Shakespeare Festival, Normal

Ney also spoke with artistic directors at two other theatres, Classic Stage Company and the Judith Shakespeare Company, both of New York City.



"Kiss me, Kate": *The Taming of the Shrew* at Utah Shakespearean Festival, directed by Henry Woronicz.

you are making a statement about that race being more human than another. You could say that the fact that the cast is entirely white doesn't exclude anyone, but I don't see it that way as a person of color. I see that I am not as human as you because I am not on that stage.

In my experience working with communities of color, I've seen that the language, the very name "Shakespeare," automatically makes them feel a production has no relevance to their lives. Finding excellent actors from different cultural groups who can embrace that language with their own specific rhythms and cultural sensibilities only enriches the work. The nature of those plays is that they're about the human condition. We are going to make sure that human looks like all of us.

I always point out that Shakespeare's theatre was called the Globe. He wrote his plays about many countries that he had never traveled to, and about people who weren't like him. We should people his plays the same way.

What are the challenges of multicultural casting?

Sometimes, by accident, directors will diversify by putting people of color in subservient roles: They're all the servants, or they're the soldiers. On the other hand, if you cast a king as a person of color and nobody else—that just doesn't quite play, because of the history of the way class and race works in this country. You may cast the right actor for the right role, but you can make a statement you didn't intend to. If you balance the diversity of the cast at enough different levels within the hierarchy of the play, I believe you erase any political issues around race and culture for those particular roles.

I call this "new-traditional" or just "inclusive" casting. We don't do "colorblind" productions. We don't use that term here. To me, "blind" means you can't see something. First of all, we can all see it. Second of all, I want you to see it.



BARBARA GAINES,
 artistic director, Chicago
 Shakespeare Theater

What do you love about Shakespeare?

With Shakespeare, it's all in there, and it keeps unfolding. If you had a 12-week rehearsal, it would keep unfolding. If it were a 20-year rehearsal period, you would never find it all. There is

nothing that is stationary in Shakespeare—nothing that is in cement. There are so many perspectives.

It sounds like you want to look at Shakespeare with today's eyes and produce it for contemporary audiences.

Absolutely. The only way I can work is to make the plays about *now*—they're about me and about you. And no matter where I put them in terms of history—what decade, what century—what's important is the human values that affect all of us now. But that's Shakespeare. Shakespeare is of today because he is so essentially human. None of the issues have changed. He didn't deal with nuclear mass destruction, of course, but almost every other facet of the life that you and I have to struggle through day to day is there in the canon.

The fact is that I don't have to make Shakespeare accessible—it is already, especially with really excellent actors. You can't go wrong. They said you could never have a Shakespeare theatre in this city, but we have made this one a success, because we have fabulous actors doing fabulous stories. CST does 630 performances a year. These theatres are always busy. We can perform two short Shakespeares a day—our 75-minute version of the plays—and then we have main-stage shows at night. In 2004 our short production was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—we'd have a thousand kids in, and then we'd do an evening performance of *King John*. That's a lot of people—about 1,500 people a day, four days a week. There are not enough seats for the demand.

Does it have to do with the building here?

Yes. Location, location, location. Five million people visited the Navy Pier during June, July and August. Five million! We did *Peter Pan* this past summer, plus *Second City* was upstairs doing their musical *Romeo and Juliet*, which is hilarious, and then we had *Midsummer* in the mornings. And we brought the Abbey Theatre from Ireland for what we call "World Stage." Remember, four years ago we're doing three plays a year. Now we're doing 11 or 12. In four years we've gone from a \$2.5-million budget to around \$12 million. We have outgrown a lot of clothing and a lot of systems along the way.



MICHAEL KAHN,
artistic director, the
Shakespeare Theatre,
Washington, D.C.

How has the Shakespeare



"Mad world! mad kings! mad composition!" Greg Vinkler in *King John* at Chicago Shakespeare Theater, directed by Barbara Gaines.

Theatre changed over the years you've been there?

Well, you know, 16 years ago when I took it over it was a mom-and-pop organization, the Folger, and it was about to close. So everything has changed! The staff, the number of plays we do, the expansion of what a classical repertory is, our education and outreach programs, free Shakespeare for 4,000 people a night in Rock Creek Park. We've gone from 3,000 subscribers to more than 16,000. We had a budget of \$1.5 million. Now our budget is \$12 million.

