ACTING SHAKESPEARE: A Roundtable Discussion with Artists from the Utah Shakespeare Festival's 2023 Productions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Michael Bahr
USF Executive Managing Director

Featuring: Cassandra Bissell, Nathan Hosner, Ty Fanning, Naiya Vanessa McCalla

Bahr: It's the twenty-fourth year of inviting academic scholars to campus to see Shakespeare performed. I think this is a very, very important part of the work. And when I say the work, I'm talking about the overall work of both production and research.

Just so I know the audience that I'm talking to, how many of you got a chance to see the show last night? [Hands are raised in audience.] Okay, fantastic. How many of you got a chance to see *Midsummer Night's Dream*? Let me see those hands too, as well. [Hands are raised in audience.] Fantastic.

This cast, or the actors that you see here, were both in *Midsummer Night's Dream* and also in *Romeo and Juliet*, and love to talk about their work.

We are going to be recording this and then we'll type it up and put it into a proceedings. Nothing will be broadcast or printed or anything until we've reviewed it and put it all together, and we send those to the actors to make sure we're okay and have permissions,

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but we do think that this helps out the scholarship. And Matt will tell you that EBSCOhost and others have used these discussions about productions to inform other productions as well. So, I'm grateful.

I haven't introduced myself, have I? I guess I probably should.

Audience member: This is the man that was missing last night, one of our founders, Michael Bahr.

Bahr: Thank you. A long time ago, we created the Wooden O—"may we cram / Within this Wooden O" (*Henry V* 1.0.13-14)—to explore Shakespeare, as we've talked about. And we've had scholars here, biology scholars and history scholars and language arts scholars and geology scholars, because that great man, Shakespeare, takes us to all of those places. I'm grateful for that.

I am presently the interim managing director at the Shakespeare Festival, where, again, we're very grateful to have you here. Enough about me.

We are so grateful that we are blessed to have these actors, who you saw in *Midsummer Night's Dream* and also in *Romeo and Juliet*. They will tell us a little bit about those processes, but I'd like you to get to know them personally. So why don't we start off, first of all, with an introduction. Tell us your name, the characters you play, and essentially just a little bit about your training and how you got here to USF. And we'll start here with Cassie and move on down everybody else. Go ahead.

Bissell: I'm Cassandra Bissell. I played Hippolyta and Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Lady Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*.

I don't have formal training as an actor, actually, but I did start doing theater from a very young age, in elementary school. My mother signed me up for an after-school theater class. And I come from academic folks, so I think Shakespeare was always kind of held up as the ultimate. So, I always wanted to do Shakespeare, but I didn't get to do it until I was in college.

I went to University of Chicago. My degree is actually in gender studies, but at the time University Theater was the largest extracurricular organization on campus. So, I did a ton of theater as an undergrad, but it was all student-driven and student-run. And then when I got out, I started auditioning in Chicago. My first professional equity jobs were actually at Chicago Shakespeare

Theater. So, when I started doing equity work, it was largely Shakespeare. And eventually, after multiple general auditions in Chicago, year after year, banging on the door, finally I got here. 2014 was my first season, and then I was also here in 2017, and this is my third season here.

Hosner: Hey, I'm Nathan Hosner. This is my first year here actually. I play Friar Lawrence, as well as Egeus in *Midsummer*.

I was very fortunate. I grew up in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and at the time there was a youth repertory company. We were blessed to have an incredibly overqualified head of the youth theatre, who actually ended up going to the Stratford Institute and getting an MA there. So, we would take our high school productions around the state to do in front of other high schools, which was great. Although I missed a lot of classes, I ended up going to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Before that, I worked at an equity theater playing Demetrius, among other things. You're much better.

Fanning: You can't escape Demetrius.

Hosner: I went to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, and after that I was largely Chicago-based. I also worked at Chicago Shakespeare quite a bit, and a lot of different regional theaters, including Alabama Shakespeare, Arkansas Shakespeare. I should just do it alphabetically at some point. If there is one, I should work in Alaska Shakespeare.

After that, I started working a lot of new plays as well. It's interesting how Shakespeare works. I find him really interesting in terms of structure and thinking that way can really help you portray new works, particularly works that maybe lean a little more language-based. And now I'm here.

Fanning: Hey. I'm Ty. I play Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* and Demetrius in *Midsummer*.

Let's see. This is my second season. I was here in 2018. I have spent the majority of the last 5 to 6 years out at American Players Theater, which is another classically-focused theater. Heavy language work. Nathan's also worked there. It's way out in the woods. It's one of the strangest places. We call it a Shakespeare cult, and if you've worked there, you would understand why. They are rigid in their work and very, very rigorous, which is really exciting, but it's very much shaped how I work.

