ACTING SHAKESPEARE: A Roundtable Discussion with Artists from the Utah Shakespeare Festival's 2024 Production of *Henry VIII*

Stuart Shelley
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Featuring: Alaysia Renay Duncan, Geoffrey Kent, Topher Embrey

***Shelley*:** Welcome, everybody. We are delighted to spend a little bit of time with you discussing *Henry the Eighth*. We're delighted that that was the common show that people selected as part of the conference, and hopefully you enjoyed that on Monday evening. We have additional actors who will be joining us. They are on their way over. But in the meantime, by way of introduction, my name is Stuart. I'm the education director at the Festival. I've been with the Festival full time now for three seasons, with a brief stint in 2016 doing summer camps and classes. We have Alaysia Duncan with us, we have Geoffrey Kent, and we will hopefully have Topher Embrey and Christopher Centinaro joining us shortly. We'll get started, and I'm going to just give the welcoming question. If you'll tell us a little bit about yourself, the roles that you play this season, *Henry the Eighth* and other plays, and where you're from. We'll get started there, and then we'll move forward.

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***Duncan*:** My name is Alaysia Renay Duncan. I play Anne Boleyn in *Henry the Eighth*. I also play Perdita in *The Winter's Tale* and Petra and many others in *Taming of the Shrew*. I'm originally from Saint Paul, Minnesota, but I now live in New York City, and I graduated from Ithaca College last year with my BFA in acting. Out of school, I was first working at the Engeman Theater on Long Island, doing *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*, and then I was just doing a few readings in the city and then booked this, and now I'm here.

***Kent*:** I also did *Beautiful* this year. It's a fantastic musical. That's why we're here, right? Hi. I'm Geoffrey. I play Buckingham in *Henry the Eighth*. I also played Polixenes in *The Winter's Tale* and various and sundry characters in *Taming of the Shrew*. This is maybe my fifth or sixth season here. I wear multiple hats at the Festival. I've been a fight director here for a number of seasons. I directed a play here last year, and I come as an actor as well, so I kind of bounce around.

I'm an Iowa boy, but I live in Denver, have most of my life, and I love coming here because it doesn't feel that far from home. I love this conference, so I'm excited to be here.

***Shelley*:** Fantastic. Just to kind of segue into *Henry the Eighth*, what was the most surprising element for each of you as you approached this text, which is, again, not often produced? What was the most surprising element for you in rehearsal or in performance? In character discovery?

***Duncan*:** It's a good first question. For me, I guess it's always the lack of text that the women often get and how you go about navigating that. And especially with someone like Anne Boleyn, who I would say is a very iconic person historically. I think in this play Shakespeare took a lot of liberties in terms of how he told the story. And one of them is that Anne just stops talking after she gets together with Henry. I think figuring out how to still make her a full and somewhat interesting person in the moments where I do get to talk was something that I had to navigate, and figuring out how to bring personality to moments where there isn't text for me to fall back on. And figuring out the parts of the character that are Shakespeare's invention and the parts of it that are historical and just discovering the character in that way.

***Kent*:** I think at this point, I only have a couple left I haven't been in, so what's interesting about being in *Henry the Eighth* is having the perspective of other Shakespeare plays I've been in, and finding archetypes in Shakespeare where you can think, "Oh, I bet I know what actor he wrote this for."
My wife's a playwright. When she's writing, she writes for actors. She casts it in her head, and it helps her individualize their voices. She knows that's a joke that that actor would do. Shakespeare, of course, did the same. So, you sometimes wonder, "Who played this? And why did he write this part?"

As Buckingham, I'm crazy compartmentalized, right? I'm only in the very beginning and very end of the play. I played Thomas More at the end. Not that you'd know, because we don't say his name in the scene I'm in. You know, Thomas is just sitting over in the corner. Everything's going to turn out great for Thomas. And John Harrow opposite me. Our characters' portraits hang opposite each other in a very famous art display where we just glare at each other for eternity.

But as Buckingham, you have two problems as an actor. One is that I would say 70% of my lines in the play are the first ten minutes of the play, which is the worst time to have lines in a Shakespeare play, because the audience is still confused. And I, Geoff, who does tons of Shakespeare, when I go see Shakespeare, it's still usually not till the end of act one, scene one that I start to feel like my translator has kicked in. Just my ability to take words I don't know in context, translate and make sense of it. So normally when I'm watching the first scene of a Shakespeare play, I get what I call mad, sad, glad, or afraid, like the four emotions of Shakespeare acting. And you're like, "Oh, he's mad. I think I know who he's mad at. I don't know what he's mad about. Oh, he's going to die." So, I can feel your inner monologue when I'm up on the stage as Buckingham.

One of the things you have to do when you're an actor in a play, which is somewhat parallel to the academic study of the play, is to ask, why am I in the play? I have to step out of the play to go, "Why is Buckingham in this play? What is his purpose? Why does Shakespeare need him? Did Shakespeare write what I'm saying or did his writing buddy write my scenes?" And then figure out how to fill your purpose.

