



John M. Meyer\*

## “Nor doth this wood lack worlds of company:” the American Performance of Shakespeare and the White-Washing of Political Geography

**Abstract:** The paper examines the spatial overlap between the disenfranchisement of African Americans and the performance of William Shakespeare’s plays in the United States. In America, William Shakespeare seems to function as a prelapsarian poet, one who wrote before the institutionalization of colonial slavery, and he is therefore a poet able to symbolically function as a ‘public good’ that trumps America’s past associations with slavery. Instead, the modern American performance of Shakespeare emphasizes an idealized strain of human nature: especially when Americans perform Shakespeare outdoors, we tend to imagine ourselves in a primeval woodland, a setting without a history. Therefore, his plays are often performed without controversy—and (bizarrely) on or near sites specifically tied to the enslavement or disenfranchisement of people with African ancestry. New York City’s popular outdoor Shakespeare theater, the Delacorte, is situated just south of the site of Seneca Village, an African American community displaced for the construction of Central Park; Alabama Shakespeare Festival takes place on a former plantation; the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Virginia makes frequent use of a hotel dedicated to a Confederate general; the University of Texas’ Shakespeare at Winedale festival is performed in a barn built with supports carved by slave labor; the Oregon Shakespeare Festival takes place within a state unique for its founding laws dedicated to white supremacy. A historiographical examination of the Texas site reveals how the process of erasure can occur within a ‘progressive’ context, while a survey of Shakespearean performance sites in New York, Alabama, Virginia, and Oregon shows the strength of the unexpected connection between the performance of Shakespeare in America and the subjugation of Black persons, and it raises questions about the unique and utopian assumptions of Shakespearean performance in the United States.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare in performance, utopia, race, slavery, Early Modern history, Black, African American, Public Theatre, American Shakespeare Center, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Texas.

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Mob violence and tyrant kings, misgendering and misogyny, nightmares and dreams, utopia and utopian natures, cutting-edge and classical: In the United States, Shakespeare is a mirror in which we wish to see our nature reflected, and since his work exists in the ‘public domain,’ we are free to polish that mirror to our liking and point it towards the passions and problems we hold in our heart’s core. William Shakespeare’s plays dominate theatre in the United States to such an extent that the Theater Communications Group has felt obligated to leave him off their annual list of the most produced playwrights—listing him would be too obvious and redundant (Tran; Daw). His popularity is singular—no one is performing Dionysus Boucicault, Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, or Suzan-Lori Parks with anything like the regularity of Shakespeare. And the popularity continues despite Shakespeare’s suspicious attitude towards democratic practice, and an expiry date that precludes his knowledge or interest in specific American mores or history. The chief critic at *The New York Times*, Jesse Green, has demanded a greater re-imagining of Shakespearean tragedies to restore what he sees as their diminishing impact, but his is a definite minority view, and some of the most exciting scholarship and public ideas lean into Shakespeare to teach us about Ourselves.

For myself, I love Shakespeare’s humane characterizations, his poetic vivacity, and the way his imagination can take the most awful of experiences and twist them into a psychological nuance that makes life less lonely and more bearable. I write about his plays, I sometimes imitate his plays, and I often perform his plays because of the insights they provide into my own life, especially when I was a soldier in America’s post-9/11 misadventures. I first read *Macbeth*, the tragedy of action, while I was in Iraq. Soldiers can and do experience the ways in which instrumental violence spins beyond its intended scope. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* gave me a foothold into exploring and surviving those feelings. All that’s to say: I have understood, on my own terms, James Baldwin’s argument that Shakespeare “operates as an unimpeachable witness to one’s own experience” (687), and that therefore Shakespeare’s usefulness as an honest witness makes our great obsession with him worthwhile.

I am more critical, however, of the enterprise I am a part of here in America, and the historiographical lacuna that both enable and blight our play and our interpretations. What is the setting in which we are performing Shakespeare? When we invite Shakespeare’s plays into our lives, how do we interpret the spaces in which these characters come to life?

The following essay examines the spatial overlap between the disenfranchisement of African Americans and the performance of William Shakespeare’s plays in the United States. Shakespeare died in 1616, over four centuries ago. In 1619 enslaved persons from Africa were brought to England’s

American colonies for the first time.<sup>1</sup> Those two dates do not point towards some incredible conspiracy by which Shakespeare’s death led to an American slavocracy, or that his life caused one. But I will argue that in America, William Shakespeare seems to function as a prelapsarian poet, one who wrote before the institutionalization of colonial slavery, and he is therefore a poet able to symbolically function as a ‘public good’ that trumps America’s past associations with slavery. With a slightly different take, James Shapiro views Shakespeare’s plays as “common ground” for both liberals and conservatives, a place “to meet and air [Americans’] disparate views” (xi). I am approaching this from the left—the vast majority of theatre makers in this country seem to identify as being liberal, and my own politics tend in that direction. Even here, however, I am aware that I am offering a naïve view that requires ignoring some salient facts, such as the racist Massachusetts senator, Henry Cabot Lodge, marshalling his “blind devotion” to the Bard to argue for the artistic and moral supremacy of the “Anglo-Saxon” race (Shapiro 127-131). That is to say, I am assuming that the people I work with do not hold the Lodge view, are not overt racists—we are rather the naïve, unintentional racists that James Baldwin described as “looking away” from Black history—American history.

The modern American performance of Shakespeare emphasizes an idealized strain of human nature: especially when Americans perform Shakespeare outdoors or in rural spaces, we tend to imagine ourselves in a primeval woodland, a setting without a history. And our imagining of that primeval woodland often leads us to erase the lives of Black people in a way that patches over the anti-Black behaviours of our American forebearers. Our performances of Shakespeare also tend to assume a “little England” context that ignores the imperialist contexts of Shakespeare (much less our own), and so a similar point could be made about the displacement of indigenous peoples; trends towards “land acknowledgment” point in that direction (Keefe).<sup>2</sup> Still, at the places I have stumbled across in my own work, the record of the Black experience has been made largely invisible and, where detected, deeply disturbing. A handful of prominent examples can make the point. I am going to make a personal instance the principal case and start from there.

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<sup>1</sup> Black people reached Texas even earlier than that, due to the reach of the Spanish empire. See Barr; Hearn.

<sup>2</sup> A succinct review of Shakespeare’s imperial contexts and how they intersect with race appears in Thompson (*Companion* 5-7).