American Players Theater have a core company, which is a wonderful thing because you've got these actors that have been there for 30 or 40 years, and they have houses in the same town that they actually work in, and they're able to play all of the roles in the canon. So, learning from them really shaped me.

But to go back a bit, I'm from Mustang, Oklahoma, so we did not have much of a focus on theatrical or dramatic work. I was a debate student, actually. In fact, we didn't have a debate program until I was a freshman, and I was the first student. It was me and my teacher. So, I fell in love with—

Hosner: Did you just debate each other?

Fanning: Yeah. We did. No, we literally did. The first thing, our first assignment, the teacher was like, "Okay, I guess I'll take the other side."

So really what I was in love with was arguments and rhetoric, and that was kind of my way in. I ended up in a Shakespeare play that they put on at my school. And it just kind of all clicked in my head. And that was how I ended up there.

I went to Oklahoma City University, which is a BFA training program, conservatory style, so studied acting. I spent the majority of my career in Chicago, also working at Chicago Shakespeare Theater. They really kind of scoop you up in Chicago. They're like, "Okay, you can speak text? Come on in." That was where I got my start. Then I worked, as I was saying, out at American Players Theater and anywhere else with Shakespeare's name in it. I spent three seasons out at Montana Shakespeare in the Parks, playing a lot of the really hefty stuff because they're a smaller company, so even though you're 25, you still get to play Hamlet. So, I was able to kind of cut my teeth out there.

McCalla: Hi. I'm Naiya.

My story isn't nearly as interesting or exciting. I'm from Georgia. I grew up doing youth theater things. I think my first Shakespeare play that I ever did was seventh grade, and it was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was small. It was at my ballet theater. I was Hermia, Titania, and Flute at the same time. Don't ask how that worked, because it didn't.

Then I continued to do local theater things around Georgia. I ended up going to New York University, and I graduated this year,

and this is my first year at the festival. And I'm very grateful to get my start here. And that's pretty much it.

Bahr: You have played Juliet, though.

McCalla: I have.

Bahr: Four times.

McCalla: This is my third. Knock on wood for a fourth. And all in this same year. I did Juliet twice in the last 265 days before coming out here. Which was fun.

Bahr: Thank you for that. I want to start off with a couple of questions to get us going, and then we'll open it up for the rest of the group.

And since we can talk about both shows, I think it's okay to talk about the conversation between both *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Let's lead with that. You also had two very different processes with *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*. So, I'm just going to open up this as a question: What is the difference between those two productions? How do they inform one another? And have you found, for example, Demetrius Romeo? Egeus?

Hosner: I just screw it up for the kids whatever way.

Bahr: I know, it's a really, really open question, but since we have audience members that have seen both of those, the Shakespeare Festival gives us the advantage of leading to interesting conversations between shows as you look at the work and response from audience. So, anybody want to take that big broad question?

Fanning: I'll say, for me, something that struck me when I was working on Romeo was this idea that he starts the play in love with someone else, yet it's the greatest love story ever told. This was just something that came to me before I got into the rehearsal process, and it ended up really informing how I approached it—because it's so odd, right? What are we supposed to believe?

What always frustrated me about the play is that you get a vapid, shallow character if you approach Romeo like that. So, I was trying to find the opposite of true love. Which is obviously a very heady idea, but to me, the thing that I came around to is that with Rosaline, it's all about "what do I get?" And I found the same thing with Demetrius when he's with Hermia. It's about "what do I get?" But what they both learn is that love is the opposite of that. That actually love is about giving.

That's what Romeo learns in the balcony, I think. And I think that's what Demetrius learns with Helena. The process—how they get there—is wildly different. But in terms of character work, I found that that is a nice overlay for me, because when you're doing rep "This is the thing I'm after tonight. I am after get, get, get." And then, "Okay, now it's the opposite thing." They're both part of that arc.

Hosner: I'm just going to say that I think it was interesting that with *Romeo and Juliet*, we had an actor who was directing. Betsy Mugavero is a fantastic actor. You probably have been here and seen her before. But what was really interesting and I found really wonderful was having a director who had a special resonance with some of the work of Shakespeare and a special understanding of what actors need, understanding that we have a very small amount of time to get these plays up and running. We have a lot of *weeks*, but not as much *time* because everybody's doing other shows.

And I think that her focus, her understanding of the needs and the requirements of this space, of what the audiences are coming to it with, let her balance really digging into the text but also understanding that there's a bit of a triage in terms of what we can deal with and what we can't deal with. And so she relied on actors. If people knew how to take care of themselves with things, she let them. And to me it felt very empowering

You feel a lot more flexible because you're not having to filter. Not that there's anything wrong with a high concept production, and those can be really illuminating, but it's great to work where you feel like somebody understands the sweaty undergarments of your costumes, both metaphorically and literally. That, I think, felt wonderful. And I hope that that comes across in the production.