What surprised me was in his second scene, where he's going to go get his head chopped off. I find that at that point in the play, I can make an emotional connection with the audience, despite the fact that I've barely been in the play. Most audience members probably didn't really get the complexities of my argument, but they still connected. We still know that Shakespeare needed to snuff him out. Shakespeare needs someone to go down for us to understand the stakes of Wolsey. And for us to understand that the King didn't bother to come and talk to me, so you see the control Wolsey has over him as well. So, I'm a plot device that I have to fully realize as a character in two scenes. Shakespeare gives you that challenge often, but *Henry the Eighth* is particularly challenging.

***Shelley*:** Thank you. Very insightful. At this point, what questions do you have for the actors? I'm happy to bring the mic to you, and I'll hold it for you to ask the questions so everybody in the room can hear. What questions do you have regarding the production?

***Audience member*:** I have a question that's not necessarily, if that's okay, about the production. But I heard your comments on the number of lines and the difficulty of Shakespeare's beginnings. And it's not just you. I'm glad you said that because I know these plays, and it always takes me a good 10, 15 minutes.

I've done a lot of research on *Othello*, and a lot of actors have talked about how that role is very emotionally and mentally draining for them, especially for black men playing that role. So, I'm just curious in your experiences, both at the start of your career and later in your career. Have there been any particular Shakespeare roles that have taken that emotional or mental toll on you? Because we've talked a lot about *Othello* in the field. And so I'm curious what other roles might we be paying attention to in that same regard? The cost on the actor that literary scholars, because we're not embodying them, may not always be as attentive to.

***Kent*:** The perspectives will be different.

***Duncan*:** That's a great question. I actually haven't gotten to do that much Shakespeare outside of school. A lot of the roles I've gotten to play have actually been quite affirming. In school, one of the last shows that I did was *Julius Caesar*, and I played Julius Caesar, so I got to be the big boy in the room. I guess it took a toll on my ego in terms of having probably a big one at the time, but it didn't hurt me in any way emotionally.

I don't know if I can speak to specific Shakespearean roles, but there have been other roles I've played that have taken a lot of emotional investment that is sometimes hard to leave in the theater. I think it's very easy to take a lot of that stuff home because you're living in it, and you are, to an extent, experiencing those emotions every day, sometimes for months. A lot of how I deal with that is falling back on my training and reminding myself that, "This is not real. I can jump in and out of it. I can turn it off at the end of the night." And sometimes I need a ritual for that. Lately it has been social time after the show, like hanging out on the porch, and decompressing, getting back into Alaysia-mode rather than whatever the show is asking me to do. That is how I have navigated figuring that out.

***Kent*:** What's funny is that I discovered post-show self-care later in my career. When I was younger, I was really good at preparing for the show, like physically warming up, vocally warming up, looking at my text to try and make some new discoveries, maybe shooting some lines with some friends, if it's a comedy, shoot jokes back and forth, make each other laugh before the show. But I never really examined post-show care because I wasn't really playing parts yet that really caused me to. When you're just standing in the back and holding a weapon and saying, "Letters for you, my Lord," you don't need a ton of post-show care. My 20s were a whole lot of, "Here's this for you. Good luck."

When I played Iago in *Othello*, I was instantly confronted with the fact that I was driving home in my car with some demons. And actors are emotional athletes essentially. If we're up there to evoke a response in you, we maybe don't need to feel the depths of it, because if we feel the depths of it, we cheat you of the right to do that too, because you can then watch us feel something, versus if I can get close to feeling something and I can provoke that feeling in you. So, I discovered self-care, like bath bombs and cartoons were a really great way to come down from Iago, and it became really quite necessary.

The other joy is doing repertory, I let myself go to deeper depths when I'm only going to do it twice a week versus what I'm going to do eight shows a week. Doing *Hamlet* twice a week is a lot different than *Hamlet* eight shows a week. *Hamlet* twice a day, well, if it's an eight-show week then a two show Saturday is a very different process than two shows a week. So, there's that.

But I will tell you one small other story about losing track of things. I was doing *Timon of Athens*. You're scholars, but just in case you don't know the basics of Timon, he has all this money. He gives it freely to anyone who asks. He eventually is told he has no money. He has to borrow money. And everyone's like, no, we can't pay you back. And he just throws hot rocks at them. Then he runs away, hides in a cave, and finds a whole bunch of gold. Everyone shows up again and he throws gold at them. And then he walks into the ocean and drowns himself. It's a real picker upper. It's like Christmas Carol in reverse, right? It just goes all the way back to Scrooge twice.

And I was playing that in a staged reading that we were working on for a Shakespeare Theatre Association conference and it was going to be a bunch of artistic directors from different Shakespeare festivals. And I had a lot of lines. Everyone else was suddenly off book. They'd all memorized their lines and were no longer carrying their pages because they were aware it was an opportunity to be seen by people who might have work for them, which is the actor's life. Well, I had 900 lines, and they had like 100 lines, and suddenly I'm the only person in the show on book. I lost track of myself in that process because Timon feels betrayed, and I felt betrayed by the entire cast, many of whom were close friends of mine. And I, as we were approaching the performance, hated them more and more, and I was lost in it. I was just so mad at them and they were like, "No, we'll carry pages." But I'm like, "Yeah, but you're not looking at them. They can tell you're not looking at them." So, to spite them, in four days, I "memorized" Timon of Athens, with quotes around it, because I was making up a lot of Shakespeare, but no one knew the play. My self-care after that was ice cream.

