

Will

by Courtney White

“News, madam; the British powers are marching hitherward.”

You won’t find these two lines of Shakespeare in any collection of quotes, part of any audition speech, on any T-shirt or coffee mug, or at the start of any essay, book chapter, or reminiscence except this one. As memorable Shakespeare goes, these eight words – out of a million that he wrote – are among the most forgettable. Can you even identify the play? Hint: the lines are spoken near the end by a messenger to a young lady who has arrived on the shores of England at the head of a French army. Earlier, her elderly father had been ranting and raving on a moor in the rain. Correct! The young lady is Cordelia and the play *King Lear*. Not only are these two lines utterly forgettable, they are so completely inconsequential to the plot that they’re not even news. Cordelia already knows the British army is on its way. She waves off the messenger dismissively. With a bow, he leaves and the story hurtles on to its tragic conclusion.

The lines weren’t inconsequential to me, however. They marked the achievement of a personal goal: it was the first time – and likely the last – I would have the honor of speaking actual Shakespeare on stage as part of a professional production. My two-line “performance” as the insignificant messenger was part of a production of *King Lear* put on by International Shakespeare Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, during September 2018. I also had the honor of playing one of Lear’s ‘bawdy’ knights, drinking from an empty goblet while being outraged by Goneril’s conniving accusations. At the end of the play, I carried Cordelia’s dead body onto stage while King Lear howled with grief. Then I got to watch everyone die.

I loved it.

I was a “supernumerary” – which is a wonderful word that means “not needed” or “redundant” in a nontheatrical context. In a stage production, they’re usually non-speaking bit roles. I was lucky to be assigned two lines! Gen and I were two of seven “supers” in *King Lear*. We were tapped to be in the production by Caryl Farkas, the director, who knew us via a troupe of teenage Shakespearians called the *Upstart Crows*.



Our children, Sterling and Olivia, were former actors in the troupe and over the years we had volunteered frequently for backstage assignments. Other “supers” had similar links. Caryl is the founder and director of the Crows so she knew that all of us were a reliable, if non-actorly, lot (as a band of soldiers we were also an over-the-hill lot – which I thought gave a bit of added poignancy to Lear’s situation). In addition to our small roles, we happily participated in the production’s busywork: moving props on and off stage, cleaning up spilled blood, fixing balky curtains, finding



Lear rehearsal

misplaced objects for actors, and generally trying to be useful. Backstage during performances, Gen also helped rehearse lines with an actor who had a habit of skipping lines during scenes.

If we weren’t needed, we often lingered near our dressing tent outside in the parking lot. Some of my favorite memories involve sitting around with my fellow “supers” in our puffy pants, funny hats, and plastic tabards on gloriously warm September evenings waiting for our brief turn on stage. During intermission, a few of the actors would join us and

the air would fill with ‘shop talk’ about other productions, mishaps on stage, wry observations, and lots of joking. I’m in awe of actors generally (all those lines!) so it was a treat to listen to their stories. We “supers” often had to enter through the front door of the theater to reach our places and occasionally I’d run into a playgoer in the hall who would smile warmly at my period clothing and regalia. It reminded me that theater is really just ‘dress-up’ for adults.

There was only one major crisis in an otherwise well-run and very well-received (and sold out) production. Before a Sunday matinee, a lead actor failed to appear, triggering frantic phone calls and text messages from Caryl. She sent someone to bang on his apartment door. To no avail. The anxiety backstage was thick. The show opens with a burst of supernumerary action, so we all took our places and waited nervously for the actor to arrive. Stalling for time, Robin Williams, the play’s dramaturg, chit-chatted with the audience. She came within a



Cast members (making blood)

minute of cancelling the show when the actor suddenly entered the building, his eyes downcast as he rushed to the dressing room. A minute later, the music started. We were on!



Backstage

The first time I delivered my two utterly forgettable lines on stage, I nearly flubbed them. My role as the messenger required that I bow twice to Lady Cordelia, once as I arrived and once as I exited. There is a proper way to do Elizabethan bowing that involves an unfamiliar coordination between arms and legs. We spent a fair amount of time practicing it in rehearsal. I was so worried about completing the move correctly, however, that I almost messed up my lines. I detected a slight smile on Cordelia's face as I gracelessly left the stage.

The star of the show was Paul Walsky, a nearly eighty-year old neurologist and amateur actor. It was his life's ambition to play Lear, he told us at the start of rehearsal – and play it he did!

Although physically frail (he required a staff to get around which was a nice touch for Lear) Paul had a regal voice that filled the theater. He captured Lear's mercurial moods perfectly and his grief at the end for the consequences of his vanity and bad decision-making felt genuine. The rest of the cast was also outstanding. They brought to life a play that I have never liked very much, especially its grim and depressing conclusion. Ironically, the original story on which *Lear* is based has a happy ending (ah, Shakespeare).