Bahr: Other comments before I go to my next question?

We are very blessed to have four really great text speakers here. Again, two very different productions. I find the *Romeo and Juliet* amazingly clear and simple, yet so incredibly deep because of the text. And Cassie, you and I have spoken about that beautiful text and resonance that you get in Titania and her language. So in both, the text is kind of our friend.

Could you share with us a little bit about your process, how you utilize the text to get what you want and how you work with the text? I've actually had multiple people talk to me about these

four actors and how their text is so fabulous. So how is the text your friend? And what do you do with the text to make that happen? Cassie?

Bissell: Well, you have to walk a really fine line on a technical level, getting the text out, lifting lines right, being clear and understanding individual words, et cetera, and also sounding like a human being. And the big thing for me is: I have to really have a very clear understanding of what I'm saying. That sounds like a really basic, obvious thing, but you have a sort of translation in your own head which tells you "This is what I'm saying here. This is the point that I'm driving at." And a lot of times with Shakespeare, you have a lot of lines to get you there.

It's driving through the argument that really powers the text. If you break it up too much, if you pause too much in between lines, you're going to lose it. But at the same time, the text is so beautiful and so rich and so layered. It's about figuring out how you get in all of these layers that are what make hearing Shakespeare's text extraordinary. Because it has so much more depth to it when you have all these different images, etc.

For me, I think about my early Chicago Shakespeare Theater days back before the internet was as much of a thing as it is now. I would go to the Chicago Public Library and get out every different edition of whatever the play was that I was working on and read whatever the notes were at the bottom to try and really get a feel for all the different interpretations of a line, and then make a choice for myself.

How do I make it true for myself in the context of this character that I'm building? What can I relate to best, as Cassie, in this character?

What I also love is the ability, with Shakespeare's text, to really talk to the audience. That's not always true, but sometimes it is. As Lady Capulet, I don't talk to the audience at all, but as Titania, I have moments where I do, especially in that first speech—that forgeries of jealousy speech—which is very hard. I've been put up on top in that balcony and it's a hard text and it's early in the play, and I feel like everybody's waiting for the lovers and the mechanicals and the fun. And it's hard to get through, but this is the scene that is setting it up. So more and more over the course of the run, I have found with that speech that I have a couple of lines where I really look at the audience, and I really try to grab them

by saying, "You're the human mortals that I'm talking about. We see the seasons alter. We're talking about climate change, folks. We are seeing the seasons alter." So, I lean into that when I can with Shakespeare, which is delightful.

Bahr: Beautiful. Anybody else? Yes, go ahead.

Fanning: In terms of text work, I think for me, it's like what you said, it's using the words to get what you want. It's argument.

Bahr: I just want to call back. He started by talking about debating. He talked about logic and rhetoric and argument. And I find that the minute I hear an actor I think—wow, they know how to use that. They know how to get what they want. So, if you want to talk a little bit about that?

Fanning: Yeah. I think for me, Shakespeare's work, both when I first approached it and to this day, feels like public discourse. It does not feel like a Netflix TV show with visual storytelling. To me, Shakespeare does an incredible job with his plots—not in all of his plays, but in many of them—but ultimately, he's trying to get to certain scenes, in my opinion.

There are certain scenes that feel like they are the argument that he wanted to have. The balcony scene is a scene where he's like, "That's gonna be the highlight of act one." It's a way to expand upon larger ideas. We can't just stand out there and pontificate or otherwise there's no story. It's what you were saying, too, Cassie. It's a weird line you have to tread where you know what you're lifting, what the argument is, but what's most important for us as actors is what your character needs, and what point you're trying to get across.

I think audiences understand text in both senses. There's the one sense of us knowing what we mean and lifting things and bringing life to them. But also the question of: what will happen to me if I get what I want? You have to think to the future as an actor. If you can get to that minutia, the really, really detailed stuff, people will think "it's so clear."

At that point, I'm not thinking about the words, because the words are a vehicle to get me what I need and a vehicle to the future. For this character, if I can get Juliet to get down from that balcony, lots of wonderful things can happen for Romeo, right? That's what I'm thinking about. I'm not thinking "Man, that's a good line." That is not where you can be living.

In the banished scene, it's the same thing for me. I can't be thinking, "Wow, what an incredible argument he's making right now." Or, "What a crazy kid. Chill out." I can't think those things. I have to think, "No, this is your fault now." I have to blame him because blaming him leads me, as Romeo, to not have to feel the blame myself. It unburdens me. It allows me to believe that Juliet will still love me.

