

# The Alabama Shakespeare Festival: Fifteen Years of Growth and Change

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The Alabama Shakespeare Festival progressed from being an idea in 1971 to a reality in 1972, its first season. Martin L. Platt, a recent graduate of Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh, became the director of the Anniston Community Theatre in 1971, and in the same year he brought his idea of a Shakespeare festival to the Alabama Council on the Arts and Humanities. Platt received a grant from the Council in the spring of 1972; within a few months, the opening season of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival began with the production of *The Comedy of Errors* on July 12.

Despite a small acting company and technical crew and an unsatisfactory substitute for a theatre, the Anniston High School gymnasium, Platt had planned an ambitious first season, following his opening production with two more Shakespearean plays, *Hamlet* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. Ticket sales of three thousand generated insufficient income to meet the first season's expenses, but attendance and critical reviews indicated an enthusiastic response to a professional theatre, and Shakespeare theatre in particular, in Alabama. Additional support for the theatre came in the form of a volunteer organization which met for the first time two days before the season opened.

Some of the problems of the opening season were solved when in 1973 the Alabama Shakespeare Festival moved to a new theatre, part of the Anniston Educational Park Complex. The move was part of an expansion in many areas of the Festival; the acting company increased from fifteen to twenty-five, the ticket sales rose

from three to five thousand, and the income doubled, although it was still smaller than the operating expenses of the growing Festival. Platt again directed a month-long season which included three Shakespearean and one additional classic play. Following the theatrical fashion of the time, Platt utilized bizarre settings for Shakespeare's plays, including an antebellum South *Much Ado About Nothing* and a rock musical *As You Like It*.

The popular and critical success of the second season resulted in an increase of productions in the 1974 and 1975 seasons. These seasons each included five plays, three by Shakespeare. The audience continued to grow, with ticket sales rising to seven thousand in 1974 and ten thousand in 1975, with 1974 marking the first financially successful Alabama Shakespeare Festival season. In the same year, the Festival hired an associate director, Bruce Hoard, who directed one play in that season and in the next.

The 1976 season was an important one for the Festival, which developed a relationship with Actor's Equity Association. Previously, the Festival had relied on recent college graduates to fill its acting company. Only one Equity actor, Charles Antalosky, worked for the Festival in 1976, performing the title role in *King Lear*. Another highlight of the fifth season was the Festival's *New York Times* review which included favorable comments about both the Festival and its director.

Up until 1977, plays by Shakespeare had constituted the majority of the Festival's productions; the sixth season included only two Shakespeare plays along with three others, one of which was the Festival's first production of a play by a living playwright, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. In the tradition of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, the Festival produced the Stoppard play in the same season as its Shakespearean antecedent, *Hamlet*. By this point, the Festival had sufficiently established its importance to the state and the region to be proclaimed "State Theatre of Alabama" by Governor George C. Wallace on June 17, 1977. (Wallace's second wife Cornelia had served as Honorary President of the Festival's Board of Governors in its opening season.) The Governor's proclamation, along with the previous season's national critical attention, may have been the major factor in the 1977 season's large increase in audience, from ten thousand in 1975 and 1976 to fifteen thousand in 1977.

The following year saw two major events, both of which resulted in important changes in the function of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. First, the Acting Conservatory Training Program was established:

. . . the Conservatory was born out of the conviction that the Festival needed to serve the southeastern region by making its educational and cultural resources available to the greater community. It was also created in an effort to develop a pool of professional actors and directors in the Southeast. (Volz 34)