## Shakespeare at Winedale

Okay, so here's how the story goes: In the 1960s, a legendary Texas philanthropist named Ima Hogg (the name is part of the legend), began collecting frontier homes and furniture on a property called Winedale in Fayette County (Taylor Lonn 1-2). In 1967 she donated her collection to the University of Texas at Austin, and the land and buildings are now a part of the Briscoe Center for American History. She intended, as a preservationist and an old-school progressive, to root America's turbulent present in the virtues of the past; this meant emphasizing the pioneer spirit, and celebrating the material, artisanal cultures of quilts, crafts, furniture, architecture, and the like. In Hogg's view, Winedale reminded her of the Germany she visited and studied as a child, and the small-scale farms she idealized (Clark 56-57). Needing to attract more people to her collection, Hogg suggested that an English professor, James 'Doc' Ayres, bring students out to Winedale to study Shakespeare ("Let Wonder Seem Familiar"). Eventually, the university's program matured from a part-time study of Shakespeare through performance to a full-length summer program wherein about a dozen or so students study and perform three or four of Shakespeare's plays in rep. Audiences come from the surrounding area, and as far away as Austin, Houston, and Dallas, sheltering from the 100 degree heat in the air-conditioned shade of a structure that seats 300. Thanks to a modified hay loft, both actors and audience have a two-story structure that enables an unusual intimacy for the audience, and a commanding height for the actors. A mock Jacobean set-piece combines with a curtain and discovery space to offer the suggestion of the Early Modern period. The synthetic historical setting collaborates with the rural countryside to offer a place where Shakespeare's escape-to-nature plays make sense; it is also a setting where the political and social obsessions of Shakespeare's time (monarchy and feudalism and enclosure and mobs and courtly love and admiration of the Ancients) can be imagined back to life in a more meaningful way. It is a space that enables a social community centered on Shakespeare, and that community pushes the hurly-burly of Texas politics (guns and voting and abortion and demographics) past the fence surrounding Winedale.

Forty years later, the program was still in place when I heard about it (in Iraq of all places). It has become a key focal point for creative energy at the University of Texas Stromberger "This Green Plot" 2). Robert Faires likened Ayres' approach to Shakespeare as "an experimental drug with unexpected side effects, [it] yielded not just a slew of students with an expanded sense of the Bard's genius, but a mob that, having tasted the fruit of the Tree of Theatre, craved more" ("More Words from Winedale"). Several films have documented the program, including the recent *Take Pains, Be Perfect*, and the site recently received awards from the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and the American

Shakespeare Center (Faires “Winedale’s Lauds”). The program now has an outreach component that gives performance opportunities to hundreds of underprivileged children each year (Stromberger). College-age students often describe the experience as a transformative part of their education and even compare the performance barn to a temple of Shakespeare, or to test out ideas about equality, participation, and public discourse.<sup>3</sup> One Winedaler, Bob Jones, wryly observed that it is much easier to learn to perform plays stuffed with nature references if you are actually surrounded by nature, rather than in one of the concrete ice boxes we tend to use for theatres (*Shakespeare at Winedale*).<sup>4</sup>

To describe Winedale, people tend to empty it of its social history, describing it as an “empty space” that requires participants to “leave behind the expectations and limitations they perceive to enable and govern their lives back home” (Kozusko).<sup>5</sup> If writers do describe any aspect of Winedale’s social history, then they tie it to an American pastoral tradition of hardy pioneers (Kozusko), or to the German communities that began immigrating to the area in the 1840s (Barratt and Stewart). Further, the same writers situate the space in Central Texas, thus lifting it out of East Texas, a region associated with cotton, slavery, the South, intense segregation, and racism.<sup>6</sup>

True enough, the theatre barn in which we perform Shakespeare was once a German hay barn—that is how we describe it. It was built *after* the Civil War—a fact that makes all of us more comfortable with our use of the building, and most articles on Winedale happily draw attention to the post-Civil War date of its construction and emphasize the barn’s German roots. But the severance is not so clear cut.

First, the cultural distinction between independent German colonists and Anglo slaveholders is easily overstated. Winedale is situated at a place where German colonization overlapped with slavery and cotton production, and German views varied from full-throated participation in the slave-trade to advocating for abolition (though there is little evidence for the latter in Texas (Kearney; Kamphoefner; Pruitt)).<sup>7</sup> Still, the Germans who lived at the site did not

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<sup>3</sup> In an otherwise straightforward blurb, the Texas Exes gently mocked the Winedale insistence on transformative experiences (Roush and Gray).

<sup>4</sup> See also, “Let Wonder Seem Familiar: A History of Shakespeare at Winedale.”

<sup>5</sup> Peter Brook’s Empty Space discourse comes up a lot in discourse on Winedale. See for example, founder Jim Ayre’s in an interview with Robert Faires, “25 Years of Shakespeare in Central Texas,” For an anthropological interpretation of Winedale, see Barratt and Stewart.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Campbell; Glasrud.

<sup>7</sup> Seeking a more heroic role for German-Americans in the abolition of slavery, two German authors wrote *Ulhand in Texas*. See Rossa; Honeck. The most famous instance of tying abolitionist sentiment to German immigrants is certainly Quentin Tarantino et al., *Django Unchained*.

own slaves (though this had more to do with the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> amendments, Juneteenth, and the occupying Union army than an active choice on their part).

Second, the Winedale site and the theatre barn itself have a much more complicated history than described on its historic markers. The markers at our performance site indicate that Samuel K. Lewis, a “pioneer,” built the nearby Winedale Inn to take advantage of its proximity a new stagecoach route. (So far, so “alright alright alright.” stagecoaches are a classic Southwestern motif thanks to mid-century Westerns; see Grant). Since the historic markers do not mention slavery, it is not surprising that when the Texas Historical Commission forwarded the site’s application to the National Register of Historic Places in 1970, not one word in 46 pages mentions an association with slavery either (Bell).

No.	Name	Age	Sex	Race	Notes
29	Samuel K. Lewis	46	M	B	
30		39	M	B	✓
31		26	M	B	
32		28	M	B	
33		21	M	B	
34		21	M	B	✓
35		12	M	B	
36		19	M	B	✓
37		8	M	B	
38		5	M	B	
39		3	M	B	
40		2	M	B	

No. of owners, \_\_\_\_\_ No. of male slaves, 34

Figure 1: The above image comes from the ‘Schedule of Slave Inhabitants’ of Fayette County in the 1860 Census, with the image cropped around the Samuel K. Lewis farmstead. The census-takers did not record the names of the enslaved. The third column indicates age, the fifth column ‘B’ or ‘M’ for Black or Mulatto. In the sixth column, a ‘check’ indicates that the individual has run away and was a fugitive at the time of the census. The record was first identified and interpreted by the Briscoe Center for American History. The above photocopy was retrieved from Fayette County’s online portal

Unfortunately, it is just not true. Under Samuel Knight Lewis’ name in the 1860 “Schedule of Slave Inhabitants,” eleven unnamed enslaved individuals are listed, the oldest being 46, and the youngest just an infant of five months-old

(“Schedule 2”). Three of those enumerated as slaves were also marked “fugitive,” meaning they had run away and had not been found at the time of census; these included two women, 39 and 21 years of age, and one 19 year-old male. The story, then, is not of an independent pioneer, but someone very much enmeshed in the Southern slavocracy. Nor is it a story of a stable, bucolic “antebellum” society; the three fugitives offer evidence for considerable resistance on the part of those enslaved.