It's an intricate web of ideas that we have hold. I think it's about knowing, not just words being clear. So, for me, text work is about what the character wants, needs, and gets out of it. What they actually get out of it, not just winning an argument.

Bahr: Cool. Nathan?

Hosner: Well, I would agree with all of that. And I think what I would layer in is that those are the two great strata of building a performance. Once you get into rehearsal and into performance the words work on you. It might be your scene partner, or it might be what you're saying and the sounds coming out, but they make you do or think differently. And that's the stuff that's so exciting.

If you're having trouble with a certain line, you might ask, "Why is this the way it is?" and then realize that this is a great key. There's a line in one of the Friar's speeches. This maybe isn't the best example—now I'm thinking of some monosyllabic stuff that's great—but there's a line that he has, talking about Juliet, "the most you saw was her promotion for 'twas your heaven she should be advanced." And what's interesting is, if you draw out the words, like "for 'twas your heaven, she should be advanced," it just starts to get kind of clunky. But if you think about the line, you suddenly realize that he's sitting here talking to someone and comforting them. Shakespeare's giving you this because you have to slow down.

You have to say, "'twas your heaven, that she should be advanced and weep you now seeing she is advanced above the clouds as high as—" he's building that staircase for you. And that ends in an "oh."

And when Romeo says, "thou canst not speak of that, thou doest not feel," and you're getting that, then suddenly you're knocked monosyllabic—"I do not know why yet I live to say these things," and beating yourself up.

The text can be all these things. When you're looking at it from outside, you can think. And I can think like that about Ty, think

"this is an interesting thing," but when you have it working on you, that's, to me, the best hit you can get.

Bahr: Can I tell you I find that banished scene the best? I've seen a lot of *Romeo and Juliet* and that banished scene is so amazing and rich anyway, textually. But to see you warriors, text warriors, do that. I mean, it's incredible. That whole second half too, but first of all, any comments on that banishment scene?

Hosner: "Touch it and the bloom is gone." But what do you—

Fanning: For us—

Bahr: I want people to understand what he just meant by that.

Hosner: *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Fanning: I think for that scene, just in terms of our process, Betsy really left us to our own devices.

Hosner: Yeah, she just said, "More."

Fanning: Yeah, she said, "I think with you guys, I could just turn dials." So, she was just saying less of that, more of that. I think, yeah, "touch it and the bloom is gone." I try not to think, "What are we doing after tonight?" I know that he's going to be giving me something different. And so then, therefore, I give him something different.

Hosner: The same. I love that feeling when I come out and I don't know—I mean, I know what's going to happen. And actually, the one thing about rep is there are some things that can't quite grow as much because you have a quick rehearsal process. It's not like Ty could go, "Well, tonight I'm going to trash the set." But within the framework that we have, we think how can we renegotiate that every night?

And I think that's what's exciting: there are different times that it lands completely differently on me. And I don't know how much of the audience gets that, but I know it keeps me interested. And I know that there are times where you suddenly feel your body doing something different, and it's almost like the language is taking you over. And I know that sounds like a cliché, but it really does. And then there are nights where you realize you were pushing against what you were getting. You need to get out of the way and let it go.

Bahr: Can I jump in? I'm sorry to throw you under this bus, and it's a big bus. "God knows when we shall meet again." When all you've got is your scene partner or the heavens or Tybalt coming

out behind you. Can you share a little bit about how you were able to get to that? Does everyone know what speech I'm talking about?

McCalla: The poison one.

Bahr: Yeah. The poison one.

McCalla: That's another one where every night it will come out slightly differently and it'll feel slightly different in my body. I think I've always thought of it as the panic attack monologue, because it is just Juliet building on her own anxieties.

The beautiful thing that Betsy and I talked about a lot and that she really, really loves about that monologue, is that Juliet gives herself all these reasons not to do the thing. And then at the end, she does the thing anyway. And I think that just goes to show how strong Juliet is as a person and as a character.

Talking about text work, there's so much imagery in that monologue of mandrakes torn out of the earth and shrieks. It's not just visual things. It's sensory. You're smelling things. You're feeling like you're claustrophobic. You're not going to be able to breathe.

As an actor, there is no other option than to not be able to breathe and to slowly build it, like Nathan said, through the text, until it is this ricocheting, terrifying thing.

And then there's Gil [playing Tybalt's ghost], who's up there, who I can't see, and I have no idea what he looks like half the time. I go off stage and he tells me, "This is what I did." And I'm like, "Thank you. I'm glad I didn't see it." I'm just going off of a lighting cue and screaming my heart out.

I think to have the ghost appear is a great choice and I love it. And it is different. It's a different world than we've been in until this moment, but it is the world that Juliet is in mentally at that time, to have that visual for the audience. But I'm not part of the audience.