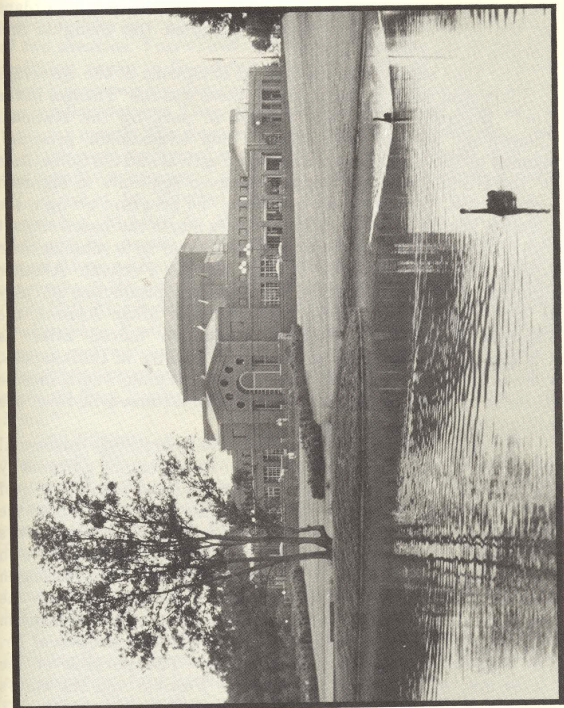
The Festival also expanded its role by touring. The first touring production was *The Taming of the Shrew*, which toured for six weeks in seven southeastern states. The touring program continued until the 1985-86 season, producing one play in addition to the regular season. In 1978, the tour attendance numbered twenty-two thousand, only one thousand less than the regular season attendance; in subsequent years, the tour attendance usually exceeded the regular season attendance. And almost certainly, the touring program brought to Anniston new theatregoers and first time visitors to the Festival's home.

Other new programs were created in 1979 and 1980. The eighth season, 1979, saw an increase in both the acting company and the touring program, which included performances in eleven states. The new program for that season was "Shakespeare Sundays," Elizabethan church services. In the next year, another new program was originated, "Music at St. Michael's." These two programs introduced the public to other aspects of Elizabethan culture. Another high point of the 1980 season was an invitation for the Alabama Shakespeare Festival to join the League of Resident Theatres (LORT), an invitation that the Festival had been working toward for several years.

An important addition to the Festival came in 1981 when it acquired a second theatre, the ACT Theatre in downtown Anniston. This second theatre, with seating for one hundred, was beneficial in a number of ways; primarily, it offered the opportunity for the staging of plays in an intimate setting. The Alabama Shakespeare Festival's first musical, *Oh, Coward!*, was the first ACT Theatre production, and the Festival took the production to Atlanta for its first performance there. At its tenth anniversary, the Alabama Shakespeare festival enjoyed significant popular and critical acclaim; financially, however, the Festival continued to experience difficulty. Deficits had been rising steadily for several years, and fundraising efforts were largely unsuccessful. When in 1981 the Festival's expenses rose to over three quarters of a million dollars, the result was that "local and regional associates of the Festival were less enamored with the ASF's financial and organizational

management" than the public was with the Festival's performances (Volz 51).

A solution to the Festival's troubled finances was found in 1982 by businessman Winton M. Blount and his wife Carolyn. Their solution to the immediate financial difficulties was a contribution that covered almost all of the Festival's outstanding debts; their solution to the long-range problems was the offer of a permanent new theatre complex in Montgomery. Such a complex would allow



Courtesy of Phil Scarebrook.

the Festival a much longer season than the four to six weeks to which it was limited by the Anniston theatre, thus giving the Festival an opportunity to recoup some of the expenses of its major productions.

With its financial future secure, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival began its eleventh season in Anniston in the summer of 1982. The Festival offered only three major productions; other offerings included the first Shakespearean play by the Conservatory and two performances booked by the Festival on subscription, one by the Roadside Theatre and another by the Free Southeastern Theatre. In addition to its successful season, the plans for the new Montgomery theatre occupied the thoughts and energies of the Festival troupe.

The 1983 season was marked by expansion of the Festival's auxiliary programs. Notable among these was the "Theatre in the Mind" program which was funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This educational program, planned by the Alabama Shakespeare Festival and the Committee for the Humanities in Alabama, involved seminars in eighteen communities. Through these seminars, the program brought the talents of scholars, directors, and players into broad-based contact with the theatregoers of the state in such a way as to enhance their experience at productions offered by the Festival. Another highlight in the season was the Festival's first production of a play by an American playwright, Bill Davis's *Mass Appeal*; the Alabama Shakespeare Festival production moved after its Anniston run to the Indiana Repertory Theatre in Indianapolis, where it sold out. Finally, for the first time in many years, income exceeded expenses as the Festival for the first time earned over one million dollars in one season.