I've never told that story.

***Shelley*:** Did we mention we publish this?

***Kent*:** Oh, please. Don't tag them in it, though. They still know I was mad at them.

***Audience member*:** So, speaking of not really knowing the play, you all are doing a piece right now that is rarely done that the audiences are probably not as familiar with. Even within the history play cycles people are going to know the Richards. They're going to know some of the other Henrys. And this play is all

talking. You're just standing around talking to each other. So how are you creating this kind of emotion?

I really felt emotionally invested. I was upset. I knew you were going to die. I knew you were going to die, and I was upset. Like, I know the play. But you all were able to create some good emotional connections with the audience. We all fell in love and were sad about Katherine. Like the entire place is behind Katherine. How are you able to create that in audiences? On Monday, you had us, and we know the play. But a lot of people are not going to know this play. What do you pull on to give a Shakespeare play which is just talking that emotional depth for audiences who maybe aren't as familiar with the texts?

***Duncan*:** I'll take this. It was actually surprising to me that so many people were so receptive to this show. I remember the first couple weeks we were open, and people just telling us, "Everyone loves Henry. They love the drama." Which is great because it is just a lot of standing and talking, and sometimes it does feel like that. For instance, with Perdita, I'm running around and jumping around and doing all this stuff. And with Anne, it's just—it's a lot of talking.

But I think a lot of how you make just talking interesting is knowing what you're saying really well and trying to convey that as clearly as you can and trying to connect it to whatever is holding you to that scene and making sure that you're tethered to your scene partners and just staying in it. Because I feel like as engaged as I can be, that's how engaged the audience is going to be. Like in the Buckingham scenes, I really do try to make sure I'm connecting how I'm feeling as Anne to the things that Buckingham is saying. And I think that just makes the world feel fuller and makes the story feel fuller. I'm glad that it's coming across.

***Kent*:** Yeah. The ones with no sword fights are hard. As a fight director, I'm like, "There's no action in this play at all." There's a brief dance and a lot of pageantry, and I think the production does honor that pageantry, which I think particularly suits the Utah Shakespeare Festival audience. It used to be they were all rooted in history and really close to how they were written. And of course, modern theater has expanded that lens. And I think you've discovered that we've started doing that here a lot more than when I first was here. But we still do make sure to give that audience

something that really is rooted as close as we can to what we're doing.

And Shakespeare is so subversive with this play because I had no idea that the Queen was going to run away with the audience's empathy. You can feel her do it. He gives her the prologue and the epilogue, and I've seen that happen before. It's often the star character that gets those. But that gives her this five act puddle skip of a character across the play.

I watched Shakespeare confined by the writing conditions he was under. He's got to write for a king that's related to someone in the play. He can't talk trash about him. He can't really talk about that religious thing. There's so many things in this play Shakespeare is trying to avoid, and he still threads the line with her and gives you something that I think is a little subversive about the power of a king, knowing the king came to see it. That's genius. I'm not in any of those scenes, but that's genius.

I think anytime you're in act one, scene one of a Shakespeare play, which I am in all three this year, it's hard. I need to negotiate it better. It's hard to start the play. It's always hard to start the play. Getting the audience's attention is hard. Getting the audience immersed in the world you're doing, even if they already know the play. This is my version of *Romeo and Juliet*. This is my version of *Hamlet*. How do you bring them along? And I think the trick is to personalize your relationship with the character you have as a scene partner.

My first scene in this play is actually a three hander that we made into a two hander. We cut a character out. That was complicated because I was getting some arguments that were the opposite of my point of view, because he combined the characters. So, I was arguing with myself, not as the show was written or intended, but as the cutting provided me a problem. So, I had to find truth in arguments with my own self.

He's my son-in-law, the character I'm up on stage with, and the minute the dramaturg told me that—We brought up the chart and she put all her photos on the chart. I love that chart she made. It has all of the people in this play and how they're all related, and then she put our headshots where we were. And I was like, "Oh, he's my son-in-law." That helped me personalize that relationship. I was now speaking to someone I had a little status over, even

though we were equal in rank, because of our relationship, and he was also having to use tactics that were like, "Look, uncle, you really should zip it."

We were also following the desire of Derek to have us speak when we were being overheard, and to play a character that believes they are all powerful and can speak openly because they have a high enough status that they're safe. And then that character gets snipped. So that's what I did; I just leaned into my scene partner. And then when the Cardinal's up above looking down on us, we quote Ghostbusters. Because it gets us to laugh and gets us to look like we're friends.