We're about to build a second theatre, almost twice the size of the current one. We will be able to introduce less familiar plays more often because we'll have two spaces. We'll also be presenting other arts—music and dance—in the new complex, which will be called the Harmon Art Center.

Is Shakespeare getting more difficult to do as the country becomes more sophisticated?

No, I think it's getting more difficult as the country becomes less interested in language as a vehicle for communication. I'm very fortunate here in Washington: I have an audience that actually wants to go to the theatre, wants to be challenged, wants to listen, wants to think. But I see in my students at Juilliard that attention spans are getting shorter. Actors are being influenced by television and the movies. Even some critics' ears are becoming more attuned to television. That can really be detrimental to Shakespeare.

On the other hand, I am very heartened by the success of Shakespeare companies all over the country. These plays offer the audience an experience intellectually, aurally, visually, emotionally and, hell, viscerally that they aren't getting from more popular entertainment—and which, whether they know it or not, they do miss.

I honestly believe if audiences don't understand the play it's not their fault. It's not their fault because they didn't go to college or they didn't read it yesterday. It's our fault; we've done something to get in the way of the communication. It's not about spelling it out. It's about making sure that each moment is fully done and leads to the next.



BONNIE MONTE, artistic director,
Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, Madison

Describe your approach to directing Shakespeare.

I'm kind of in rebellion against the more radical, masturbatory, end-of-post-modernism Shakespearean approaches—some of which just angers me, because it has nothing to do with the story. By the same token, I have rebelled against what I call a museum-piece style, what's generally thought of as traditional. I don't believe the word "traditional" should even be used, because there has never been a traditional way of presenting Shakespeare. It has changed from generation to generation.



"So foul and fair a day I have not seen": Patrick Page and Kelly McGillis in *Macbeth*, directed by Michael Kahn at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C.

This theatre was probably more known for that kind of museum-piece Shakespeare presentation, which I wanted no part of. Nor did I want to do the kind of deconstruction of Shakespeare that took it so far out that it was no longer Shakespeare. What began to interest me more than anything else were directors who shared the aesthetic that I had somehow intuitively felt. The stories are so archetypal; most of them are not perfect stories structurally, but that doesn't matter—they are brilliantly compelling stories. What is most interesting about these tales about humanity is that they are overlaid with amazing poetry. In line with that are hidden layers of rich, complex images. So the deeper you dig, it just gets richer and richer and richer. All the inspiration you need to create the visual landscapes for the play—the worlds of the play—are in those images. Here we tend to lean toward creating metaphorical kind of worlds in which these plays can reside—worlds that are inspired by the imagery in the text. By "world" or "landscape," I mean everything about the play—the costumes, the sets, the lights, the sound design, the props, whatever. We are both training directors in this way of thinking and seeking them out.

What is your audience composition age-wise?

My 18-to-25-year-old audience is pretty substantial. I don't know a lot of theatres that can say that. I think that when we looked at last year's survey, almost a quarter of them were 18 to 25, a quarter were 25 to 45, another quarter were 45 to 60, and the final quarter were 60 and above.

Your ticket prices cover 50 percent of the costs?

Fifty-one. Fifty-one percent is earned, which is great. It's pretty healthy, although we'd like it to be a little more. Out of 49 percent contributed income, the biggest chunk is coming from individuals, which is great. That's telling you that the people like your work. Foundations are the next largest chunk, in part because they see we are a very big-picture company. We are not just consumed with what is happening today, or with the flavors of the week. Our desire is to create a populace that wants theatre—that wants Shakespeare.

What are your dreams for the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey?

I dream of the day when we have made Shakespeare so popular that you can't get a ticket. And then I'll have to build another theatre.

The biggest organizational problem for us now is that we've grown so rapidly and so well that it has necessitated a decentralization. So we are all over the place. There's a huge chunk of us four towns away in our shop. Housing is all over. There's going to be a new office annex downtown, because we're maxed out up here. All that is starting to impede our efficiency in our daily operations. So the big dream right now is to find a location very close that is almost going to become like an artist colony, where our classes, our rehearsals, all of our educa-

tion programs, our shop, our events, our offices, everything is centralized in a campus. We want to create this kind of wonderful Camelot that is ours.



TINA PACKER,
artistic director,
Shakespeare & Company,
Lenox, Mass.

