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Shakespeare for Everybody

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By [Autumn Van Ravenhorst](#)Posted on Jun 20, 2015
by [Rich Larson](#)

Filled with contradictions, English is a damn hard language to learn. I still haven't grasped every rule or the exceptions to those rules. Frankly, a rule is a rule, but whatever. I still use the oxford comma. Is that bad grammar? Maybe, but despite my poor writing skills, I have always had a bit of an obsession with language. I actually wanted to be a linguist like Noam Chomsky. But then I stumbled upon this magazine (okay, I skipped ahead a little). I was kind of intimidated to write about the incredibly talented group of people who celebrate the most famous of all Englishmen over in Winona. I didn't want to let anyone down like I let down my Intro to Shakespeare teacher in high school.

We all know (I shouldn't assume, but really) of Shakespeare, that he at one point wrote some stuff and you are fairly certain he is the man behind *Romeo and Juliet*. Don't second guess yourself, he did in fact write *Romeo and Juliet*. But he is also a landmark in the history of the English language and literature who contributed beautiful and timeless pieces of art. He even invented words and phrases to make his works more profound and vibrant, because the English language can be a bit drab. Where would we be without words like "dexterously," "obscene" and "cockatrice?"

Shakespeare festivals have been around for quite some time—one of the most well-known being from my homeland, Oregon. And what does the largest rotating repertory company in the US have in common with the Great River Shakespeare Festival in Winona? Uh, only one of the founders. Paul Barnes, former Oregon Shakespeare Festival Director and Education Director, co-founded GRSF in 2004. He has a long and reputable history of directing Shakespeare. Having done work for several other festivals, including the Utah Shakespearean Festival which won the 2000 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre, Barnes had a more than good understanding of how Shakespeare should be done.

"They were looking to develop an arts center and really wanted it to be a major regional event," explained Artistic Director, Doug Scholz-Carlson.

"They were thinking Red Wing or Stillwater, but Winona fought for it and put together the business leaders that could fund it."



(courtesy The Great River Shakespeare Festival)

Winona's Great River Shakespeare Festival offers productions for aficionados, novices and everyone in between.

The festival has more than flourished as a destination point for both Shakespeare and theater lovers. People travel from Minneapolis and Chicago while reviews online range from New Yorkers to Oregonians. Winona is known for its arts and cultural opportunities but having a festival of this caliber has done wonders for that community. The Great River Shakespeare Festival has been such a successful inspiration that since its debut in 2004, several other renowned events and organizations have come along including the Beethoven Festival, Minnesota Marine Arts Museum, Boats and Bluegrass, and the Frozen River Film Festival.

The 2015 season will feature *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and *King John*. Though the main focus of any Shakespeare festival is on the works of the genius himself, there are plays offered from other acclaimed writers. Directed by Paul Barnes, *The Glass Menagerie* was written by American southern playwright Tennessee Williams, so it is also a very language driven play, which I can attest is also very difficult to read. The organization also offers an apprentice program where practicing students come to study and put on a play themselves. This year that intern production will be *King John*, a story of “sibling rivalry, overbearing parents, whip-smart humor, love, loss, grief, war treachery, and a feud with the Pope!” *King John* is the first play of Shakespeare’s English history cycle.

In addition to the brilliant theatrical madness, there are all sorts of free festival extras, in case your mind suffers thee-thou-doth-ye overload. Out on the green of Winona State University, there are free concerts every Friday and Saturday night, accompanied by friends and food trucks. This year the extensive line-up includes Shannon Murray, a riot “grrrrr!” folk/punk group out of the north woods of Minnesota, classic metal from Up The Mountain Down The Mountain, bluegrass melodies from The Beavers, and Hot Cellars which is a Lo-Fi Rock and Roll band. (I googled that for you—Lo-Fi can be described as garage rock of the ‘60s, punk rock of the late ‘70s, or a breed of underground indie rockers. So, there’s that.) And many more.

What makes GRSF unique to the other Shakespeare festivals across the nation is its focus on education. That is a key part for many to truly enjoy and appreciate Shakespeare, or in my case, to understand what the hell is going on.

“We do a lot of educational events. Part of the aesthetic of the company is we really spend the time to investigate the language, and then we can deliver that language in a way the audience will understand—fourth graders can understand it. When you try and read it off the page, no matter how great the teacher is, it is hard to read. It would be like taking a conversation of two teenagers over lunch, writing it on paper, then giving that piece of paper to someone to read. It would be very hard to understand. But, if you witness the conversation and everything that is going on around it, you will understand what is being said. The reason it has survived is the language has so much depth of meaning; there is so much to explore,” said Doug.

He explained that the first couple years were rough because so much of theatre is driven by word-of-mouth. But that type of acknowledgement has worked out pretty well since they have progressively seen more traffic, last year being their best yet with approximately 11,000 ticket buyers. That number, however, does not take in to account all the people who showed up for the freebies.

“We are hoping to break that record this year,” he said.

They have received National Endowment for the Arts Grants, a major national recognition, in addition to gaining a strong reputation around the country and being added to lists of places to go and experience. Shakespeare can’t escape the internet either—GRSF’s YouTube channel, Great River Shakes, is filled with short and satirical promotional videos. They have received tens of thousands of views and - not gonna lie - I laughed my ass off at a couple, specifically “Kids Explain Shakespeare’s Hamlet” and “Stuff People at Shakespeare Festival’s Say.” And I hardly know anything about Shakespeare.

If you are like me and lack pretty much any knowledge of Shakespeare and just aren't sophisticated enough to comprehend the language, this beautifully artistic group of people will do their best to get it through your thick skull. Doug explained, "If people think they don't understand Shakespeare, they should still come and give it a try. If you come a half hour before the show, there is someone there to give you an orientation about the play and the characters. Shakespeare plays are one of the great achievements of western civilization and are great works of arts that are completely worth approaching."

Shakespeare coined the phrase, "all that glitters isn't gold," but for once (or multiple times, I wouldn't know) he may have been wrong.

Despite her repeated use of the Oxford Comma, Autumn Van Ravenhorst is an invaluable staff writer for SouthernMinn Scene. Drop her a line at autumn.vanravenhorst@gmail.com and explain to her the meaning of the phrase "Blue Roses."

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