***Duncan*:** Kind of following up with the Queen Katherine through-line and the opener and the closer, it doesn't necessarily have to be her. Another thing that was changed for this production were the two ladies-in-waiting who are the gossipers. Those scenes are written for lords. They're for men. That was a specific change for this production to give the ladies-in-waiting a bit more stage time and give them a stronger perspective. That is not an element of this play that you're necessarily going to get anywhere else.

What's cool about this production is that there are moments where we took a lot of the low hanging fruit to make these relationships deeper. Like, for instance, I know Derek, our director, was talking on the first day about why he cast Margaret as a black woman and Anne as a black woman, so that that mentor-like friendship can have an additional layer, which is that they're the only two black women in this court, in this palace or community. And then the song that I sing in Katherine's chambers that was not necessarily intended for Anne, but it gives us this beautiful moment between Anne and Katherine when otherwise you don't get to see them interact at all in this show. I feel very lucky that me and Cassie get to do that twice a week, because it's definitely become one of my favorite moments.

Again, it's not something that's really supported by words, but it's showing Katherine has to pass this torch on because she has no choice. And Anne might not be ready to take this on, but she has to step into it. And what supports that story is that I don't know how to play the lute. And I had to learn for this. So, it really does feel earnest and deep.

***Audience member*:** I have a question about the costumes. In Shakespeare scholarship, a lot has been written about clothes. We have Henslowe's inventory, and the costumes cost more than the play text and more than the actors earned. And it was a big draw to the theater. And you have such gorgeous costumes. And I wonder how that feels from the perspective of an actor. I've seen old interviews with Laurence Olivier, and he was an outside-in actor, and he wanted to get the look and the walk and sort of the externals right, so he could feel the part. And I think modern actors start inside-out. But how do you deal with the costumes? How is that part of the characterization, and is it really hot up there?

***Kent*:** The answer to that is yes.

***Duncan*:** Yes. So hot.

***Kent*:** I compliment your dresses repeatedly.

***Duncan*:** I love my dresses. I love my dresses, and they do help. I do find that costumes help a lot. Obviously, they're not everything, but for this show, the costumes are so important because it really affects how you compose yourself. Like, most of the time because we have these huge sleeves, my hands can't just be flat at my side. They have to be tucked here. It affects how, for instance, I can play the lute, because I am in this big costume, so, that's something I have to prepare for. Being so sweaty every night is something that you have to adapt to. Wait, what was the question? I'm so sorry.

***Kent*:** What does costume do to you?

***Duncan*:** I think the costumes in this show really help everything feel a bit more real. When we were in rehearsals and we were just in our street clothes, it could feel a bit silly. But it adds a level of seriousness to feel that someone actually has to get me in and out of this every day. And I think about that and understand what that must have been like at the time to have to live like that. I definitely could not. I would be so crazed. Like, at the end of rehearsal every night, when I'm waiting for someone to unzip me, I'm like, "Ah!"

***Kent*:** Ladies and gentlemen, His Majesty has arrived. The king arrives.

***Embrey*:** The king's alarm didn't go off this morning. I'm so sorry.

***Kent*:** Introduce yourself.

Duncan: We're talking about costumes.

***Embrey*:** Oh, well continue talking about that. I'll introduce myself later.

***Duncan*:** I think a costume always helps you feel a little bit more in character. And it prepares you for the harder parts of the show where the costume might be a hindrance. I really love wearing the costumes in these plays, but it was definitely an adjustment having to adapt to the corset. And another element of that is thinking about how you can still breathe and still project when you're tucked into that corset. So that was a learning curve for sure. But yeah, gorgeous, gorgeous gowns.

***Kent*:** I want to tap back on something you said about actors in terms of outside-in versus inside-out, right? If you were to put those in a gross, stereotypical bucket of extremes, you have "I build the physical life of my character, I say the words, and then I find the truth," and then other actors who look at it and ask, "Why am I like this? What's caused me to be like this?" What I would call a pre-Freudian versus a post-Freudian approach to text. And it's really important for me as an actor, to know when I'm working with text that was written before that was really part of the consideration.

I'm more likely, in a Shakespeare play, to just trust that the line I'm saying, as long as I understand it and have a point of view on it, works. Shakespeare makes these characters take complete right and left turns all the time, and sometimes you spend so much time making your interior character's life justify every line you say that you just get trapped. You can't serve the play anymore because you're trying to serve the character you created out of clay in your apartment. So, I'm a big proponent of ensuring the text is driving everything we do. If you're not connecting to what I say, it doesn't matter that I decided as a child the king took my puppy away. I'm not making fun of interior life, though it did sound like that. But with a Shakespeare play, I approach it as an actor a little differently than I approach a modern play.

Costumes, for me, are late. I've had a few actors I see who seem to wait to act until they get their costume, to which I'll be like, "I needed that character like a month ago. It's amazing that you have found this discovery, but it's a little late in the game."

But costumes are always going to give you a gift. They're going to change the way you stand. And then sometimes I have to decide, "Do I like that, or do I want to fight against it?" As Buckingham, I power lounge in the opening scene. I lean back, and I work against the costume because I want to show someone who is defiant of status and defiant of structure. So, I'm going to do that subtly to see if that kind of comes across that he just likes to, pardon the term, man-spread himself all over that downstage bench to create a physical life that's in opposition to the costume. So sometimes I work with it, sometimes I work against it.