I don't know how you guys felt about it, but to have that visual for the audience to see exactly where her mind has gotten to over the course of the last two and a half minutes is so helpful. I'm thankful for Betsy, because a lot of times I think I had trouble speaking up and speaking my mind and Betsy gave me permission and encouraged me. "Yeah, Naiya, you can scream. You can fully work yourself up to a point where you have no other option than to let it out vocally."

I don't know if that was the answer to your question.

Bahr: That was wonderful. You said something else, too, that I want to emphasize and talk about. You and I had a talk over a Coke, and we were talking about how I teach this show a lot and *Romeo and Juliet* gets a bad rap. People think they're cute or boring, as opposed to—you use the word strength. The strength of Juliet, and the power of Juliet. "Fiery-footed steeds"— all that type of stuff. Talk a little bit about why you feel she's as wonderfully strong as she is, because I agree. The text supports a very, very strong character.

McCalla: She is. I think—it's the same thing with Hermia. They're both stories about, for my character, someone who has something expected of them because of the way they exist as a woman in the world. And they're stories about them standing and finding their own agency and bodily autonomy.

They know what they want. They have no doubts about what they want the whole time. There are only other people telling them that they should want something else. And Juliet—Juliet doesn't speak four lines in a row until Romeo comes. Juliet is quiet. She says, "Okay, Mom, we'll see what happens." But she never says yes. She says, "We'll see." She says, "Okay, this is a great thing, and maybe I'm thinking something else." But she doesn't speak her mind.

And then she finds someone who not only speaks his mind and allows her to speak hers, but who works with her. It's a sonnet that they speak beautifully together. And she realizes that she has an intellectual power. And now there is someone who is allowing her to express it. And then she has the balcony scene, and she is speaking whole monologues and whole soliloquies without being interrupted because she knows she can now. And then as she's found herself through this other person and through the things that she always knew were there inside of her, then there's everything that happens in act two. And act two is just her saying no over and over again. Act two was her saying yes to herself.

Hosner: Many shades of no.

McCalla: And there is no other choice when everyone in your life has turned on you, everyone you expected to love you and support you. She simply must do the thing that she knows is right. "If all else fails myself, have power to die." "Myself have power." And that's her.

Bahr: I want to make sure we have time for questions. So, I have two more. We'll see how long this takes. The discovering of Juliet dead. Incredibly tough scene. How do you work up to that?

There's some scholars who think that it sometimes could be played as a comedy back in Shakespeare's day with all that crazy stuff which has been cut and omitted. We wouldn't do that today. But that is very tough. Tough for you, Cassie, and the Friar who's living a lie, and everyone. So, can you let us into a little bit about the rehearsal process to get to that scene? And to the choice—the directorial choice—to overlap those lines? How did that process come about?

Bissell: Well, Naiya can speak to this, too, since she was in the room.

Hosner: With her eyes closed.

Bissell: With her eyes closed. I feel like we brought to the table pretty high stakes right from the beginning. We didn't have to be pushed too hard to know where it needed to go. I think the decision about overlapping text happened—I feel like that was almost already in place.

Hosner: I think it was, yeah.

Bissell: That was a decision that was made dramaturgically even before we got into rehearsals. And it does create the effect of this cacophony that the Friar has to overcome—it gives him a reason to say, "Let me take control of this situation."

Some shows you have a text-heavy load and that's where the big burden is. And then some shows there's an emotional heavy load. And in this show, for me, is, that's what it is. And I feel like my job [as Lady Capulet] in this show is to bring that grief because the story is ultimately telling us this is what happens when you "other" people and when we lead with hatred. Bad things happen. And so the emotion, especially at the very end of the play, that is the warning. It's the message. "See what happens when we hate, when we when we 'other' people and we have arbitrary walls that we put up?"

Bahr: Thank you. Can we talk about—what audiences are talking about is the death. The death and the wake up. How was that conceived? How did you plan to show Romeo and Juliet waking up just before death, seeing each other's eyes? Betsy has said to me, "I've seen it done before. I've done this choice before.

This choice is not new to me." But it works magnificently well within this production.

You can tell. You hear the audience, too, as close as you are to what happens here. So, I want to talk about how the timing of that works.

Fanning: The other night, I accidentally saw your feet in my periphery, and I thought, "You don't see that because you need to drink this poison."

This was Betsy's idea, if I'm remembering right. We didn't come up with this, so I'm not taking credit for this, but it is common. I think the Baz Luhrmann film did it as well. And it's because the choice is effective.