The historic marker at Lewis’ grave, located close to Winedale, also completely omits his connection to slavery in Texas; it merely describes him as a settler and a one-term Republic of Texas legislator, as well as the founder of “the Winedale Inn,” also known as the “Stagecoach Inn” or the “Sam Lewis Stopping Place.”<sup>8</sup> The Texas State Historical Association’s *Handbook of Texas* and the websites *Texas Independence Trail* and *Texas Escapes* all refer to the site as a German community founded on the “Lewis farmstead,” avoiding the terms “cotton” and “plantation” and “slavery.”<sup>9</sup> Since the applications for the historical registers in 1967 and 1970 almost entirely avoid the subject of slavery, this is not too surprising—these historiographical moves were all made in the same time period around the founding of Shakespeare at Winedale.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, given American history’s Texas-sized obsessions with status and wealth, what is surprising is just how much the historic markers understate Lewis’ possessions—an important element in assessing why and how Lewis used enslaved labour. The 1850 census lists the Lewis holdings in Fayette County at 69 improved acres, with the total value of the land listed at only \$3,000. Just ten years later the improved portion increased to 800 acres, with the farm listed as being worth \$20,000—a seven-fold increase in value. Though the structures Lewis left behind lack the neoclassical trappings of the plantations further east, the records here suggest that enslaved labour led to a substantial

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Knight Lewis historic marker, Marker number 11680. <https://atlas.thc.state.tx.us/Details/5149011680/print/>. For a photograph of the Samuel Knight Lewis marker, see: <https://texashistoricalmarkers.weebly.com/samuel-knight-lewis.html/>. N. access d.

<sup>9</sup> Marie Giles, “Lewis, Samuel K.,” *Handbook of Texas Online*. <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/lewis-samuel-k/>. Accessed 19 May 2021. Carole E. Christian, “Winedale, TX,” *Handbook of Texas Online*. <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/winedale-tx/>. Accessed 19 May 2021. “Round Top: Winedale Historical Center.” *Texas Independence Trail*. <https://texasindependencetrail.com/plan-your-adventure/historic-sites-and-cities/sites/winedale-historical-center/>. Accessed 19 May 2021. “Winedale, Texas: Texas Ghost Town.” <http://www.texasescapes.com/CentralTexasTownsSouth/Winedale-Texas.htm/>. Accessed 19 May 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Texas Historical Commission. [Historic Marker Application: Winedale Stagecoach Inn], text, January 31, 1967; (<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph477840/>. Accessed 19 May 2021), University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/>; crediting Texas Historical Commission. Bell.

accumulation of wealth. But the way Lewis portrayed himself in the census understates his holdings. Contemporaneous tax records show a claim on 17,000 acres across several counties—an incredible instance of capital accumulation for the humble ‘pioneer’ depicted on the historic markers.<sup>11</sup>

The Briscoe Center for American History has recently begun to reassess the contributions of Black Americans (some free and some enslaved) at the Winedale Historical Center (“The Winedale Story”). Prior to this reassessment, one has to jump back to folklorist Henry Yelvington, a Texas writer who seems to have been most active in the 1930s and 40s.<sup>12</sup> His typed, one-paragraph, scrapbook note on the Winedale Inn states that “The structure was erected entirely by slaves on the plantation”.<sup>13</sup> Four decades later, the legacy of slavery receives a one-line mention in an otherwise romantic academic article entitled “Winedale: Texas’ Williamsburg,” which seeks to establish a breezy parallel between the site’s frontier spirit and the bicentennial of the American revolution—a line of thought entirely aligned with Ima Hogg’s intentions for the site (Martin). All of the more recent academic theses on the site have no mention of slavery whatsoever, and the studies that look explicitly at theatre practices follow the lead of the historiography, and are silent on slavery (Stromberger; Barratt and Stewart; Moczygamba).

Earlier in this essay I mentioned that Fayette County narrowly voted against secession. Yet according to the Yelvington scrapbook, Samuel Knight Lewis’ Stagecoach Inn was used as telegraph post for the Confederate States until the end of the war. So rather than Winedale being a German-abolitionist island in the sea of East Texas slavery, it may have been quite the reverse—an island of pro-slavery sentiment in a county that narrowly voted against joining the Confederacy. Of course, Fayette County was nevertheless dragged into the war once the secession referendum passed elsewhere in the state (Buenger).

The omissions suggest that by the late 1960s, references to slavery were not welcome. In this sense, the preservation of Winedale’s pioneer and German legacy found common cause with the “Lost Cause” narratives that presented an idealized portrait of Southern and Southwestern life.

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<sup>11</sup> Samuel K. Lewis holdings, Briscoe Center for American History.

<sup>12</sup> See for example *Yelvington’s Ghost Lore: A Collection of Ghost, Phantom and Legendary Mysteries Chiefly of Texas* (1936). His version of the “Tengo Frio Bird” legend is included in Dobie. (<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc67649/>. Accessed 21 May 2021), University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/>; crediting UNT Press.

<sup>13</sup> Texas Historical Commission. [Historic Marker Application: Winedale Stagecoach Inn], text, January 31, 1967; (<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph477840/>. Accessed 19 May 2021), University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/>; crediting Texas Historical Commission, 9-10.



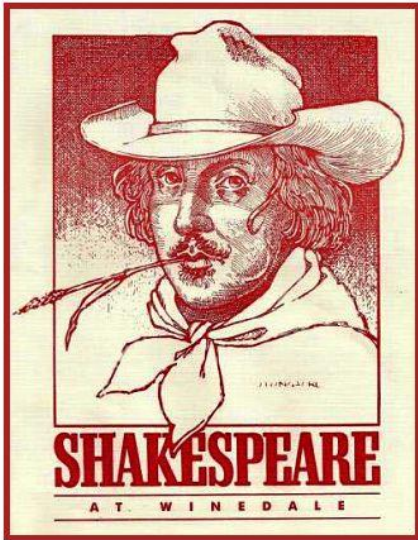


Figure 2: “Cowboy Willie”?

