

Shakespeare in the Parking Lot

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Scene One: A municipal parking lot in Lower East Side, Manhattan. A tall, attractive, red-haired young woman in her twenties is looking out across the street from the second floor of an apartment above a small, storefront theater. Her name is Jennifer. She speaks to her husband:

--Rob, look out there. What do you see? I know, Graffiti-covered walls, lamp posts, municipal meters. It's kind of ugly, isn't it?

--Yeah, he replies. What are you getting at?

--I see potential, she says. Look, we could use this space--they say it's the size of a quarter of a city block--It is unused after 6, and the lights come on around 8. That would provide free lighting. And I think: the acoustics should be just fine without amplification. Just imagine the sounds of the actors' voices bouncing off those walls. We could use the meters as props, too.

--Sounds like you're on to something, Jen. You mean we could do performances outdoors in addition to those in our indoor theater?

--Yes, she replies. Rob, we can do more. We can give people access to both theaters, those who live around here and those who don't. I know, some will think it's grubby and unsafe after dark. But I know they'll start coming, maybe a few at first, then more and more as time goes along.

--O.K., Rob says. But what's going to be the big attraction?

--Shakespeare! Jennifer says excitedly. Shakespeare's plays performed right here in this parking lot. That would be so cool, so different. Let's go over there and check it out. I can say some lines from "The Taming of the Shrew" and see what the sound is like. You listen, O.K.?

They enter the parking lot and Jennifer recites: "A woman moved is like a fountain troubled,/ Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty,/And while it is so, none so dry or thirsty/ Will deign to sip or touch one drop of it."

--That sounds pretty clear, Jen. Try another spot, maybe by that parking meter over there, enough distance from that wall with all that great abstract art. Try a few lines from "As You Like It."

She begins: " Men are April when they woo, December when they wed. Maids are May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives." Here's another passage I remember. I'll stand over there: "There is a man haunts the forest that abuses our young plants with carving 'Rosalind' on their barks, hangs odes upon hawthorns, and elegies on brambles; all, forsooth, deifying the name of Rosalind..."

-- Amazing! Every word clear as a bell! Enough for now? We'll try other spots later.

--This isn't exactly what the forest of Arden would look like, she says, but we can pretend it is, can't we? Rob, this place can be perfect for Shakespeare, believe me. I have an idea. I know you know about Joseph Papp's conception of staging Shakespeare's plays for free in Central Park. Well, this place isn't a park, for sure, but it can become something different from what it is. We can name it something different from anything else. Let's call it "Shakespeare in the Parking Lot." It too can be for free.

Scene two: Later. An ongoing interview with Jennifer during a rare free moment in the storefront theater.

--Jennifer, you've told me something about your background: growing up in Long Island, where your mother ran a music school. When were you drawn to theater?

--Early. First there were the plays and musicals in high school, then I was on my way to Emerson College in Boston, where I was exposed to the kind of theater I would adopt as my way of life.

--Then where after Emerson?

--My mother moved to Cincinnati and I enrolled in Northern Kentucky University, which, by the way, has a really fine drama department. Then I met Rob and we got married in 1990, then we were off to New York. We had this dream of starting a theater company; so, in time Expanded Arts was born.

--And you both eventually found a place to live and work?

-- Yes, a place affordable enough and close to the subway; it could be described as a storefront sandwiched in between a candy store and a warehouse here on Ludlow Street. Nothing fancy, but just right for us and our little theater operating below us.

--Sounds like La Vie Boheme to me.

-- You're right. It's such a fun area to be in: trendy bars, great delis, bargain shops, you name it.

-- What kind of plays have you been producing at Expanded Arts?

--First, the avant-garde ones of the early 20th century. Then we switched to the classics--much less expensive. We usually put on five performances every six weeks. Really packing them in, in this tiny 30-seat theater and charging \$12 for admission.

--So, how did this idea of yours take shape, doing free Shakespeare in that lot across the street?

--As you can see, this theater is so small, and that enormous parking lot was in a way beckoning to us, crying out to be used. There was nothing going on at night. It was just one big, empty space. I couldn't help thinking of Peter Brook's line that empty spaces can be theaters. That is what really turned us on.

--But that is a city-owned lot. How did you get permission to use it?

--We called the Department of Transportation, which directed us to the local Community Board and the Business Improvement District. They told us we would have to get permission of the residents in the neighborhood. They had to sign a petition saying it was all right with them to "play host" to an outdoor theater.

--Aren't most of the residents here Chinese?