With a comedy, you want to double down on the comedy. With a tragedy, you want to double down on the tragedy. If it's painful, then you need to make it twice as painful. As actors and directors, I have found that if the productions are really effective and great, that's what we do. We go, "Okay, so that was hard for your character. How can we make it harder?" It's part of how we extend the benefit, the payoff, of the story to the audience.

Something Betsy said, if I'm remembering right, was that even in the lark scene with the adieu, he has these two adieus, and it just always feels so quick. And the marriage as well. It's like "you guys are gonna get married. Bye." So, Betsy staged us to have one little second alone on the balcony, even though the Friar just said "I'm not leaving you alone." Betsy said, "It's about them having one moment to think, 'This is us.'" To show that they know what they're doing and there's no doubt in their minds. I think that's something we were really interested in.

The death scene is a question of how we give them yet another moment to really be together before they're dead forever. There's just a brief moment where everything is great. It's exactly like the Friar said. It's like you could see just for a minute that if he had just not gotten the wrong message, this could have worked.

This play gets a lot of bad rap because of because of the number of things that have to go wrong for it to end in tragedy. But if you can find those moments of possibility, which show the positive, which ask "What if it went well?"—but it didn't because he already drank the poison.

I don't know if you have anything to add.

McCalla: It's the near miss of it all. I love it. Something that I love about our ending—and I don't know how Nathan feels about this—is that in the story, this is not how it happens. The Friar comes in and Romeo's already dead. And then I wake up and I'm like, "Where's Romeo?" And the Friar says, "Don't look. Don't look."" And then just leaves me there. It's like one final betrayal, which is I guess makes sense in the script. And it makes sense with everything else that's happened.

As an actor who has done it twice before, it hasn't been my favorite cup of tea because I have to think, "How could you do this to me?" And then I have to come to all these conclusions seeing Romeo's body. I like the immediacy of it all now. There is no other thing distracting me. It is just this thing, and I'm experiencing it in real time, and there is no other option than to tumble down the hole because it is immediate: grave and immediate. There is only: how do I solve this? How do I fix this? And the way that I am playing, the positive fix it for me is—[gestures]

Bahr: I agree, and I think that empowers you. So many times the audience is thinking "Oh, we get to hear from the friar again?" And in your performance, you're hanging on. We care about you because of the compassion.

Hosner: Early on when Betsy talked to me about it in rehearsals, she said, "I know this is weird that you're not doing all this." This was before she really knew what I was going to bring to it, but I think she just had a sense of it. We both did.

There's certainly an argument for an older, bumbling kind of friar. He says "wisely and slow, they stumble that run fast." And he has the line—I don't say it in this play—about stumbling over gravestones. So, there is a sense of his acceleration and it getting away from him. But I think that Betsy felt instinctively, which was great because I did too, that this person that we have who's a little more engaged and maybe younger, he wouldn't leave her. I love it.

Initially she had had me re-entering earlier where they say, "Here's a Friar weeping." And I went over to Betsy, hoping she would be on board, and I said, "I can't be there. If the parents aren't there yet, and I come in, I would have to go to the lovers." And so I said, if I come in where he's mentioned again, where the watch says, "here's the Friar," but he's already been there for something like three pages, if the parents are already there, I can't go to them. And I loved that he's too late.

That for me was really exciting because it was a bit of a broken expectation. And certainly there's an argument for exploring what's in the full text. And I think that would be really interesting to do down the road and ask: why does he do this? Or, what if he is this? But I love it. I found it very illuminating.

Bahr: I don't think most audiences notice that. I think there are people in this audience who have taught it over and over and over and who saw this and thought it was genius. And it works beautifully, because the work was done. The discoveries were made. And it's really lovely.

I want to make sure you guys have a chance to ask the questions that you have. We still have time. Questions or comments from you? Yes. Go ahead.

Audience member: I saw *Midsummer*, what was it, two nights ago? And then *Romeo and Juliet* tonight. And I noticed that there's some liberties taken with the scansion. Particularly Puck does more of a contemporary scansion of the text. And then I also noticed you, Naiya, play a bit with Hermia and Juliet. I have the most familiarity with the Tybalt banished monologue. I have a BFA in music theater, so I did this, too. But I was wondering, how do you make those choices with scansion? When to honor Shakespeare, when to honor what you're getting, how to honor what the director wants from it. What are the choices that you make, and when you decide to rapidly go through a monologue, what leads you to make that decision, and what hesitations have you had in your own personal scansions of the monologues?

McCalla: I love Shakespeare. I'm sure we're all Shakespeare nerds here, because that's what we're doing here. I care a lot about the text, and I care a lot about—I was going to say I care a lot about honoring Shakespeare, but I was about to say also, I don't really care about honoring Shakespeare, which can be divisive. I think most important to me is that I honor myself and the truth of a moment, and that I honor the audience that I am with. And if "honoring Shakespeare" is in some way putting him on a pedestal that is unreachable for any person, I chafe against that.