The inability to “see” slavery at Winedale has had some unintentional consequences. The t-shirt mascot for Shakespeare at Winedale—“Cowboy Willie”—hearkens back to Texas’ connection to cowboy culture. Given that it is a University of Texas program, that seems like a straightforward connection to make, and it is often considered a logo that “perfectly captures this long love affair between a poet and a place” (Stromberger). But with Anglo features, a pale face, a pale hat, loose cravat, agrarian straw-chewing, and an unshaven mug, the Texas Shakespeare also bears a resemblance to Samuel Knight Lewis, the slaveholder.<sup>14</sup> The American cowboy has always been an image loaded with contradictions and violence, but those

who present us with the image most often intend to evoke a mythical spirit of liberty and independence; once we associate Winedale with slavery, the image suggests quite the reverse, and it becomes a little harder to interpret the site strictly in view of Shakespeare’s “pastoral pleasures” (Frantz and Julian Ernest).<sup>15</sup>

Seeing slavery at Winedale challenges our notions of the utopic: what exactly is the nature of the utopia we have been experiencing? But *not* seeing slavery at Winedale has also had its challenges. For example, the program has largely avoided the plays *Othello* and *Titus Andronicus* due to a dearth of Black students signing up for the summer course (we can tell them it is in Central Texas but the compass still points East).<sup>16</sup> Other plays are present, but complicated. In *Comedy of Errors* the “master” characters repeatedly identify the clowns as “slaves.” And beat them. The sound of the play takes on a peculiarly unpleasant resonance, especially given the violent slapstick involved

<sup>14</sup> An image of Samuel K. Lewis is available at the Briscoe Center’s online digital tour, “The Winedale Story.”

<sup>15</sup> The “Pastoral pleasures” quote is from Campana.

<sup>16</sup> We can make adjustments. We cannot accept the historical as normal in an age when the American presidency became a four-year mouthpiece for white nationalists. Shortcomings have been articulated and actions suggested in Kimberly Anne Coles, Kim F. Hall, and Ayanna Thompson (Coles, Hall, Thompson). See also: SAA Diversity Committee, “Antiracist Resources,” <https://shakespeareassociation.org/resources/inclusive-pedagogy/>. N. access d.

in the performance; it is not necessarily “deadly” theatre—but it is weird, especially when no one else among the actors or audience seems aware of the site’s history.

It is not clear who at the Winedale Historical Center made the decision to avoid the subject of slavery, or why. Was it a deliberate decision? Was the historical image of Texas too tied up with Southwest hokum to spark anyone’s curiosity? Did Ima Hogg or the University of Texas specifically ask that slavery be stricken from the record? Was the purpose of stripping out slavery to ensure the sites could “pass” as white, and therefore serve as unproblematic anchors for Ima Hogg’s humanities programs?

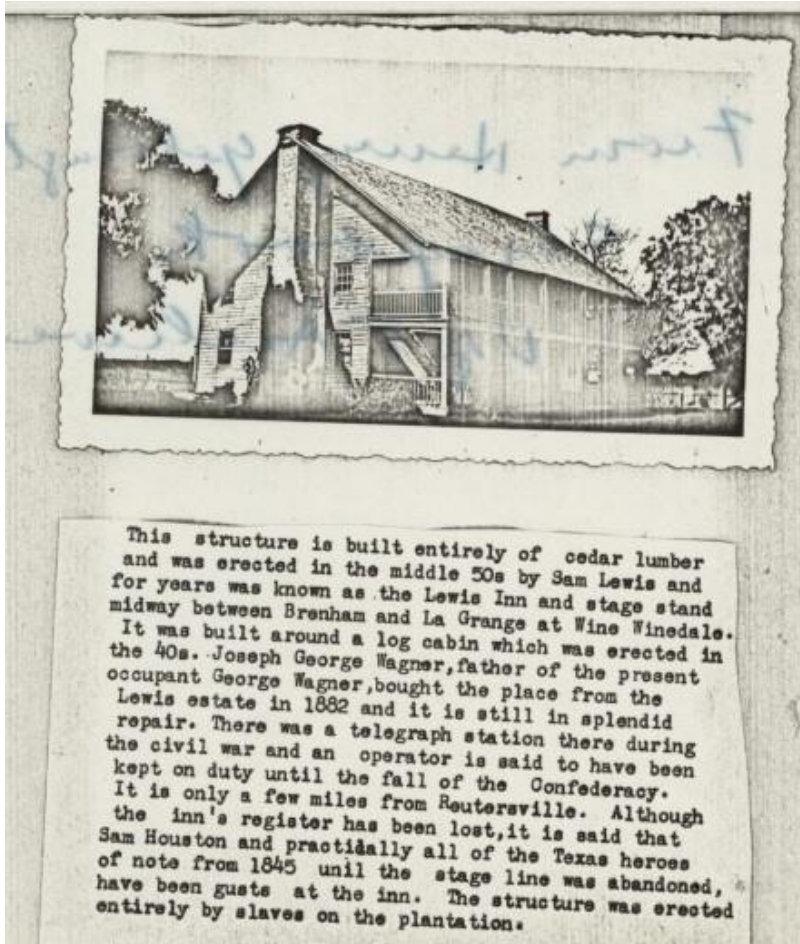


Figure 3: A page from the Henry Yelvington scrapbook, probably made in the 1930s. UNT archive, “Portal to Texas History”

The answers are murky. Before Ima Hogg bought the property, she commissioned a survey from the James A. Nonemaker, the director of the Harris County Heritage Society. He eschews the word “slavery,” but clearly locates the site in East Texas, ties it to the traditions of planters in Virginia and elsewhere, and considers the decorative painting in the interior to be the finest example of “any sort in the Southern States;” he therefore concludes that the building’s preservation is made “absolutely [sic] imperative” as an ideal type of frontier plantation (Nonemaker 4). Wayne Bell, perhaps the key figure in the Texas preservationist movement (Sheehy), personally led workshops at the site, and he and his students thoroughly documented the buildings, assessed how they were constructed, and determined the uses and reuses (Harwood). By the time of their 1990 historical survey, slavery had completely dropped out of depictions of the Winedale Historical Center. A nearby transverse crib barn (now used occasionally for historical demonstrations) “which appears on an 1869 map of the Lewis Estate” was almost certainly built before the Civil War, and may well have involved enslaved labor (Brown). We do not know the names of the enslaved. We do not know what happened to them after the Civil War, or when they left the area, or where they are buried, or who their descendents might be, or what further violence they suffered in “bloody” Texas.



Figure 4: The Winedale theater-barn as it appeared in 1970. Wayne Bell papers, University of Texas at Austin. Wayne Bell’s surveys determined that the beams had been recycled from a cotton gin and cotton press. The beams were likely carved by enslaved Black laborers

For those of us who use the Winedale theater barn, the connections to slavery are tactile, all too real, and all too invisible. According to an architectural survey from the 1960s, the frame of the theatre barn was built with lumber recycled from the land's previous use as a Southern plantation (Bell). The beams we use in our theater quite literally propped up the twin instruments of the Southern economy, a cotton gin and a cotton press. Enslaved laborers most likely hewed the timber and carved the beams. Looking at beams, we can see where the plane tracks have notched wood.