Topher, introduce yourself and talk about your costumes.

***Embrey*:** Hi, everyone. My costumes are beautiful. So sorry again about this morning. Sometimes, you know, your alarm doesn't go off because your phone died in the middle of the night. My name is Topher. I'm an actor here. I am originally from Virginia. This is my second season here. Last year, I played Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Bobo in *A Raisin in the Sun*. This year, I play the King in *Henry the Eighth*. And then I also play Christopher Sly in *Taming of the Shrew* and the Clown in *Winter's Tale*. What was the question about costumes?

***Kent*:** We were just talking about what that does to you as an actor.

***Embrey*:** Oh, okay. Well, I don't know if anyone noticed I had a bit of a limp going on.

***Audience member*:** We did notice.

***Audience member*:** We were wondering.

***Embrey*:** No, I'm not injured. I did that on purpose because the king had gout and he's had leg injuries or whatever you fancy. But it's also another way for me to differentiate my characters. And also in that costume, speaking of manspreading, the, what would you call them, the breaches themselves kind of force my legs to go out a little bit more than a regular pair of pants would do. So that really informed the way I walk as Henry. Also, it's very hot in that costume when it's hot outside, so there's that. But yeah that's really all I have to say about the *Henry the Eighth* costume.

***Shelley*:** I'm going to jump in here. I had an interesting conversation with the costumer Bill Black. He has retired officially from costuming and designing, and we were chatting and he said, "I held on specifically to costume *Henry the Eighth*. I've

been waiting to costume this." And he dove into the portraiture of Hans Holbein. So, most of those lead player costumes should have looked familiar. Because he really leaned into Hans Holbein's portrait. So that's a fun nod to art and art history as well.

***Audience member*:** Thank you so much. Thanks, Stuart. And thanks to all of you for being here this morning. Two questions/comments for Alaysia. Speaking of last night, your dancing brought so much joy to what was getting to be a heavier and heavier play. I really appreciate your performance in *A Winter's Tale*. That seemed to turn something for me and lead to the redemptive qualities of the play.

But back to *Henry the Eighth*. You've already alluded to props, the lute. Could you talk more about that scene where Katherine actually gives you the lute? You just referred, I think, to that when saying passing the torch, but is that—I didn't check the play. Is that in the play? How was that developed in this production?

***Duncan*:** Thank you. So, the song itself is in the play and the line of Katherine saying "Take thy lute girl," is in the play. But I think in the script it's just Lady-in-Waiting or Working Woman or something. So, Derek decided he wanted Anne to do this song. And I was like, "Okay, that's great." And I realized that they also wanted me to play the lute. And I didn't know how to play the guitar or the lute at all.

So, I was working with our music director, Brandon, who's awesome. I really love him. And he was so kind to me and helpful to me. It,s only four chords, so it's not too hard, but it's definitely hard with all the elements, like the dress and not having a strap and having to wander around. And at first that moment was pretty general. In the first few times I did it in rehearsal, I was just standing center and like playing it and singing, and it just didn't feel like anything. And so I had a lot of conversations with Derek trying to figure out why that was. We'd built this internal narrative of Cassie or Katherine offering the lute, not necessarily as a challenge to Anne, although I think it could be read that way, but to see whether the girl who was going to take her place could do this. For me, what I receive as Anne from that moment is that the Queen is asking me to do something, so I have to do this. It's kind of awkward in the moment because of everything that's going on. I have to do it in front of my fellow ladies-in-waiting. It does feel very vulnerable.

Within the song, I start off playing it a bit more hesitantly because I don't know how to play it. And then I let myself just sing it a cappella. I think that moment me and Derek talked about was Anne comforting herself, but also making the decision that what she's good at is singing and not playing the lute. So, she tries to prove her worth a bit in this way, or at least try to comfort herself in this way after this rocky start, and then she circles back in at the end, remembering that the Queen asked her to play the lute. So, Anne has to re-add that element. She has to recognize that, at the end of the day, she doesn't have a choice in this situation, just like in the wider situation of having to marry King Henry and essentially betraying Katherine. But here she's still thinking, "I'm going to do it in my own way."

Cassie and I have talked about how for her that that is the moment she thinks, "Okay, the girl is going to be queen, whether we like it or not." I think there's a lot of depth to that scene. And then at the end when I try to give the lute back to her, and she allows me to take it, I think that's probably the most passing on the torch moment of that. But it is still bittersweet and sad for both of them, because I think if they had more power, neither of them would have chosen that scenario. Thanks for asking.

***Audience member*:** In the staging for *A Winter's Tale*, what was the symbolism of the frame for those pictures? Were those mirrors? And the clock that was set back a couple hours. What was the purpose of the director in that?