Shakespeare, for me, became a thing that I knew I was going to be able to do when I had someone explicitly tell me I could. This was a professor I had at NYU, a wonderful man. He knew that there is often a barrier between Shakespeare and certain people

and people who have not had been exposed to scholarly levels of training, etc., etc. And a lot of my comrades did not want to do Shakespeare because of the way that it had been presented to us in the past. I personally had an experience in high school where I loved Shakespeare and I wanted to read a monologue, and my teacher said, "No, this is not for you. This is not something that you can do." And that kind of broke me a little bit.

After that, I didn't do Shakespeare for years and years until I had to do it at school. And then I was kind of going through the motions until my teacher told me that is exactly what's wrong with Shakespearean training today. And we need to find a way to bring him to ourselves and bring ourselves to him, rather than trying to lift and lift and lift, inserting ourselves into something that is just not truthful.

So yes, I scan all my texts—you'll see all my little notes in my script—but at the end of the day, if something in a moment is feeling like "I am just doing it because this is how it's supposed to be done," or "I'm just doing it because of the scansion," then I'm missing the point. The point is that we're doing this so that we can reach people and we can reach each other. And if I'm not going to reach anyone, then—

Hosner: Thank you for sharing that. The thing is that you do that work, but—going back to what I said before, what does the language do to you? And I think that's what you're really responding to. Because even if doing it a certain way is a great map that you've been given, if you've become divorced from your own center, it doesn't land in the same way. And I think we don't want to be cavalier about it, but sometimes those broken expectations can really illuminate or bring things out. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes you wonder, "Why did I do that tonight?" But you have to keep it alive. So, thank you for sharing that.

Audience member: I really appreciate, Ty and Naiya, what you were saying about helping us to see real love from Romeo and Juliet's side. This is the greatest love story and I think, very often it's dismissed and not taken as sincere love. So, I was hoping that as we're contrasting or comparing the two plays that you guys could speak, especially maybe Cassie and Naiya, to the things Demetrius says to Hermia, or the actions that Oberon takes toward Titania. It's hard to find real love in that. Do you have a sharp contrast in

mind, like *Romeo and Juliet* is a love story and *Midsummer* is not, or is there a closer relationship in the portrayals of love?

Bissell: Well, for one, it's comedy versus tragedy. You know, what I have come to really appreciate about getting to do Titania is that the goofiness that happens with her falling in love with Bottom is what happens in the beginnings of falling in love. You do crazy stuff and in the beginnings, you don't know the difference between what becomes real love and what is not real love. It can fizzle away or it can continue to grow. That's not really answering your question, but I feel like for me, being able to enjoy this crazy, wacky journey that Titania goes on is about that.

And, yes, her love has been contrived by Oberon and we can talk about that. It's problematic, especially in such a beloved play. There are some serious problems with what's going on in that play. I think on the first day around the table, Corey, who plays Oberon and Theseus, said, "Just to be clear, Oberon is basically roofying his girlfriend and kidnapping this child, right? That's what's going on."

We had a director who was trying to problem solve some of the things. She carried the child, the changeling child, through to Athens. We didn't really have enough time to thoroughly flesh out and follow through with some of her ideas, which I think we haven't spoken of. But there's a little bit of frustration when we feel the difference between working with a director like Betsy, who's an actor here, with many years of experience, who knew what kind of time crunch we were under and knew what we needed, versus a director who was working here for their first time and really, I think, misjudged the amount of time we had for us, as actors, to be able to fully embody these ideas that she wanted to show in the production.

But for me at least, I do feel like I am trying to embody what love does to us, which is part of what makes it wonderful. It's all the goofy stuff that love makes us do early on. So that does not speak to Demetrius. I'm not addressing the lovers' situation. That's another problem.

Fanning: I don't know what you're talking about. He's a stand up young man.

I'll just jump in because this feels like Demetrius is the elephant in the room. For Romeo and Juliet, it's simple. To me, you don't have a play if they aren't instantly certain that they would

die for each other. You have to know that because everything they say reiterates it. And when you're doing Shakespeare, there's not much benefit in ever saying anything you don't mean because the characters are—this is pre-Freud. They don't really know how to be circuitous in their arguments. They say what they mean. There is some variation in that because sometimes you say what you need to say to get something, but it's not necessarily the same thing as lying, even if Iago and those kinds of villains are somewhat different.

Hosner: Juliet, you have so many of those moments with your mother—

Fanning: That's true, that's true.

Hosner: Where you're not saying what you mean, but it's for a reason.

Fanning: There's a purpose to that silence.