In order to perform in the theatre barn, the audience and students must navigate around and under the low-hanging carved beams—the same beams that were used to construct the cotton press and house the cotton gin. We are not always successful at avoiding the beams—minor head injuries sometimes occur. It is a painful irony that when performing Shakespeare in America, we duck our own history.

I briefly move on to other sites to demonstrate a trend, rather than one miserable American happenstance. In these cases, we will again see how the progressive movement's embrace of Shakespeare in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century will, with vaulting ambition, o'erleap itself and—.

## **The Delacorte Theatre in Central Park**

Seneca Village, the largest pre-Civil War African American community in New York City, stretched along the east side of the avenue now called Central Park West from 82<sup>nd</sup> to 89<sup>th</sup> streets. It began on a subdivided farm in 1825 and was one of the few places where free Blacks could legally buy property (Taylor Dorceta 276). Three decades later, the land became increasingly valuable, and wealthy white New Yorkers began dreaming of removing their neighbours. New York's elite pressured the city to destroy it through the use of eminent domain in order to ensure Central Park's rectangular shape (Manevitz). One dismissive New Yorker denigrated the people living in the area for marrying and leaving the races "amalgamated" (Taylor Dorceta 274). They mischaracterized the settlement as "shanties" that should be removed to shield wealthy residents from impoverished neighbours and to create a "pastoral Transcendentalism" (Taylor Dorceta 260, 268). The Seneca Village residents were unaware of their neighbour's plans, as evidenced for their breaking new ground for a church just two years before eminent domain forced their exit beginning in 1856 (Taylor Dorceta 277). Another sign of stability was the presence of a family such as that of Andrew Williams, who purchased a lot for \$125 in 1825 and remained there until forced to move; since that time, all the men in the family have been named Andrew Williams, and all of the women receive a name that also starts with 'A',

such as ‘Ariel,’ the first Andrew’s great-great-great-great granddaughter.<sup>17</sup> After displacing the Williams family and hundreds of others, the city used a 1,000 strong all-white workforce to build the park (Taylor Dorceta 282-283).<sup>18</sup> Today, on a hill overlooking the largely invisible site of Seneca Village is the Delacorte Theater (roughly aligning with 79<sup>th</sup> street), home of the city’s largest Shakespeare festival, and a vanguard member of the non-profit theatre movement. If the Public Theater’s Shakespeare Festival is not the largest such festival in the American landscape, it is certainly the best known, and it has set standards followed by countless others (Venning). Tickets have always been issued free of charge, thereby driving up demand (Bennett). More importantly, the festival takes place in the open air of the park, exposing actors and audience to the elements. The festival’s founder, Joseph Papp, elevated the perception of outdoor Shakespeare from an amateur practice to the pre-eminent American method of exploring Shakespeare’s plays. In Central Park, performing outdoors is a vague gesture towards Early Modern performances at the Globe in London, but it is also an embrace of the park itself, and the experience of nature in the middle of a metropolis. Unlike at the reconstructed Globe on the bank of the Thames, the Delacorte provides no shelter for the actors or audience, and one of the consequent rituals includes intercom announcements of weather delays, much like at a baseball game. In the background of the theatre sits the quirky “folly” called Belvedere Castle (“beautiful view”). With longstanding connections to the New York acting scene, the theatre offers actors a place to work on their craft in an environment without as much commercial pressure, and therefore its stages often attract high-status professionals; it also serves as a launching point for future stars, including the great James Earl Jones, Colleen Dewhurst, and George C. Scott. One of the recent stars, Lee Schieber, commented that one of the pleasures of working in the open air was incorporating the natural environment into his performance because “the setting is really the star of the show” (Grode).

The buried ruins of Seneca Village never entered the discussion around the festival’s shift into the adjacent Delacorte, but that is the point: Shakespeare, perceived as a public good, fits within the pastoral Transcendentalism tradition in a way that the complexities of American history do not. By the time Joe Papp, the founder of the New York Shakespeare Festival, started operating in the 1950s, Seneca Village had been effectively erased for a little less than a hundred years. Though Joe Papp demanded relevance from his productions (something he did not always get) it was Shakespeare’s brand as a pastoral public good that

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<sup>17</sup> Central Park Conservancy, “Seneca Village: The Williams Family Legacy,” 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Whiteness helped European immigrants get a job, but it could not help them keep it: in accordance with the typical practices of the time the laborers were poorly paid, and fired if sick or injured.

allowed his ventures to mesh so well with the elite interests invested in Central Park. When Papp strayed too far from the pastoralism, it could result in crashed productions. In one of his later seasons this pursuit resulted in a flood of complaints, such as the following assessment from M. E. Comtois in *Shakespeare Quarterly* about an indoor series Papp produced:

It seems wasteful to use [Shakespeare's] plays as vehicles to comment on our present society, when the worlds they create and the insights they contain, studied and our stage, will prove fresher and more soul-satisfying than the daily newspaper ever can. (408)

Buried within the Comtois critique is the assumption that American news (history in the making) is neither soul-satisfying nor fresh, whereas the Shakespearean canon remains “constant as the Northern Star,/ Of whose true-fixed and resting quality/ There is no fellow in the firmament.” (*Julius Caesar* 3:1:61-63) Comtois points out that the indoor season she describes failed at the box office. The theaters were too dingy and small, the acting and costuming too naturalistic (or else too loud): in a word, they were not transcendental.

Joe Papp's free theatre in park has never suffered from the absence of the picturesque, such that the happening—the transcendent event—can overwhelm whatever is on stage. A sense of this comes from Papp's romantic memories of using an amphitheatre built by the Works Progress Administration along the East River; he loved the way the poplar trees swayed in the breeze, and therefore insisted a decade later that they plant poplars to frame the Delacorte as well (Turan and Papp 80). Papp's contrarian image tends to overshadow his extraordinary ability to conform to the times. The legend of Joe Papp's brief struggles against Robert Moses, for example, belies a decade of quiet cooperation, and the sweetheart deal the Public received from the park's commission (Turan and Papp 153-172; Sheaffer 51). When it came to the construction of the new outdoor theater in Central Park, taxpayers footed 60% of the bill while George Delacorte donated the other 40%. The theater's name appalled fundraiser Herta Danis, who thought Delacorte “got away with murder” (Turan and Papp 233).

It does not take too much digging into Delacorte's utopia to uncover the dis-ease of the place. In a feature for the *New York Times*, Papp crows about his success in casting an all-Black cast in *Julius Caesar*. One of the stars, Morgan Freeman, nevertheless “expressed a certain unease about the position he and his colleagues find themselves in. ‘We've spent years doing kitchen-sink drama, dealing with everyday events within the black experience. It's very removed from the Sturm and Drang of Shakespeare. I think there's some feeling of being in a goldfish bowl’” (Blau).

