A Personal Perspective on Original Practice, by Jeff Watkins

I am a fortunate man.

As a teenager I came to the world of performance through an informal apprenticeship to my father who happened to have spent many years supporting himself and his family as a professional magician. Self-taught, he had used magic to put himself through college in the late 1930's. He had four children and he used to tell us stories of how he hitchhiked to school and then worked long hours at odd jobs to make money so he could take our mother to the movies.

He said that standing out on that windy Texas highway each Monday, Tuesday and Friday, he would dream of owning a car. He later said that on one such day he determined that it would be one of his life's ambitions to buy a car and provide a college education for each of his own children. Of course he was assuming that the woman he was dating would ultimately say yes to marriage and that they would indeed have children.

I am the youngest of my father's four children, born and raised in the 1950's. He did indeed give me a 1972 Volkswagen beetle and a college education. He also taught me how to shave a deck of cards, time a joke, and the gentle art of bovine persuasion (slang: bamboozle, playfully deceive, or . . . bullsh*t). Such things are the stock and trade of the professional magician. And such things are valuable in and of themselves, but for me, their value was greatly magnified by what I didn't learn in college.

Let me explain. I graduated from a good university with an excellent theater program. The program included classes in set design, properties, lights, costumes, creative process, playwriting, acting and directing. But through an odd turn of events, there was no Shakespeare.

The acting portion of my training consisted of classes in various acting styles: Greek, Roman, Medieval, and Restoration. When I asked my teacher "Why no Shakespeare?", the reply was that if I mastered the others, Shakespeare would be easy. I thought it was a cop-out. I still do. But in retrospect, it was also one of the best things that could have happened to me. Thinking back, it's as if I went into the world to build a life in the theater, except unlike most young people in my situation, there was a hole where the Shakespeare should have been.

That coupled with the lean years of my career when I actually fed myself by doing magic tricks on big-city streets for total strangers have led me to embrace an approach to Shakespeare's plays that is radically different from most other American theater artists whose performance training did not include a hunger penalty for failing to connect with an audience.

You see the art of magic and the art of theater each depend upon a process of shared revelation. As a street performer it became apparent very quickly that if I did not properly lay the groundwork necessary to set up an illusion, there was no revelation. And without revelation, there was no money. Thus the cause and effect relationship of my performance and what went into my stomach was clearly established very early on.

By contrast, the vast majority of modern Shakespeare is not dependent on its audience for survival. Certainly on the professional level, American Shakespeare is heavily subsidized by universities, foundations, sponsorships, and the philanthropic support of the very rich. Moreover, directors,

designers and performers are often trained in a vacuum where real consequences for arrogance, elitism, and excessive cleverness simply do not exist.

It didn't happen overnight, but in today's world, the contract between actor and audience has been diluted to the point that Shakespeare in performance is virtually meaningless to most Americans. Through a process that took less than a century, the conscious connection of a whole people to this incredibly vibrant part of our cultural DNA has been lost, misplaced, or usurped by other art forms.

At least that was my judgment after several encounters with Shakespeare productions in 1970's America. Somehow, even as I sensed its power, any fundamental emotional connection to the language was lost to me. As my investigation into the forces that shaped these performances began, I discovered that for the most part, Shakespeare productions put on by American universities—and by extension—American professional companies, were heavily influenced by the work of British directors like Peter Brook and Jonathan Miller in the 1960's.

It seems they had set out to deconstruct and destroy a Victorian tradition of Shakespeare that had reigned in Britain for more than a hundred years. Since Shakespeare is hardly Victorian in its world-view and since that tradition by nature was restrictive and inflexible it seems reasonable that the British had to blow it up in order to discover what Shakespeare might mean for them in the modern age. That's fine for the British but what about Americans? We had no Victorian tradition of Shakespeare against which to rebel. From what I can tell, we merely gazed across the pond and, being good second-country citizens, copied what the British were doing. Thus, Americans were aping an artistic rebellion against an established tradition we didn't even have. "Where is the American tradition of Shakespeare?" I asked out loud. Not hearing any satisfactory answers, I set out to discover what it meant for me personally.

I would like to say that through a series of incisive intellectual observations and unbending scholarship I came to be a part of a new movement in American Shakespeare but in truth it was economic necessity that drove me to "Original Practice".

When a young company is starting out—as I was with my own fledgling troupe in 1985—and they can't afford anything but the text, sometimes that is the most riveting Shakespeare imaginable. I know that's how I felt about those early productions we cobbled together under difficult circumstances. So much so, that as my company grew and greater resources started to come on line, I consciously questioned the basic assumptions that go in to making plays in the 20th Century. Ultimately, my conclusion was that the initial work we had done from the depths of poverty was indeed very exciting. I didn't see how a conceptual framework or lavish sets and costumes would improve on that. Plus, with what we saved on costumes and sets, we all made a bit more money as actors, too.

As the company matured, my heart led me to follow the Elizabethans and their model. This was true of their business practices as well as their aesthetic approach.