But the love story: for *Romeo and Juliet*, it's to the ends of the earth. That's what makes it such a great story. *Midsummer* is messy, and I think in some ways more contemporary because of that. You have to remember, *Romeo and Juliet* is based on all of this other source material, romantic, tragic poetry, and it's trying to reach this high ideal. *Midsummer* was pure invention. There's some stuff Shakespeare's pulling from, but largely he's just making stuff up. And so you get this much messier, uglier version of what love is really like. I kind of like that about it.

In terms of Demetrius, there's the question, is he really in love with Helena when he's affected by love juice? The text says that he fell in love with Hermia suddenly, even though he was betrothed to Helena before the play started, and, in my opinion, clearly is still in love with her. I think there's true love for Helena from the beginning, but there's something to be gained from this relationship with Egeus and Hermia and that's what he's pursuing. It's slimy, and it's not pretty, but it's true. And if you don't think that happens in the real world, welcome to Earth. I think that feels real to me.

It's not something Jessica, our director, was interested in, to be honest. But it's something I'm interested in and still am. I think otherwise the love juice is still on him, which means there is no payoff at the end and I'm not sure what we're supposed to believe about Helena's story, which is in many ways supposed to be the most sympathetic story within *Midsummer*.

To me it feels important that wake up after a crazy night in the woods where all the things are parallel truths. The fairy things did happen, but also didn't happen. They're also just kids waking up in the woods, and it's really up to the audience. You can decide how you feel, though I think you're better off just embracing the liminal space that *Midsummer* lives in. That's what makes the play great.

So to me, Demetrius wakes up, and thinks, "Man, I have been such a terrible person," and realizes what he's done, and he thinks, "It's so weird, but I actually don't see the point in this whole thing anymore." That's the arc for him, to me. It is true love, but you've got to do a little bit of work to get there. It's not Romeo and Juliet where it's just on the page.

Audience member: I have a question for Cassie. You spoke, as a performer, of your work with the text and spoke about emotion as a part of the process. My question is if movement and deportment are also a conscious part of your performance. To me, as a spectator, all I had to do is see you walk and I was transported back centuries and aware of social status. So, I'm curious whether you have a movement background, whether it be dance or sports.

Bissell: Well, thank you very much for that. I do not. I said before that I don't have formal training. I'm very intuitive. That's my way into most things. But, I did get a lot of experience early on in my career doing classical work, so I do think that instilled in me a certain sense of what is required.

Obviously, status is a huge thing in a room, and we're all text people, but so much of storytelling is nonverbal. You make facial expressions in response to what you're hearing that clue an audience into what's being said. You show emotion. There's the way a king walks into the room and how the other people respond tells us just as much about a person as their costume or the way they carry themselves. I do feel like somewhere along the line, early on in my career, I absorbed that sense that physicality is a huge part of storytelling. As many methods as we can use to translate to an audience what the relationships are, who wants what in this moment, where the stakes are, what the important story points—we want to hit you with as many possible ways to help you along that story line as possible. And obviously physicality is a huge one.

Audience Member: Ty, I just want to know if this is a directorial choice or your choice: in the beginning with Rosaline,

you're in love, but you're morose. You're depressed. The minute you see Juliet and fall in love, your demeanor changes. Now you're energetic. Was that your choice, directorial, or collaborative?

McCalla: I just have that effect on people.

Fanning: Have you ever seen Naiya?

No, that's just when the caffeine hits me. I time it perfectly every night.

No, I mean, it was a collaborative choice, ultimately. I will give myself the credit that I brought that into the room. As I was saying, for me, with Romeo and Rosaline it is that sort of shallow relationship, where it's about "what do I get out of this?" and that is frustrating. And he's morose, and he's kind of just depressed. In all the stories about him, he's wandering around in the woods crying all day.

I wanted to show that this is the real thing, that the second he sees Juliet it's like a lightning bolt. This is the end all, be all. The way to do that, to me, as an actor, is to make sure to show it. There's a telephone game actors play. It's such a dumb thing, but if you know that you're about to pick up the phone and answer, and it's going to be really bad news, you have to start out having a good time and acting like everything is great. And then you pick up the phone.

Hosner: The one-sided telephone call.

Fanning: Yeah. It's that so that you can really contrast. And it helps you as an actor because otherwise how do you go from one thing that is morose and sad to being morose and sad? There's nothing there to contrast. I was trying to set up that contrast. It's a little bit of character work. It's a little bit of story work, too, of looking at the actual story arc. That's something I always try to make sure I'm focused on whenever I'm working on something as an actor. I think we often think, "Oh, no, I just get in the story, and it happens to me. The director will make the story." But we have to do it, too. You have to know how to set yourself up for success.