--That's right. Very few if any of them could read or speak English; so, I hurried to a nearby Baskin-Robbins, where one of the guys working there could read and speak their language. After that, I went around the neighborhood, literally stopping people on the street, knocking on doors, showing them the document. No problem, thank God. I got more than 250 signatures.

--So that was all you needed, and you were on your way.

--Yes. Rob and I were just ecstatic.

--Being executive artistic director and producer means you are in charge of everything?

--Yes. I arrange the days and times for all rehearsals and performances. Rob and I are completely absorbed in our theater. We have to be on top of things constantly. I always aim for quality in each production. Part of the reason we are able to produce quality shows at a rapid pace is due to the relationship built among our company members: the designers, directors, and actors; they all act as a team.

--Tell me about the actors.

-- Well, many are members of Actors Equity Association who appear without benefit of contract or salary. You might say they donate their services. They are just wonderful. So professional, so talented, and no prima donnas. These guys are the backbone behind Expanded Arts. A lot of them have been around for a year or so and some longer. They contribute 1000 per cent to our company. I love them all.

-- You of course act and direct?

--Yes. I played Kate in "The Taming of the Shrew". Rosalind in "As You Like It"; I directed our first production, "A Midsummer Night's Dream", then "Julius Caesar", "Richard II", "The Comedy of Errors", "Hamlet" and some others.

-- What about the people who come to see the plays?

-- They come from all over and generally tend to be young, mostly around thirty. There are also the Chinese kids from around the corner, those from SoHo and the Bowery. Many read blurbs in "Village Voice" and "Time Out New York" or hear about it on radio. Yes, there are those who come from as far away as Long Island, Westchester, upstate New York and, of course, Manhattan. So, there's a mix of people, just like in Shakespeare's time. There are usually 75 to 100 attending each performance, and they have comfortable folding chairs to sit in. By the way,

since we don't charge admission, after a performance we discreetly put a basket on a table and ask for donations; the response has generally been very good.

--Now let's talk about your productions.

--First of all, I want to say that only a portion of that large space is used for the plays. It all began with "A Midsummer Night's Dream," which I directed. Because of the low budget, we had to find costumes that gave the idea of a classic Shakespeare play. This is true for all the productions. Anyway, in "Midsummer" the fairies had flowers in their hair and made their entrances on tricycles and skateboards; Titania entered on a little red wagon; Oberon wore white platform disco boots. Right in the middle of the performance a garbage truck made a really noisy entrance into the lot at the same time each night. Unbelievable! We couldn't let that stop our show. Naturally, the actors couldn't shout out the noise. So, on the spur of the moment, the cast made that truck a part of the show, bowing before it as if it were some sort of alien god sent by Zeus.

--So you really do have to improvise at times?

--Yes, we do. Our philosophy is to embrace the distractions. You don't, you really can't, chase them away. Things you don't expect to happen, do happen. Like that truck, for example. Distractions create a challenge for the actors. They need to improvise when necessary, to keep the performance going, to project, and to hold the audience's attention. They always have to remain focused no matter what noises there are: screaming children, horns blowing, planes overhead, sirens, car alarms, et cetera. You know, in Shakespeare's time during a performance there was generally some noise and some sort of commotion going on in the pit and elsewhere close by.

--And that's the way it is here too, as you say.

-- Yes. I remember during a performance of "Macbeth" a group of Asians and Latinos cut across the staging area. They weren't disruptive, just curious. They perhaps wondered why the actors dressed in those strange costumes were shouting at each other in a strange language. Then, on another night during our "Road Warrior"-like modernization of "Macbeth" a member of a real-life youth gang who was watching the show jumped on a motorcycle that Macduff had ridden on to the set. I was the director and had to act quickly. I asked him politely to get off the motorcycle. Suddenly he pulled a knife! This mini-crisis was resolved when the actors, who were dressed like street-gang punks themselves, came menacingly over to the motorcycle with objects we had found for props: clubs, hubcaps, and other "assorted weapons," and scared the guy off. The audience apparently loved that dramatic moment, which was not, of course, in the script, and watched the performance to the end, applauding enthusiastically. As far as I was concerned, I was not anticipating a repeat of that slight distraction.

--You've really modernized the plays, haven't you?