***Kent*:** I can speak to that a bit, because I've probably done the most shows with Carolyn, who directed that show. I've done maybe twenty shows with her. It's fun to work with the director and develop a relationship as an actor-director over a long period of time. Carolyn in general has morphed from literal to non-literal. She really prefers the world to be more theatrical, less a concrete location and more about evoking a feeling. And she's really into crooked shapes right now. I've worked in the last few shows she's done, and some version of those frames have been appearing. Her *Lear* had a similar feel to that, and I remember going, "I think I've seen this look before, Carolyn." She told me, "I'm going through a phase," but her phase is that she wants you to feel something's out of joint.

The framing allows you to look at the story from different angles, just like you can with a painting. So, I think that's what she's trying to evoke with it. But I would say in general with the clock and the frames, she wants you feel a world that's out of joint, which—with that set? I could do twelve Shakespeare plays on that set. *Hamlet* would jump right off that set, too. So, I think she's interested in—not set changes, not scene changes, not different locations, but the idea of artistic representation of something that's a little askew reflecting on everything. So, I would say that's probably what Carolyn would say, but she'd also want to know, what did you think?

***Audience member*:** Well, I thought time was out of joint. Like possibly a mirror for us—holding the mirror up to nature, as it were, and seeing yourself, as it were, in this play.

***Kent*:** Yeah, that's a better answer than mine. So, we'll use that.

***Shelley*:** I'm going to chime in again, I apologize. You're all scholars, so you probably all know this, but I'm going to share it nonetheless. Shakespeare drew on source material from Greene's novella, which was entitled *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time*, which really plays into the story, the arc, the sixteen years that go by. But having that clock on stage throughout, for me, really leans into the idea of the triumph of time.

***Kent*:** And to add to that, I think Shakespeare, towards the end of his life, the end of his writing career, is now exploring forgiveness as a violent act. It's just as violent as revenge, and here we explore what forgiveness is. This is the first play I've been in of Shakespeare's that, to me, gets close to earning that forgiveness. It's not like the lotharios and the terrible boys that we forgive at the end of these plays all the time. He does that by giving you sixteen years of grief that he jumps. It takes you far enough away from the act to give you permission to choose to forgive him if you want to. I would say Caroline would never say she was directing the play towards or against forgiveness, but I think she wants the play, and I think Shakespeare wants the play, to create an opportunity for you to forgive him. I remember after my wife saw it, I was like, "So do you forgive him?" She's like, "Oh no. Dead kid. Dead kid, Geoff. Do you remember the dead kid?" I was like, "Oh yeah, dead kid." I don't think Shakespeare is saying forgive him, but I think he's trying to write a play that can create an opportunity for it.

***Audience member*:** Thank you all for the amazing performances first of all, but also for taking the time with us today. I was wondering if you could talk about the relative challenges but also joys of working in very rarely produced plays versus fairly mainstream, frequently produced plays.

***Embrey*:** So essentially, no one does *Henry the Eighth*. And I think you know why. It's a passion play. I think the alternative title is always true, which it most certainly is not. But the thing is, the joy of doing shows like that—I've done a lot of weird Shakespeares. I've done *Cymbeline*. I've done *Pericles*. Those are also not—[whispers] I know I love *Pericles*.

***Audience member*:** *Pericles* is the best.

***Embrey*:** It is. It's my favorite, actually. But the cool thing about doing plays like *Henry the Eighth* and *Winter's Tale* is that—Geoff kind of said this to me after we worked together at Denver Center doing *A Christmas Carol*—no one does *Henry the Eighth*. So, no one's going to compare anyone's performances because it's not done a lot.

I was kind of terrified doing the show. We're going to talk about the negative first, because I kept reading reviews of places that had done it, and they were terrible reviews. Now we got a good one, so I was happy to hear about that, but there is such a huge difference doing something like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, because people do that all the time, or doing *Taming of the Shrew*, even though that's not one that you see often nowadays. This is my third production doing *Taming*, and I'm sure it's like Geoff's seventh. Geoff's done a lot of *Taming*, right?

***Kent*:** Oh, yeah.

Embrey: And the same with *Winter's Tale*, too. This is my second *Winter's Tale*. This is my second time playing the exact same tracks in *Winter's Tale*. I was really good at it. Right?

***Audience member*:** Yes.

***Embrey*:** Thank you. The joy of doing a play that's not done often is that you can't really compare it to anything else, which is actually something that works in our favor sometimes. Because you can't be like, "Oh, well, I loved seeing *Henry the Eighth* at Oregon Shakes."

***Kent*:** In 1984.

***Embrey*:** Yeah. And you know what's really cool is that Henry Woronicz played Henry the Eighth, and he was Lord Chamberlain in our show. I think I asked him how old he was when he played *Henry the Eighth*, and he said, "twenty-nine." I thought I was young at thirty-two.

***Duncan*:** I think it's really cool that I'm getting to do this play early on in my career because it's not done as much, so I don't know if I'll ever get the opportunity to do it again. So, I think that's a cool element. What's been exciting for me about doing this play is that I've really grown to love the text. As you guys have said, you really connect with Katherine in the show, and she has some great text. I think that's the joy of doing some of the less produced plays, being able to see there's a lot of merit here. And also getting to do our own take on it. I was talking about the changes that we made to allow the women to have a bit more stage time. That is exciting too, to take something that's not usually done and to put a different imprint on it and allow it to connect a bit more to modern audiences.