What are the inherent strengths of a theatre company devoted to Shakespeare?

Shakespeare & Company recently did a new play about Lichtenstein and Bertrand Russell. It came directly out of the practice, through doing Shakespeare's plays, of being unafraid of the big thoughts, the long arias and the down-and-dirty battles. Doing Shakespeare ultimately gives you such confidence.

When people go to the theatre, and especially to Shakespeare, they're coming together to listen to a debate—this power structure vs. that power structure, this kind of person vs. that kind of person. In Shakespeare's time, audiences stormed out and continued to argue about what the play was all about. This is one of the reasons the Puritans were always trying to shut down the bloody things. It is an extraordinary moment when people start thinking, "I can live a life that I design for myself, not a life that is designed for me." Do you see what a huge shift that is? And Shakespeare plays and playhouses generate that thinking.

What trends do you see in American Shakespeare?

It's so different from what it was a quarter of a century ago. In these 25 years, not only has the number of Shakespeare companies in the country grown exponentially, but we have started talking to one another. We exchange knowledge all the time. Those of us who work outdoors meet with those who do indoor Shakespeare. Those of us who belong to university departments meet with those who have nothing to do with any academic institution. We're finding ways to work with one another that strengthen everything that we do. The Shakespeare Theatre Association is absolutely part of this. The fact that Oregon has started to offer itself as a map for young companies—such generous spirit! And that Utah has offered its resources. It's crucial, it's keen. An organization like Shakespeare & Company,

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which isn't as old as either of those companies but has been around the block, can be a resource as well.



JOANNE ZIPAY,
artistic director, **Judith Shakespeare Company,**
New York City

Where does your company perform?

We don't have a permanent stage. For a lot of Off-Off-Broadway theatres, that's the norm, because space is so horribly expensive. We produce one full production and one "unplugged" production—an elaborate staged reading—so we are only rehearsing

and performing for 8–10 weeks. We try to stay in Midtown as much as possible.

What's your mission statement?

It's quite simple: "Bringing Shakespeare's language to life with clarity and vitality, while expanding the presence of women in classical theatre." While we're thought of as a company offering opportunities for women, the first purpose is dramaturgical. We do cast women and men nontraditionally, but that has to start with a good look at the play. I'm extremely conscious of how gender operates in Shakespeare, and I'm interested in pushing the boundaries of gender on both sides.

We've gone from being conservative to much more risky. I did a gender-reversed *Julius Caesar*. That was fascinating, men walking behind, playing the wives. You get to a scene in which a wife is played by a husband—you hear it differently. You don't take anything for granted.

Richard III, in June 2004, was our first gender-blind production. We cast with a commitment to women in the title roles. But I had a male Clarence walk in the door, and I said, "This is my Clarence right here!" I wanted a man to play Margaret; I couldn't find that. You start with an idea, but it's got to evolve into, "Who's best for each role?"

Can you talk more about your "unplugged" format?

It's a quick and dirty way to get Shakespeare on its feet. It enabled us to do the entire history cycle in less than three years. We have about 50 hours of rehearsal, and we do basic costume elements—usually black and white—minimal fight choreography, live music. We cover the actors' books with black contact paper. You see the actors dependent on the language in a way that they're not necessarily in a full production. There seems to be a great discovery together between the actors and the audience—the text being discovered even as it's being spoken.

What are you doing next year?

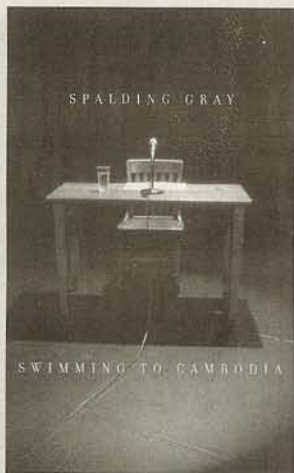
We're taking some time off. We've been going for nine years and a lot of development and infrastructure work hasn't been done because the company's been living from production to production. I'm putting together a board of directors to look into funding. We worked under the umbrella of a fiscal conduit for a number of years, but they went under in 2002.

For our 10th anniversary season, I would like to do a festival in New York of women's classical theatre. There are all-woman companies in L.A., San Francisco, North Carolina. Here in New York there are companies doing all kinds of gender-bender work. I think it would be wonderful to get those companies together and say, "Look, this is a movement happening in different places in our country." **AT**

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