Morgan Freeman’s Sturm and Drang reference locates Shakespeare within a European Romantic tradition that prioritizes a white male’s self-involvement (a Young Werther), rather than “everyday events within the black experience”—that is to say, everyday events within the American experience, “everyday” events that Freeman and his colleagues must repeatedly survive in order to get to the stage. In the kitchen-sink tradition, lighting divides the audience and actors, and the performances often use an imaginary fourth-wall that separates the audience and the actors even further. But for Freeman, that is not the “goldfish bowl.” Instead, the goldfish bowl comes from being Black in all Black cast in a space named after a white benefactor performing a play written by a white writer surrounded by the most expensive real estate in the world largely occupied by rich white Americans. All this is not to say his performance would or would not succeed in his terms or on the terms of his director or his audience. Instead, between Schieber and Freeman, we can sense a sharp distinction between an idealistic urban retreat where “the setting is the star” and a dysphoric “goldfish bowl.”

As of May 2021, the Public Theater has launched a cultural transformation plan that seeks to empower non-white artists.<sup>19</sup> So far, the Delacorte’s adjacency to Seneca Village has only merited a brief aside in a podcast episode (entitled “Racoons are very intelligent creatures”) that otherwise focuses on standing in line for tickets at 6 a.m., “great celebrity acting,” and experiencing the winter and rough weather of producing theatre out of doors.<sup>20</sup> Much like Central Park itself, the podcast suggests that the Delacorte does not intend to experience nature or America’s political circumstances, but to dominate them. The most moving performances at the Delacorte occur when the utopic imaginings of the Public Works program simplify the Shakespeare plays (i.e. “the worlds they contain”) in order to demonstrate the immediate power of forgiveness—such as a *Twelfth Night* where even a humiliated Malvolio joins in the final song and dance number, or an *As You Like It* in which a paranoid Duke Frederick abandons his delusions of total control via a social rapprochement with his brother in the forests of Arden (Kwei-Armah and Taub; Taub and Woolery). Neither play’s ending matches the source text, but both reflect some of the utopic aspirations of the 130 plus community performers that typically

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<sup>19</sup> “Anti-Racism & Cultural Transformation Plan: Reflecting on Our Cultural Transformation Work So Far,” The Public Theatre, <https://publictheater.org/news-items/anti-racism--cultural-transformation-plan/anti-racism--cultural-transformation-plan/>. N. access d.

<sup>20</sup> Dani Lencioni and Michael Friedman, *Racoons Are Very Intelligent Creatures*, podcast audio, Public Square: A podcast of the Public Theatre, 24:38, [https://publictheater.org/news-items/buckets/conversations/podcast/podcast\\_ep3/](https://publictheater.org/news-items/buckets/conversations/podcast/podcast_ep3/). N. access d.

appear in a Public Works program.<sup>21</sup> The excitement of even these plays, however, requires the three-fold suspension of knowledge: 1) the fate of Seneca Village, 2) the fate of similar communities scattered throughout an ever-changing city, 3) the disjunction between the audience for the Public's plays, and the public at large.<sup>22</sup>

## Oregon Shakespeare Festival

Jill Dolan, the preeminent exponent of theatre's utopic potential, finds Ashland "a charming small town whose streets are lined with chic, interesting shops and gourmet restaurants, all in the shadow of pine covered hills that gesture to the mountains beyond," a place where even a critic fortified against Shakespeare can find themselves spellbound, and where archaic language simply seems like the vernacular (Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator*).<sup>23</sup> The festival context, the actors' comfortable embodiment of the language and action, and the director's spare staging enabled what Dolan termed the most fluid and imaginatively productive Shakespeare she had seen.

In Oregon, the utopic sentiment is doubtlessly present in the historical landscape, but its meaning is not fixed. The framers of Oregon's first territorial laws held onto an implicit concept of "white utopia" and they therefore made an explicit exclusion of both slavery *and* ethnic minorities. The white settlers in Oregon sought to avoid embracing the "slaveholding power" of the South (Thoennes and Landau 453), and serve as a fraternal model to the country—the white part of it, anyway (Thompson "Expectation and Exclusion"). It was a wild irony that 2020's largely peaceful protests saw their most sustained and least-disciplined energy in Portland, a city with one of the lowest percentages of Black people, and where largely white crowds felt safe enough to use force to both attack and defend a federal courthouse (Fuller).

Ashland, the home of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, possesses its own share of Oregon's contradictions. Perhaps the most striking image from 1920s Ashland shows the Ku Klux Klan marching openly through the city.<sup>24</sup> As

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<sup>21</sup> To make this claim I am drawing on my personal conversations with the unpaid community participants.

<sup>22</sup> Sheaffer notices that the Public and the New York Shakespeare Festival often rhetorically conflate their audience with the public-at-large in order to describe their productions as a public good. This is a common move when pursuing arts funding, as is the polishing of the proposal with Shakespeare (56).

<sup>23</sup> Dolan argues for the experience of utopic sentiment as a motivation for social change, a way of seeing a better future (*Utopia in Performance*).

<sup>24</sup> Oregon Historical Society. Date unknown. The photo can be seen online at <https://www.klcc.org/post/white-supremacy-pervasive-scourge-oregon-history/>.



at Winedale, the nearby historic markers emphasize the successes of white pioneers, civic leaders, and progressives. In a recent low point, in 2016 a townspeople yelled at OSF actor Christiana Clark that he could “kill a black person and be out of jail in a day and a half. Look it up. The KKK is still alive and well here.” The actor responded by emceeing a Juneteenth Remembrance Day (Akins).

Oregon Shakespeare Festival recently addressed the tensions with a pandemic-era short film, *Ash Land* (dir. Shariffa Ali). The filmmakers, the majority of whom were African American, described their artistic intentions in a podcast interview in which they observed that the Oregon Shakespeare Festival had sheltered them throughout the pandemic, and that they valued the gorgeous, pastoral setting; but they also had observed the absence of Black community. It does not betray the plot to say that the first part of *Ash Land* finds two Black women isolated in Ashland’s rural setting. One of the women is refused a ride from a passing pickup; the vehicle is loaded with the imagery of “gun rights” and white libertarianism. The other character sits isolated in her trailer, and she uses makeup to change her skin colour. The rural space only begins to offer comfort after they link up, and the images shift towards cleansing, baptism, renewal, play, self-forgiveness and creating a community in the absence of others who look like you, or who look at the world in the same way. The film only runs twenty minutes, and the final five are devoted to an original song from Ray Angry of *The Roots*. The lyrics make explicit what is rendered invisible in the recorded critical reception of Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s plays. “...still a body of water to cross, can we forget / All the bodily fluids we lost to the horsewhip? / Is health a sundown state of mind in the northwest? / Was Ashland built on burnt crosses and torches?” The final frame offers “We black. We in Oregon. Look at us.” For an audience member, the short film offers a lot to give witness to in twenty minutes. In scale, it is a pocket-project that usefully articulates how difficult it can be for Black Americans to “take in” the rural settings in which we ask them to study, work, and play in the dramas of William Shakespeare—or for white audiences to “take in” the reality of the Black performers on stage.