The final Anniston season, 1984, was enormously successful despite an unpromising start; before the season began, a fire set by thieves destroyed costumes, which were replaced with the help of local fundraising as even in its last summer with the Festival the Anniston community demonstrated a loyalty which in many ways had made the Alabama Shakespeare Festival possible thirteen years earlier. In addition to five major productions, the 1984 season included the Festival's first concert series. Finally, 1984 saw the formation of the Consortium for Academic Programs in association with the Alabama Shakespeare Festival and the election of Dr. Guin Nance to head that organization. The purpose of the Consortium was to bring together the Festival and the state's academic institutions to pursue the mutual interests of both.

Immediately after the 1984 season closed, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival moved to temporary offices in Montgomery to prepare for the 1985-86 season, which would open in the new theatre complex. Pre-season activities included an international theatre trip for Alabama Shakespeare Festival patrons which proved to be a major fund-raiser. The first students enrolled in the Festival's new MFA Professional Actor Training Program, the result of collaboration between the Alabama Shakespeare Festival and the University of Alabama, arrived in the fall of 1985 to begin the two-year program.

In September of 1985, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival moved into its permanent home, a \$21.5 million complex consisting of two theatres. Year-round operation, made possible by the new facilities, began in December with production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on the Festival Stage, the larger of the two theatres; the smaller Octagon Theatre opened with *The Glass Menagerie* in the same month. The season included ten major productions, most of which were performed in repertory in the summer of 1986. The two popular successes of the season were Shakespeare's *Richard III*, directed by Edward Stern; and George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, directed by Martin Platt. Ticket sales for the first Montgomery season exceeded even the Festival staff's high expectations, setting "a new fourteen-year box office record within six weeks of the printing of the premier winter season brochure" (Volz 122). Along with the support of the theatregoers, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival benefited from the support of volunteer groups and various agencies. This support assisted in funding educational programs such as SchoolFest, designed to introduce students from grades 7 to 12 to the theatre, and "Theatre in the Mind."

The fifteenth season, 1986-87, included the premiere of Tom Stoppard's *Royal Crossing* among its ten major productions. For the second year, the fifteen MFA students offered productions, called New Stages, in addition to their participation in the regular season; those students formed the first Alabama Shakespeare Festival graduating class when they completed degree requirements in the summer of 1987. Shortly after the departure of these graduates, the second group of students arrived to begin the MFA program.

To look at the success of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in fulfilling its purpose during its first fifteen years necessitates some consideration of the Renaissance theatre with which it is so directly concerned. The professional theatre of late sixteenth and early

seventeenth century England was a remarkable phenomenon, essentially unparalleled anywhere else in Europe. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the plays written for the English Renaissance stage was their fusion of the native elements so popular in the Tudor interludes with those of the classical tradition which dominated the university dramas and the theatricals performed at the inns of court. Such a fusion allowed the playwrights of the day, Shakespeare being the preeminent among them, to present the great themes of classical literature in a form with broad appeal. And this appeal, combined with the fact that entrance to the pit of a public playhouse cost but a penny, brought to the theatre a class of citizen—many of them illiterate—who had never before found the works of England's literati accessible. In short, the English Renaissance theatre was such an effective vehicle for the widespread dissemination of ideas and cultural values that Elizabeth I quickly moved to regulate its activities and Parliament banned public theatricals altogether in 1642.