It was the Elizabethan business model that taught us to be incredibly productive in what we do. And it was the Elizabethan business model that led us into a contract with our audience that has given us relative financial stability in these terrible times.

Much work has been done to peel away the layers of time and reveal the arcane subtleties of Shakespeare's text. His theaters have been replicated, his costumes duplicated. Cross-gendered casting,

original pronunciations: the list goes on. But who has actually endeavored to recreate the kind of production schedule that an Elizabethan actor might experience over the course of a year?

From the documentary evidence, we know that companies like Shakespeare's routinely presented six different titles a week, adding new plays every two or three weeks and repeating themselves only once or twice every three weeks or so. There is evidence to support the idea that a single company of actors performing twenty-one different plays in less than two months was not uncommon.

These kinds of numbers do not compute in modern theatrical terms. But from a business standpoint, they make a great deal of sense. If you would, imagine a moment in your own company when your work brings in slightly more money than it costs. Amazing things happen when that occurs. When the work brings in more than it costs, the work necessarily remains at the center of the company. Moreover the compulsion is to do a great deal of work. If the food in your belly comes from the work that you do, and you have to eat every day, then you have to perform every day. So it was for Shakespeare and so it is today. The primary difference is that Shakespeare had a much smaller universe of patrons. This in turn required a greater number of distinct titles to sell the requisite number of tickets to stay in business. In the modern theater, whole careers have been built selling a single title to a never-ending stream of patrons over the course of decades.

My company works out of a house of about 240 seats. In a year we present more than 250 performances and play to ~52,000 people. Our 2005-2006 season consists of 13 plays: five comedies, three tragedies, and one romance—all by Shakespeare, plus The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams, A Christmas Carol and an Off-Broadway musical.

Now I know that even though we're not talking about twenty or thirty plays a year, what I'm saying still doesn't compute in terms of typical "modern theater". The key thing here is that we have learned to exploit the enormous efficiencies of time and money inherent in a "core aesthetic" that's based on the Elizabethan business model. This model assumes as its center the Playhouse.

In the Elizabethan Playhouse, as I imagine it, the world of the play and the world of performance are one and the same. Thus we do not craft a distinct world of performance for each and every play we do. We use the Elizabethan playhouse. In the Playhouse, we have the Heavens, we have the Hell, we have every thing known to man and we have all of humanity as well. We have all that has come before and all that is yet to come. The playwright has free and easy access to all creation with the stroke of the pen. Thus the playhouse was the central metaphor for life, the universe, and everything. Shakespeare called his playhouse "The Globe".

Think about it: the stroke of a pen, excellent actors, and the imagination of an impassioned audience. Time and again I have concluded it is these three elements that can empower most any company to create an extraordinary place in time and space for not a whole lot of money.

From what I can tell, there are perhaps a half-dozen Shakespeare Companies in America currently pursuing what we call "Original Practice". Of course, any two words can mean very different things to different people. My colleagues and I disagree on a good many details, but we all agree that "Original Practice" is an approach to performing Shakespeare that assumes a burning desire to understand Shakespeare's text as it was understood by the actors who first spoke that text and by the audience who

first heard it. It also assumes an appreciation and respect for the stagecraft originally employed by Shakespeare's company.

Obviously, it is impossible in the absolute sense to know exactly what Shakespeare meant when he wrote any given line of text. Yet there is so much to be gained in the attempt and I have dedicated my entire working life to this pursuit.

Over the years I've tried to express this same essential thought many different ways. For example, the mission statement guiding my work in theater says that our company is “dedicated to the communion of actor, audience, and playwright through poetry.”

We go on to say “to foster that communion, we have built the Southeast's only Original Practice Playhouse®®. Using this space as an active laboratory for the exploration of Elizabethan stagecraft and theatrical techniques, all of our work is guided by a single clarion principle that we revere above all others: the voice of the playwright.”

In the simplest terms, whether the company is presenting an original piece, an American classic or a timeless masterpiece by William Shakespeare, each production is a process that begins with the way the play was originally staged in its own time and ends with a modern audience experiencing the play in a manner consistent with the playwright’s original intent. Thus, when presenting plays by Shakespeare, our productions feature hand-made period costumes, live music, and thrilling sword fights orchestrated to assure that the passion and poetry of Shakespeare's genius remains at the heart of the theatrical experience. This is in stark contrast to "modern" approaches that routinely update, alter, deconstruct or otherwise adapt the plays in the service of a 21st Century sensibility.

I had a board member who put it differently. He said “Y’all do Shakespeare you can throw beer at.” “Back-to-Basics,” “Shakespeare done right,” “the way it was intended,” “more like it was,” “Shakespeare Shakespeare.” One high school teacher simply said “the play I teach is the play my kids see” . . . I could go on.

From an elitist point of view, one might call it “primitivism” or as someone once said “They do Shakespeare anybody can enjoy”. Ironically the latter comment was not meant as a compliment!