***Kent*:** I'll just add one tiny thing, which is when you're in a room with twenty Shakespeare actors that haven't done the play you're doing, when you're like, "Who here has done this?" and only two of the twenty raised their hands, that's exciting. One was Henry Woronicz and the other is John Harrell, who's done all. I once asked, "Who's done all the plays?" And he said, "Well, I'll just list the plays I've only done once," because he's in ASC [American Shakespeare Center] and he was there for fifteen years. So, he's been through all the plays.

It's really great to be in rehearsal on a play when no one's been through it before because it saves you what's inevitable, when you're doing *Romeo and Juliet*: "Well, the last time I did this—" That sentence comes out a lot in rehearsal, and it's kind of death to discovery. Because even though you learned something about the play, it doesn't mean it's going to work for this production of the play. I've now learned when I repeat roles or repeat plays never to say that. I do say, "I have an idea," and sometimes it's an idea that I had five years ago, the last time I played the part. But I just leave that off, so it feels like a discovery, and also so the room can reject it more freely without feeling the burden of me saying, "I've already done all this work, and I want to bring that to this choice." So,

doing new plays—new plays, I call them—plays we haven't done yet, is really fun as an actor because there's nothing to steal from. You have to build it out of whole cloth.

***Audience member*:** Hi. Doing plays in repertory and doing three very different Shakespearean plays in repertory. Do you notice an energetic difference to the audience coming in to the show, during the show? What is that difference? How does that feel? How does that affect your performances?

***Kent*:** Have you done rep before?

***Duncan*:** Not to this extent. This is the most unique schedule I've worked on. It is very unique. But yes, there's definitely an energetic difference. Like with *Taming*, it's always our biggest audience. I'm not sure if it's because it's a comedy, or maybe it's just because, out of the three, it's the most well-known because of its controversy. But people are there, and they are ready to laugh. *Henry* is a little quiet. Sometimes we get our laughter, but we have to warm them up. We know we have to get them in this world. But once we get them there, they're usually there with us, which is great. And then *Winter's Tale* can be quiet. It just depends on the day. I think last night we had a bit of a quieter audience, not laughing as—

***Embrey*:** You were all there.

***Duncan*:** Not laughing as much as they usually do. Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry to say that.

***Audience member*:** We got the jokes on Monday night.

***Embrey*:** Oh, good.

***Duncan*:** Not that we don't appreciate a quiet audience, but you do have to work. I never expect the audience to react any certain type of way to anything. I usually try to adapt to what they're giving me that day and try to have my own fun with it. But it is great to work on things that are completely different because every day I feel like I get to have a different type of fun.

***Embrey*:** I love rep for that reason. Because you never know. You never know what reaction you're going to get on a certain night. Like, for instance, I thought I was terrible last night. As a comedic actor, I'm not expecting uproarious laughter. I'm so glad everyone got the bit when I come in as the shepherd, when he's like, "Good lord, boy. When hast thou seen this?" And I had my Bea Arthur moment, and said, "Now." That's the joy of rep.

It doesn't affect my performance, no matter what the audience's reaction is or what their vibes are, because I do it for fun. Like, I don't do this job for fun; I do it for money. But I'm saying that's when you start doing it for yourself in a way. And just because the audience isn't reacting doesn't mean that they're not paying attention. And that's a beautiful lesson to learn. I toured in rep for several years at the American Shakespeare Center. We range from middle schoolers to hundred-year-olds. It didn't matter. And there's nothing like it, rep, and that's why I love doing it.

***Kent*:** I'll just say, I do rep a lot, and it's my favorite thing to do. When I'm doing eight shows a week of one play, I inherently get bored somewhere along the run. I have to push through that wall and keep discovering, but because you're doing eight shows a week, you kind of run out of discovery, and it starts to become indulgent, your discovery, because you're just trying to do something different.

Whereas in rep, I'm sure you know our schedule, but we built these three plays in seven weeks. So, each show only gets fourteen days of rehearsal, fourteen, eight-hour days of rehearsal. That's it. And on night of the fourteenth day is our opening. That means that we're memorizing and we're staging, but if any of us were to say that we have discovered the depths of what is possible in fourteen days of rehearsal, we're completely full of it, right? There's a lot left to find.

And we're only doing them twice a week. We're halfway through our run now, but I think we've only done the shows eleven or twelve times now. I've been here a month and a half and I've only done a week and a half of *Henry the Eighth*. I've only done a week and a half of *Winter's Tale*. So, you're watching us continue to discover in front of you the truth of something.

I think that makes it really engaging, because curious actors in repertory are constantly poking and prodding at things. Sometimes we come in with an idea we'll try. Sometimes you're just in the moment and you discover something that of rocks you, and you get off stage wondering what just happened. I think that's what's really cool about it. And the audience is a big reflection of that because they're the scene partner we don't get to work with until we're out there, the scene partner we change every show. There is no group mentality that is reliable in that space.