While the education, indeed edification, of the audience may have been secondary to financial success to the dramatists and players of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was a foremost concern to Martin Platt in 1971 when he envisioned a Shakespeare theatre in Alabama. On the purpose of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Jim Volz quotes Platt:

... We are here in a part of the country where Shakespeare in production is almost nonexistent. Almost everyone remembers Shakespeare unpleasantly from high school and college English classes, and what we must do is present Shakespeare in a way which will make these people forget their prejudices. Shakespeare is first and foremost an entertaining playwright, not an oblique poet. He was writing for a mass audience, not a select one. (6)

This passage actually reveals two attitudes, both of which have served to shape the growth and development of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. On the one hand, we see an awareness that the intellectual splendor of Shakespeare's dramas does not prevent their being entertaining scripts. On the other hand, Platt reveals when he says "present Shakespeare in a way" that presumption of which players are often guilty, the belief that the performance is somehow a creation, rather than a recreation of characters, actions, and ideas which the dramatist has already shaped. With Shakespearean drama, in particular, this second notion becomes

especially problematic, for although in Shakespeare's plays we acknowledge, indeed applaud, the universality of character and theme, they are, nonetheless, plays which remain the product of a specific intellectual and cultural milieu and of a theatrical tradition with its own conventions and devices. The successes of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival have resulted from an awareness that Shakespeare was, and remains, an entertaining playwright; its weaknesses from an effort to improve, through production devices, upon his appeal.

The educational dimension of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival surfaced early in two forms, first in the selection of plays and a production philosophy which governed their performance, and second in the structured programs designed to train players and to familiarize the audience with the plays performed and the theatrical tradition from which the plays emerged. As early as 1975, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival presented the sixteenth century play *Ralph Roister Doister* as an apprentice production, and in 1978 ten actors joined the Student Conservatory Program. In large part, these early activities set the stage for the enhanced formal educational role of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. In 1983, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival hired Carol Ogus to direct the Artist in Education program and began with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities the Theatre-in-the-Mind program which has brought the experience and expertise of players, directors, and scholars into a forum for the benefit of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival community. The Consortium for Academic Programs in Association with the Alabama Shakespeare Festival begun in 1984, and the MFA Professional Actor Training Program established in 1985, point to the commitment of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival to continue a remarkably young but solid tradition of educating the public and ensuring a new generation of classically trained players. A perhaps less obvious, but no less significant, aspect of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's educational function is served through the theatre's volunteer network.

Given its modest beginnings, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival of necessity relied upon the energies of Anniston residents who, as did the actors themselves, gave of their time and talents to prepare costumes, build sets, and even take roles in the performances. The much more professional Alabama Shakespeare Festival of today continues to benefit from the volunteers who participate in Will's Guild. In both settings, but most certainly in Anniston, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival has through its



involvement with volunteers provided a splendid educational experience for the community at large. And such intimate contact with the community has assured that the vision of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, to bring to Alabama a much needed theatrical experience, was in a particularly concrete way fulfilled.

Attendant activities such as the MFA program and the volunteer network must stand second to the play selection and production philosophy when we consider the educational role of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, for it is the performances themselves that bring the power and pleasure of Shakespeare to life. Moreover, it is in play selection and production philosophy that the evolution of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival is most obvious.

A comparison of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's opening season in 1972 and that which has been announced for 1988 is decidedly revealing. In its premier season, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival presented four plays—Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Comedy of Errors*, and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*; and Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. In 1988, only two Shakespeare plays grace the season of 13 productions, *Hamlet* and *As You Like It*. This contrast documents a trend away from classical theatre in general and Shakespearean drama in particular which has accelerated since the move to Montgomery. An equally revealing statistic is that during its first ten years, from 1972 to 1981, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival presented 52 productions, of which 30, or almost 60%, were of Shakespearean plays, and another nine by such authors as Wilde, Ibsen, and Molière who are decidedly part of the western tradition of great theatre. During the past five years, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival has presented 44 productions, omitting the MFA performances, of which 21, or less than 50%, have been Shakespearean, with many on the level of the dramas written by Noel Coward, who appears to be a favorite with the Festival. Of course, mere statistics do not tell a particularly complete story, nor should a review of these figures stand alone as a statement on the changes in the vision of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. We should note, for example, that the Festival has avoided the mistake of the BBC Shakespeare series and not tried to present performance of such plays as *King John* or *Henry VIII*, which despite the regard we have for their author simply do not make a very satisfactory evening's entertainment. And the emphasis on Molière and Ibsen in the non-Shakespearean selections is well considered, particularly given the superior quality of the 1987 production of *Hedda Gabler* and the almost definitive performance by Greta Lambert in the title role. On the other hand, with the exception of the 1974 apprentice production of *Ralph Roister*

