UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

February 11, 2016
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The Essence of The Bard

Here's a sure-fire way to teach people to hate Shakespeare: Stick them in a theater and make them binge-watch "Richard II," both parts of "Henry IV" and all of "Henry V." Then, maybe a day or two later, force them to take in all three parts of "Henry VI" and the full "Richard III." That's 24,803 lines of The Bard, or roughly 24 hours of viewing. Deadly, no?

But wait. What if, by some miracle of a guy who locked himself alone in a room for a year, you could see all eight of Shakespeare's histories in five and a half hours? What if those 108 years of intrigue, angst, duplicity, lust and vengeance were whittled to their essence to trace that epic arc of English history?

The world's about to find out. "The Death of Kings," performed by UC Santa Barbara's Naked Shakes, debuts Feb. 19 at the campus's Hatlen Theater. Adapted and directed by Irwin Appel, a professor of theater arts at UCSB, the production will be performed as two plays. The first, "I Come But For Mine Own," blends "Richard II," "Henry IV" and "Henry V." The second, "The White Rose and the Red," melds "Henry VI" and "Richard III."

Oddly and fittingly, this audacious compression of Shakespeare's histories owes its life in part to the golden age of television binge-watching. The dramatic sprawl of "Breaking Bad" or "Game of Thrones" shares a theatrical affinity with the episodic arc from "Richard II" to "Richard III." Seeing every episode of a TV series, Appel said, heightens our appreciation of it.

“Why do people so look forward to a season finale?” Appel said. “You could turn on ‘Breaking Bad’ anywhere in the middle and watch an episode and think it was a good show. But when you know the characters, when you’ve been following them from the beginning, then you are emotionally involved. Can we do that with our characters? Many people have seen ‘Richard III,’ for example, but there are a lot of scenes when the characters are explaining the political situation of what came before. In our play, you get to see it. And so I’m hoping that enhances that character.”

Compressing all eight plays into a coherent whole was daunting, even painful, Appel said. “I’m literally cutting 75 percent of each of these plays,” he explained. “So, there are a lot of difficult choices. It’s a lot like deciding between your own children.”

Appel’s goal in adapting the plays was to show the connected development of the plays, from beginning to end. And not just the highlights, but the moments that advance the century-long story. “I always thought ‘Henry IV, Part 1’ is a fantastic play,” he said. “That’s the story of great characters like Hotspur, and the great Falstaff play and Prince Hal. I always felt that ‘Henry IV, Part 2’ had a lot of parts that I found dull, but it has a great story at the end when Prince Hal renounces Falstaff. And it is the death of Henry IV and the beginnings of Henry V becoming king.

“So I thought to myself,” Appel continued, “ ‘I would actually like to do more of ‘Henry IV, Part 1,’ cut a lot of ‘Henry IV, Part 2’ and put it with ‘Henry V’ so that you see the entire arc of a character like a Prince Hal becoming Henry V in one sitting.”

The dual plays, with discrete casts totaling more than 50 actors, will allow the public to experience the plays either one at a time or, on the final days of its scheduled run, March 5 and 6, to see them together. Appel stressed that the plays can be seen in either order.

As Naked Shakes performances, what the audience won’t see are elaborate productions. The company, which for “The Death of Kings” includes four faculty and two campus staff members, is known for its spare staging. More importantly, it stresses a clarity of verse. Performed properly, Appel observed, Shakespeare reveals itself.

“What I think makes a Naked Shakes production great is that the audience hears Shakespeare in a fresh way, and they go, ‘Wow,’ ” Appel said. “You could go to a play like ‘Hamlet’ and think, ‘I never heard that line before. I didn’t know that line

was in the ‘To be or not to be’ speech.

“The British don’t talk about going to ‘see’ a play; they talk about going to ‘hear’ a play” he added. “I really like that expression because I feel like that’s very much what Naked Shakes is. In a way it’s very visual and wildly theatrical, but I feel like if we’re doing our job right you could close your eyes and listen like it’s on the radio. It would invade your soul. You may not understand every word, but hopefully that doesn’t stop the enjoyment.”

Appel left The Bard’s words largely intact, if trimmed, and strove to adhere to three rules: It can’t boring; the audience has to know who’s who (not easy when it seems everyone is named Henry, Richard or Edward); and it has to have theatrical heart and life. “My way of doing it is not underestimating the intelligence of that audience, not feeling like it has to be dumbed down,” he said. “It’s the opposite. It’s basically saying, ‘How do we bring people in to see how great this stuff is?’ It’s meant to be energetic, electric, raw, exciting.”

It’s also been a long ride for Appel. Although Naked Shakes performed excerpts of “The Death of Kings” in September, the real test of his work is just around the corner. “It’s lunacy,” he said. “It’s going to take probably until we close for me to really sit and say, ‘OK, what do we really have here?’ Because I’d love for this to have a life beyond UCSB. I don’t know if it’s possible or not, but I would love for ‘Death of Kings’ to go to New York. I don’t know if that’s something we can do, but I would like to try. I spent a whole year alone in my room working on this and another year getting it on its feet, and now we’re going see what happens.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.