## Alabama Shakespeare Festival

Alabama Shakespeare Festival did not respond to my queries regarding the site’s land usage history prior to its current role as an artistic playground. As with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, tracing the specific chain of ownership has not yet occurred, and since the theatre is located in the South such an understanding would allow us to know if people had been enslaved there, and perhaps what happened to them, or what took place there during Reconstruction, or

indeed at any time prior to when the Blounts purchased the property for use as a cultural park. We do know that it is located in Montgomery, a “birthplace of the Confederacy,” and a place where racial unrest sparked incessantly at the century-old flashpoints of police violence, corruption, and poverty (Miller).<sup>25</sup> The festival is more specifically located in the Blount Cultural Park, where the Shakespeare Garden offers a “Stroll Back in Time” and “romantic buildings inspired by the picturesque English countryside.”<sup>26</sup> The romantic posture of the Blount Cultural Park uses Shakespeare’s cultural capital to make an implicit prelapsarian leap away from the history of Southern rural life. To attract artists to the area, they may have needed every ounce of cultural capital (not to mention USD capital) they could get; Winton Blount was himself among a large set of wealthy southerners who turned towards the Republican party in the 1940s in a revolt against the perceived economic and racial liberalism of northern Democrats—hardly a popular posture among American artists (Feldman). The Blounts were devoted Anglophiles, and when the Carolyn Blount theater opened in 1985, it raised two flags: the American and the British. Rather than locating the action in Montgomery, the first production at the theater transported *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* back to Edwardian England wherein the lovers escaped into the woods from a “class conscious” Athens. *Southern Quarterly* reserved its highest praise for the “lavish visual feast” of a *Richard III* production in which “few things occur to Richard. He is at the center of the action, a whirlpool forcing people to react to him,” and for this reason, “the role of Richard may be Shakespeare’s greatest achievement” (Robertson).<sup>27</sup> (Despite the exhausted gothic ennui found among William Faulkner’s characters, the white southern man-of-action remains one of the strongest stereotypes in the region.<sup>28</sup>) As is typical in the American experience, the site places a supreme emphasis on the benevolence of the founders, and tames history within the set bounds of “culture” as set forth by the founders’ vision. In a city rich in

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<sup>25</sup> Judith Miller, “Montgomery Tension High after Incident between Police and Black Family,” *The New York Times*, 16 March 1983. The headline undersells the story: it involves a call for martial law, an accusation of torture, a rash home invasion by police officers, the incarceration of an entire Black family, and fervent protests.

<sup>26</sup> *Blount Cultural Park Visitor Information Guide: Inside the Shakespeare Garden*. Undated, but it includes a reference to Mayor Bobby Bright (1999 to 2009) and it was probably printed in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>27</sup> Robertson’s “whirlpool of action” quote comes from the director of that season’s *Richard III*, Edward Stern.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Alabama Shakespeare founder W. M. Blount, *Doing It My Way*. A more literary example can be found in Tom Wolfe, *A Man in Full: A Novel*. Compared with William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*. Ralph Ellison smartly parodies white delusions about self-reliance at the end of the ‘Golden Day’ episode in Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

American history, it is, at times, an ahistorical island. Their ongoing Southern Writers Project tries to build a bridge to the mainland (Gardner). The artists involved have described the experience as one of artistic solitude, or a monastic existence (Willis 31).<sup>29</sup> As is the case with all the sites in this survey, more research is needed. Brevity can be felt as a kind of cruelty towards the students and artists who have committed their artistry to these stages, and that is not the purpose of this essay.

## **American Shakespeare Center**

The American Shakespeare Center (ASC) is unique among the sites surveyed in its self-awareness of both the Shakespearean “time machine” it pursues, and its location among quite explicit memorials to slave-owning traitors to American democracy. That self-awareness translates to a reminder of what Paul Menzer describes as the “theatre’s unique ability to be two places at once” (Menzer et al. 12). It is a semi-historical, semi-imagined, and reconstructed Blackfriars theatre from 400 years ago and 4,000 miles away, and it is tucked into what was once the frontier of England’s first American colony and later became one of the geographic centres of “Lost Cause” tourism (12). Remarkably, it produces more Shakespearean and Renaissance drama than any other theatre in North America, and it lives in the Shenandoah Valley, one of the critical Confederate arteries, and consequently the site of several military campaigns (Menzer ivx; Gallagher; Cozzens; Bohland). At just over twenty-five years of age, the American Shakespeare Center is the youngest of the five theatre companies listed here. Up until 2020, the theatre was situated next to the “Stonewall Jackson Inn,” and the biannual Blackfriars academic conference has made frequent use of the next-door hotel. Both the theatre and the hotel “[came] up together as financial successes” in the renewal of downtown Saunton, Virginia (Zeigler). The hotel finally changed its name in the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests last summer; the local newspaper focused on the reaction on Facebook, which tilted towards white people angry at the “ridiculous” attempt to “change history” (Peters). Of course, naming a hotel for dead traitor “changed history,” and the building of the Blackfriars “changed history” as well. Local residents, historians, and marketing professionals tend to portray the Shenandoah Valley as an “idyllic rural heartland” that rarely challenges the normative assumptions of the Lost Cause tradition (Bohland 14-16).

The ASC’s Blackfriar playhouse is nestled behind the brick façade of a 19<sup>th</sup> century carpet factory, and the building turned a story of 20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Emerson at “35 Years in Montgomery,” Alabama Shakespeare Festival <https://asf.net/35/>. N. access d.

urban industrial decline into one of 21<sup>st</sup> century arts renewal. The interior is approximately designed to mirror the layout, look and timber resonances of a 17<sup>th</sup> century Blackfriar's playhouse, presenting a "cross-hatched history of England and America" (Menzer et al. 6). The playhouse uses "universal lighting," a practice wherein the audience and actors share the space, can see each other. Before each performance, the actors "set the [audience's] clock" and describe the stage practices they will use, including doubling (multiple characters inhabited by a single actor) and audience interaction, and justify these techniques as being appropriate to the Early Modern period from which springs most of their repertoire (Menzer et al. 1). Yet this setting of the clock requires "selective memory, selective forgetting, and deliberate amnesia" on the part of the theatre-makers as they seek to draw the audience into their confidence and into a liminal space where their staging conventions propel the work (Menzer et al. 5).