Whatever else Shakespeare had going for him, he was—and is—the people’s playwright. He wrote the whole of the human experience for all humanity. And for my own part, I judge he speaks most clearly to the greatest number of people from his own place in time.

I remember my mother talking to me about a production of The Tempest she had just seen at a prestigious regional theater where she had season tickets. She asked “Who are the naked men? I’ve seen The Tempest before and I don’t remember any naked men.” She then went on to describe a chorus of scantily-clad gentlemen that spent most of the evening chanting songs in a forgotten language and pulling on ropes connected to something really big and heavy located off-stage. Shakespeare didn’t put any “naked men” in The Tempest, of course, so my mother was confused.

Now we all know that Shakespeare was a master communicator. So I concluded that if I don't understand what actors are saying in a Shakespeare play, the chances are the people on stage don't understand it either. Moreover, I’d go so far as to say that if my mother doesn't understand a given

Shakespeare scene in performance, the chances are the actors don't really know what they're saying. Or at the very least, they have lost sight of the playwright's original intent.

So what exactly has happened to these plays over the last century that, somehow in performance, they have become so patently confusing to the average American audience? After all, Shakespeare's audience was hearing him invent the English language—literally thousands of words were being used in new and inventive ways—in their very midst. We've been using these same words for 400 years now and have had the benefits of good nutrition, to boot. If anything, Shakespeare should be easier for us to understand than it was for the Elizabethans.

I believe the fundamental nature of the theatrical event has changed. Moreover, I believe that the key to understanding this change can be found in examining the Elizabethan business model and the methodology of how they created their performances. Once understood, we as modern theater practitioners can re-engineer our own rehearsal processes and rediscover the essential power that gave us these great plays.

In the modern theater, most companies routinely rehearse a play . . . say 120 hours. During those hours of work, the company strives to create a performance event. Everything that is done in the rehearsal process is informed by this event. Modern theater professionals are good at their jobs, they know what they're doing and they are comfortable with how it is done.

In Shakespeare's day his company created a similar event. We can disagree on how many hours he rehearsed but I'll say he rehearsed less than 20 hours for a new play. Patrick Tucker of the Original Shakespeare Company in London posits zero hours. I say 20 hours. Some people say 12 hours. The point is, that whatever the Elizabethans did in those <20 hours was determined by what was required of them by the performance event. They were good at their jobs, and they were comfortable with it.

I submit that what modern theater practitioners are doing in our rehearsal processes to create the modern performance is not what the Elizabethans were doing. At its core, the event we call theater has changed. So what kind of event were they doing all those years ago?

I submit it was an event that had a great deal more room for audience involvement than most modern productions can tolerate.

If you had 200 hours to rehearse the play "Hamlet", and the actor playing Hamlet couldn't show up till final dress, what would you do? I imagine a modern director could spend 12 to 20 hours getting productive work done with the other players, but ultimately, not much of substance would occur until Hamlet came to play.

And so it was for Shakespeare's own company and so it is for the modern Original Practice Playhouse. Except in our case the leading player isn't the actor playing Hamlet, it's the audience.

Shakespeare & Company's Tina Packer says—and I wholeheartedly agree—for the Elizabethan actor, the primary scene partner was the audience. For an Original Practice Shakespeare Company, the audience is acknowledged and absolutely present. The world of performance and the world of the play are one and the same. Actors and audience are physically, spiritually, metaphorically, and literally present in the same room.

Actually, if you've seen much Shakespeare in performance, you've already seen glimpses of what it must have been like all those years ago. Think back now and remember sitting in the audience when something clearly went wrong: Malvolio's ring drops off the stage, someone drops the fake severed head, a cell phone goes off, whatever. The actor on stage—through some stroke of divine luck has the perfect four word combination to deal with the specific thing that has just occurred, and it has been given to him by the playwright. Just by altering his inflection, he can acknowledge, control and dominate the situation while keeping the play on track and on text. In that very moment a huge pulse of energy explodes out of the house and up to the roof. It's a moment when the actor and audience are fused into one collective being.

That moment is a window into the performance dynamic of the Elizabethan Playhouse. I tell you, entire swathes of Shakespeare, whole Acts, complete two hour and 47 minute productions can have that kind of energy. It's an energy that comes only through the communion of actor, audience and playwright through poetry.

The great irony is that it's been with us all the time, lurking in the shadows, just beyond the fourth wall. Like so many answers to the truly great questions of life, the universe and everything, we simply have first to acknowledge that we are all here together in one space and in one time.

It wasn't just the Shakespeare I didn't learn in college. It was plying my father's trade working small crowds of distracted people with a deck of cards on the streets of New York City all those years ago. It was there I made my contract with the audience.

They taught me that quality of attention is the essence of communication. They taught me how to fail. It was through them that I learned the power of humor and the joy that exists at the precise moment of shared revelation.

I am a fortunate man. I've found my way.

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