--Yes, but for a purpose, which is to make the plays relevant to our times, that is more comprehensible to our audiences. We don't change or delete any of the words in the plays, but we are experimental. Our purpose is not to make light of

or lessen the value of the plays but to remain truthful to the meaning of each one. Given the surroundings, the plays are adapted to an urban setting, in this case, street theater. You might say that our minimal aesthetic enables us to free our imagination. "Richard III" is set entirely in a gutted Ford Malibu, which is meant to represent the doomed king's realm. In "The Tempest" Prospero's realm is an island, but not an island you normally think of, rather an asphalt island surrounded by a sea of brick. The battle scenes in "Henry V" were played against those walls of graffiti; the younger people in the audience really loved it, just as good as anything they could watch on television. Let me read to you what a critic from "Village Voice" wrote about Prospero and Caliban: "An Asian Prospero, dramatic with long black braid, looks sternly on while a "storm" tosses a golf-clubbing crew of "noblemen" on a voyage on the F-train. By the time the halogen street lamps are glowing, Taliban, flanked by punchy dancing sprites, has belted his plaint to rock music, vying with blasts of Hispanic music from passing cars." And this from "The Times": "Petruccio is always sure of a laugh when he yells above the traffic noise: 'Think you a little din can daunt mine ears?'" That gives you some idea of the kind of thing we are doing and of the things that we have to contend with. Do you have time for me to tell you about "Hamlet"?

--Sure.

--First, let me ask you a question. Have you ever seen a ghost in a parking lot? Well, one night when Hamlet's father's ghost came into view, some in the audience weren't sure if that ragged figure was a homeless vagrant or a character in the play. Just a momentary alarm, I suppose, but they began to sense the mystery, the other-worldliness of it all. During one performance a group of teenagers taunted the performers with howls and laughter. However, about halfway through, they quieted down and began watching the performance. You could just tell that they were totally getting everything that the actors were doing and enjoying it and having a great time. Here is a portion of a review from "New York Press", which gives you an idea of audience involvement: "We are watching the bloody end of a performance of "Hamlet"... Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes and Hamlet have fallen and lie face down on the asphalt, covered by white sheets. Ophelia lies stage left, toe-tagged on a makeshift bier. Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern are in the rear, arms raised and necks askew in a pantomime of hanging. A kid rolls up on his dirt bike and taps one of us on the shoulder... He asks, "What happened?" It's a long story, we tell him dismissively... He insists by asking the same question. "Well", we say, pointing, "those four were poisoned, she drowned, and the two in the back were hanged." The kid surveys the scene again and asks, "Are the cops coming?"

--There's a fine line between fiction and reality, isn't there?

-- Yes. I remember particularly one night when someone in the audience refused to let Juliet die. He kept muttering and moaning with great feeling, "Oh, no! No! Please don't die!" He briefly stopped the action of the scene, but was quietly but firmly escorted from his seat. I'm not sure if he came back. In "Macbeth", one spectator. asked, "Who's the drunk leaning against that meter?" Actually, he was the porter in the play.

--Do you think you have reached your goal?

--I would say we are getting there. There is always the feeling that there is more to do. You can say that our goal is to bring Shakespeare to the people, from young people who have never seen or read his plays to those who read and studied Shakespeare in high school and now in their lives want to read and study him more, to discover more about his plays to the really seasoned Shakespeare buffs. What I love about all this is the audience's and the community's response to what we have been doing for them. When we first moved here, we noticed it is very family-oriented. Some actually help us with the projects. One Asian kid asked to read along with us during rehearsals. Who knows? He may some day become a great Hamlet or Romeo. I hope there is a certain heart and soul here that you cannot find elsewhere. I believe it shows that Shakespeare's plays can come alive anywhere, even in a city parking lot in the lower East Side of Manhattan.

--Jennifer, thank you very much.

Epilogue:

Shakespeare in the Parking Lot was seen on ABC News, CBS, Fox, PBS and BBC. It was featured in major publications across the country, including "The New York Times", "The Wall Street Journal", "The Boston Globe", and "The New Yorker." Jennifer was the original producer of the Lucille Lortell-winning Off-Broadway hit "Shakespeare's R&J", which was the longest running production of "Romeo and Juliet" On-or Off- Broadway. She came up with the initial concept of the play being performed entirely by four young men in multiple roles, hired a director and oversaw all aspects of production. "R&J" has been performed in several theaters, including Cincinnati's Playhouse in the Park. I am proud of what Jennifer has so far accomplished in her artistic career, of what she has done to make Shakespeare's plays accessible to people of all ages and background, to have the plays performed in different venues, and to have those in the audience experience the universality of the plays. I love and respect her. She is a wonderful, talented, and creative step-daughter.