The pandemic of COVID-19 ensured a fraught year for every American theater, but the American Shakespeare Center found itself on especially precarious footing. According to the reporting of Jerald Raymond Pierce, administrators and artists from the theatre wrote a letter charging the artistic director—a white male—with bullying and abusive behaviour; when he resigned a few months later, he implied his actions were for the good of the company as he sought to offer the American Shakespeare Center a "tabula rasa" for the new year. For the artists who had composed and signed the letter (more than a hundred of them) the tabula rasa suggested a white savior narrative at odds with the tenor of the reproach they had sent to the board (Pierce).

Despite the relative youth of the company, the chaos of the past year, and the bizarre historical posture of region, the ASC's consistent aesthetic approach has yielded remarkable achievements in art. For the purposes of the present essay, lifting those of an exceptional Black artist seems most appropriate. In the short span of fifteen years, René Thornton Jr. performed the folio—all of Shakespeare's extant plays, and in a few seasons would offer powerful performances not just in the roles most closely associated with race (Othello and Aaron from *Titus Andronicus*), but the less explored characters in the canon that he came to prefer, such as the title character from *Timon of Athens* (Taylor Michael). The sustained excellence and unique achievements of René Thornton Jr. are an important part of the new history of Blackfriars, and the fact that he did this despite the very well-known and very racist history of the area suggests the prelapsarian move towards Shakespeare may not just be the prerogative of white artists and audiences. Thornton Jr. has moved on, and other Black actors now make use of the space. As Pierce recently put it, these performances give us the chance not to see how Black actors fit into Shakespeare's world, but how they allow Shakespeare into theirs (Pierce).

In this sense, the American Shakespeare Center offers a reinvention of heritage armed with a commitment to equity and a disciplined artistic approach. Menzer warns that “heritage always wantonly traffics in misrepresentations” (“Less We Forget” 20). Yet if heritage is inevitable, we can commit our actions towards the best available.

### **“The latter end of his commonwealth forgets the beginning”**

In the canons of the English language and live performance, no writer has bequeathed as rich a heritage as William Shakespeare. Throughout America, he remains the most performed playwright. His plays gave us lightening bursts of language that permanently shaped our idiom, our poetic imaginations, and our understanding of the human condition. His complex and deeply revealed characterizations created individuals like Hamlet, the Macbeths, Viola, Benedick and Beatrice, Romeo and Juliet, whom we often seem to know better than ourselves. My own mentor, James Loehlin, has expressed the following about Shakespearean performance in America, and in particular at Winedale:

Shakespeare’s language [can] still be communicated with power, clarity and immediacy to twenty-first century audiences, and that Shakespearean performances [can] still respond to a changing world while still functioning with the basic theatrical and narrative engines that made them work 400 years ago. (270)

This is how James directs, as well—he encourages repetition, repetition, repetition until the student actors can explore the contradictions within each scene, and for the most part letting broad brushstrokes fall away. As W. B. Worthen puts it, this is inquiry through action (264-87). The plays thereby develop their own internal logic, one that roughly aligns with Shakespeare’s text.

Without design choices that make sweeping interpretive statements, these productions play each scene for its theatrical value, and in so doing reveal the social relations within it with searching detail and clarity. (Loehlin “Playing Politics” 93)

In a sense, American history is the sweeping “design choice” or “interpretive statement” that could foil our inquiries into text. An English, Early Modern playwright has, with much merit, achieved the status of an American public good. Therefore, his plays are often performed without controversy—and (bizarrely) on or near sites specifically tied to the enslavement or disenfranchisement of people with African ancestry. We have seen that New

York City's popular outdoor Shakespeare theater, the Delacorte, is situated just south of the site of Seneca Village, an African American community displaced for the construction of Central Park; Alabama Shakespeare Festival likely takes place on a former plantation; the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Virginia has made frequent use of a hotel dedicated to a Confederate general; the University of Texas' Shakespeare at Winedale festival is performed in a barn built with supports carved by enslaved labour; the Oregon Shakespeare Festival takes place within a state unique for its founding laws dedicated to white supremacy. A survey of Shakespearean performance sites in New York, Alabama, Virginia, Texas, and Oregon has shown the strength of the unexpected connection between the performance of Shakespeare in America and the subjugation of Black persons, and it raises questions about the unique and utopian assumptions of Shakespearean performance in the United States. The evidence falls far short of a racist conspiracy—there was no organized, explicit intent to erase the history of racism. But the evidence does show a consistent pattern of how the performance of Shakespeare serves as a scenic backdrop that overwhelms the senses in an attempt at new beginnings for European culture where the first attempt—slavocracy and systemic racism—was viewed as lapsing into immorality. Shakespeare is the workaround.

The insistence with which we celebrate the utopian in American Shakespeare belies a need—or maybe just a desire—for a prelapsarian Society. Do all societies have such a poet? We can easily imagine Tolstoy and Chekhov performing that function in Russia, or Homer providing that for the Greeks. Our vision of the meaning of Shakespearean performance in America may be as inescapable as it is historically inaccurate. But now you have read the slave schedules, and I have read the reports of Reconstruction-era violence, and I am asking us to try.

The absence of this knowledge prevents sites like Alabama's Blount Cultural Park and Texas' Winedale Historical Center from serving as places to "open up hard history," or seeing how Black lives have shaped America's built environment (Dudley). The activists and educators Theresa G. Coble *et al* argue that we can use history to learn to confront difficult emotions, recognize sanctified space, facilitate group bonding, identify models for activism, and move forward in activism (26-32). Ironically, the goals of Coble *et al* are not a universe away from the progressive goals with which many Shakespeare festivals were founded. In Texas, James Ayres wanted Winedale to be an escape "to the forest of Arden" for the sake of self-discovery; in the Coble framework, the enrichment occurs through deep immersion into American history rather than total immersion into Shakespeare. This is the frustrating thing about so many Shakespearean performance sites: they could better execute the work that they intend to do with Shakespeare (as Ayanna Thompson and Tom Mooney put it) if they admit the presence of the elephant shitting all over the students,

actors, and audience members (Thompson, 2011). This would better honour the challenges faced by non-white students and awaken us to the ongoing damages and dangers of American society.

I am someone who has experienced Shakespeare as a kind of utopia. At the University of Texas at Austin, I studied Shakespeare through the process of performance, and the teamwork and creativity involved in that process will be a source of strength for me throughout my life. When participating in the program, it was very easy to imagine myself, like Rosalind and her friends, escaping to the woods. But those woods are neither ideal nor empty. American history has visited these places before. My essay has challenged the nature of that utopia and the social costs involved in creating Shakespearean utopias in the United States. The days I spent examining the Freedmen’s Bureau reports of Reconstruction violence, scanning for explicit references to the Lewis plantation—and even without coming up without direct links to Winedale—Jesu. “Fool, of thyself speak well. Fool, do not flatter.”

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