And there will be elements of the weather which have something to say. Some nights wind is bad, and we turn our amplification off. That changes the way we have to play the space. So, you're looking at a very, very alive piece of theater in repertory where we barely know the plays when we open them, in the sense of how much more depth there is to discover. So, we're going to explore it in front of the paying customers.

***Audience member*:** Thinking about repertory, that is actually closer to the original mode in which these plays would have been produced than the way that you typically see them in RSC [Royal Shakespeare Company], which is doing a massive run and there's this cast and this cast and this cast. Does that help? Like, as you think about what you're doing and how you're doing it, do you think about the original mode of performance, and do you try and bring that forward? Or is it more useful to think, "This is a new thing that I am retelling in the twenty-first century for my twenty-first century audience." Because this is such an old play, because it has this history; I hope they didn't tell you that we were all going to be there on Monday because the idea of doing a show in front of a bunch of Shakespeare scholars who are going to be sitting there judging would be terrifying to me. How much does that legacy impact the way you perform it versus doing something that was written in the 90s or the 2000s or the 2010s?

***Kent*:** I would say I certainly encounter the years the text has existed on this earth. Part of the process of creating it is knowing I have to unpack this, to make this make sense. I have to make this work. I don't think when I'm up there that I'm necessarily thinking about what it was like to do the play 450 years ago, but I am always connected to the fact that Shakespeare performed in repertory. And I think Shakespeare in repertory is always going to be fresher, because it can't fall into its structured patterns.

And knowing that Shakespeare himself hired a prompter that was hidden, that was downstage center, knowing that Shakespeare's first performance of a play was more expensive than the second one, because it was a wild ride? Like, we know he didn't rehearse very much. Just like modern theater, you don't make money when you're rehearsing. No one pays to see that. So, they would just under-rehearse and get people to pay for watching them rehearse. I think there's something about that.

I think that the joy of discovery and performance with repertory is, to me, more fun because it's less structured. I've been in so many eight-show a week plays where the light cues are very structured. I did a Much Ado, where I was doing my soliloquy to the audience, and I like to interact with the audience, but I was told, "We're going to do these four lights here, and then this light is going to fade. You're going to go to this light over here." I want to go where the audience is. You can't decide with the lights where the laughter is going to be. And they told me that's the tech. You just have to make it work.

So, then I have to go to the stage manager to go, "Okay, well, here's the deal. There's five light cues. Sometimes I'm going to skip through those real quick to get to where the fire is with the audience." And the stage manager goes, "Yeah, great. I'll just call them with you." But in outdoor repertory, we're freer to explore. I'm never in the same place as Buckingham in that first scene. I wander all over. I go to where I think the audience cares, not where the director told me where to stand. He's gone, so it's okay. He doesn't know. Anybody else want to talk to Shakespeare repertory? I may have answered that question. I'm not sure.

***Duncan*:** I think being outdoors, as Geoff said, is very helpful in feeling traditional. I performed outside before, but not Shakespeare. So, learning how to really get your reach out there was a really fun challenge. But I'm also someone who considers myself still kind of a baby in the Shakespeare world. A lot of my experience with it was in school and then here. I really don't pretend to know, or to act like I know, much about it. I think especially as a black actor, knowing that at the time these shows were first being put on, someone like me was not necessarily involved in that type of stuff, I do have to meet it initially from a modern lens. I have to ask, "How can I make this personal to me, but honor the ritual of it and the tradition and history elements of it?"

***Embrey*:** Ditto. Wait, do y'all actually want me to say something? I thought they said it beautifully.

One thing I love about repertory, and I don't know if this is answering your question or not, but the one thing that I love about repertory, especially this season, is that you get to see me play a king in one instance, you get to see me play a drunkard in one, which is tonight, and then you get to see me play a clown

in the next. And how I differentiate those is one of my favorite things. Then I also get to explore what these characters mean to me. Kind of like Alaysia, I'm biracial, so I'm half white, half black. And so someone like me was probably not doing this back in the day. What actually made Shakespeare accessible to me was seeing a black man play Oberon in *Midsummer Night's Dream* at American Shakespeare Center, and it made it accessible to me.

So, it's exciting to do something like *Henry* as a person of color and hope that if someone sees it, someone young, old, whatever, they see themselves. Hopefully not in *Henry the Eighth*. But they get to see something that they thought they could never do. That's kind of my story right now. And it had to do with repertory.

***Audience member*:** That was a great show. I saw that *Midsummer*.

***Embrey*:** Which one? The one that I was in?

***Audience member*:** No, the one in American Shakespeare Center where the guy playing Oberon was black.

***Embrey*:** Well, there were many of those. Which one? What year?

***Audience member*:** 2014 or 15, I think.

***Embry*:** That was before my time here. I played Bottom there the last time they did *Midsummer*.

***Shelley*:** Thank you all. We are at time, so we'll wrap up. But thank you for your questions. Thank you for your expertise, your wisdom, and your experience. It has been a pleasure to spend a little bit of time with the group. Thank you all.