*Doister* and the 1986 MFA production of Middleton's *The Changeling*, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival has ignored the many splendid dramas written by Shakespeare's contemporaries, plays such as Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and *Edward II*, Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, *Volpone*, and *The Silent Woman*, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, and James Shirley's *The Cardinal*. These are plays which were produced by the same cultural milieu which gave rise to Shakespeare's dramas and have much of the brilliance of his most celebrated efforts. To see other Renaissance plays in the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's repertoire would indicate that the commitment to educating the public about the Shakespearean theatre is a bit more firmly placed.

The debate is constant between academics and performers, whether we do an injustice to a dramatist to stage his plays in such a way as to alter their settings, to edit the language and movement of the action, or to embellish the script by adding music or some other form of spectacle. Certainly no dramatist has had his scripts treated in such a manner more often than has Shakespeare. Generally, such performance embellishments reveal a production philosophy, and in the case of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival this is the case. Martin Platt's initial vision that the Festival should reawaken the public to the entertaining quality of Shakespeare while at the same time educating that public about the Renaissance theatre, led to a rather pronounced degree of experimentation with the productions of the plays. On the surface, giving Shakespeare a face-lift would seem a proper approach to attracting, or perhaps reattracting, an audience. However, the appropriate question becomes whether in fact one is presenting Shakespeare if scripts have been edited, settings altered, music added; if, in other words, embellished production finally alters the play as significantly as it so often does. Again, in a statement by Martin Platt, quoted by Jim Volz, we find an awareness of the potential problem when he speaks of the 1974 season: "This year . . . we have done almost no cutting at all and we have fun with the plays in their period. Sometimes people twist them so far out of their periods that they no longer mean the same things" (22).

What seems to have occurred with the Alabama Shakespeare Festival is that to establish a following that would ensure financial security for the theatre, Platt was willing to make concessions, but concessions that he retreated from as the theatre moved toward its fourth season. In recent years, however, the Festival seems to have returned to that initial philosophy which produced experimentation, such as in the anachronistic stagings of the 1983 productions of *All's Well that Ends Well* and *The Taming of the*

*Shrew* with their twentieth-century settings, the 1984 production of *Macbeth* also set in the twentieth century, and the 1986 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, again set in the twentieth century. In fact, with the recent performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* we note not just a contemporary setting but a stylized one as well. Such anachronistic productions are not simply unnecessary, they are often the weakest Shakespeare productions offered by the Festival, although the 1987 production of *The Taming of the Shrew* necessitates a qualification, for its setting in the eighteenth century, though not true to the play, was consistent with the style of the comedy. The effective productions of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, both the most illuminating and the most entertaining, have been those which remained faithful to the Shakespearean script, such as the 1986 production of *Richard III*. In these productions the excellent talents of the Festival's troupe are not overshadowed by performance devices and directors' experimentation. Ultimately, such productions, staged as their scripts would demand, best fuse the dual purpose of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, to provide both an entertaining and instructional theatre experience.

The Alabama Shakespeare Festival has brought a successful and much needed theatrical experience to the South in general and the state of Alabama in particular. The new facilities in Montgomery should magnify both the impact that the theatre has on the cultural life of the community and the ability of the Festival to fulfill its dual mission: reminding theatregoers how entertaining Shakespeare's plays can be, and educating them about the great theatre of western literature, Shakespearean theatre in particular. However, at this particular juncture in the Festival's development, we sense a shift from its traditional commitment to Shakespearean drama, evidenced by the fact that only two Shakespeare plays (*Hamlet* and *As You Like It*) appear in the 1988 season. Such a small number in a season of thirteen dramas, and the growing importance of plays which might find more appropriate setting in a dinner theatre, raise the question of whether the financial demands of maintaining the new facilities could shift the direction of the theatre finally away from its commitment to Shakespeare and ultimately leave questions about production philosophy moot points.

#### Work Cited

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