Tragedy aside, the production was great fun and we were sorry to see it end so quickly. Standing on the stage after the last performance I was struck by the 'here today, gone tomorrow' essence of theater. Books and movies and the written plays themselves last forever, but a show dissipates like a cloud, never to be seen again. The laughter, the teamwork, the long hours, the intense anticipation of opening night, the great acting, and the satisfaction of the standing ovation at the end of each show all dissolved into thin air, as Shakespeare himself famously noted, leaving only memories.



Gen and I as Lear "supers"

If my brief performance was the culmination of a personal goal, it was also the climax of a deep immersion into Shakespeare and his plays for Gen and myself that began three-and-a-half years earlier when Sterling and Olivia, then aged sixteen, joined the Upstart Crows. The nonprofit's brave mission is to get teenagers excited about Shakespeare through performance. They put on three plays a year entirely cast with young people (ages 11-18) and employ *uncut* versions of the text – yes, you read that right. Uncut. In addition to acting and backstage work, the kids participate in workshops, pop-up performances, and even an occasional parade.

The Crows changed our lives. Joining the troupe almost on a whim, Sterling and Olivia quickly became full, busy members. Their inaugural roles as Lysander and Peter Quince respectively came in a production of *Midsummer Night's Dream* held in the historic Scottish Rite Temple in downtown Santa Fe (built in 1913). And what a dream it was! Every part of the experience was new and memorable for all four of us. I was deeply impressed by it all: the great energy of the young actors (verging on bedlam at times), their undaunted courage in tackling the Bard and his arcane language, the lovely homemade costumes and simple props used by the troupe, and Caryl's phenomenal patience. I loved the old-world beauty of the Scottish Rite Temple theater, where Gen and I often had the honor of carefully raising and lowering the century-old painted backdrop



Eli Poppele and Sterling in Julius Caesar



Olivia in The Winter's Tale

screens for many of the shows. Most of all, I was totally dazzled by the terrific performances of the actors, nearly all of whom had never set foot on a stage before!

A cascade of roles for Sterling and Olivia followed: Sterling as Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, arguing with Cassius played by his best friend Eli; Olivia playing the famous Roman dictator and accidentally leaving a blood stain on the carpet of the historic theater; Sterling chewing scenery as the dishonorable king in *The Winter's Tale* and energetic Hotspur in *Henry IV Part 1*; Olivia as an exuberant Aeschylus in *Winter's Tale*, a jolly Falstaff (in a fat suit), a creepy Caliban in *The Tempest*, and her

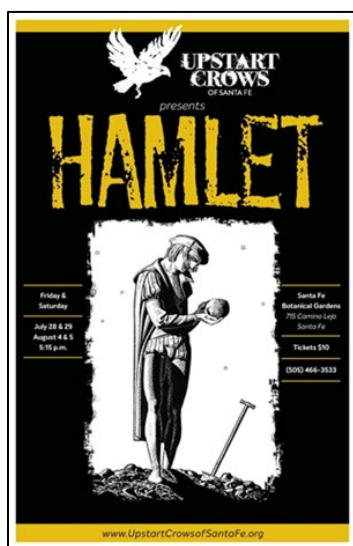
noble namesake in *Twelfth Night*, while Sterling played the drunken clown Feste. There was a great deal of dramatic stuff in between the productions as well – workshops, readings, fight trainings, school performances, parades, pop-ups, short videos, as well as a winter Youth Shakespeare Festival. In addition to their acting duties, Sterling and Olivia became apprentices and then assistant directors to Caryl, learning what it takes to herd theatrical cats.

The Crows became family. The troupe had twenty core members who performed in each play and everyone quickly became friends, supporting each other through rehearsals, laughing during breaks, hugging before and after performances, doing each other's hair and makeup, and eating meals together. In the run-up to a show, they became a beehive of activity, flying energetically around the theater in small swarms and speaking in the excited tones of teenagers on a mission. As older members, Olivia and Sterling became mentors to many of the younger actors, especially as they gained experience. They also helped smooth the inevitable stresses and personal dramas backstage. Dress rehearsals were the worst of all – and one of the few times I saw Caryl lose her patience. Her philosophy was to never turn a young person away (there were no auditions to become a Crow) so by the time they tackled *Twelfth Night* she needed to employ four casts of



Olivia on stage at the Scottish Temple

actors – four! The dress rehearsals were chaos. To make matters worse, the lighting technician quit at the last moment. Parents were pressed into service to run the sound board. During *Henry IV*, almost everyone caught the flu. The pressure was intense. Actors cried. Cues were missed. Lines forgotten. Yet somehow it all came together. Every show (we saw them all) came off beautifully. It's the inexplicable magic of theater.



After the final performance of a show, everyone would go to a restaurant for a celebratory meal. At the parent's table you could feel a huge sense of relief and accomplishment. Whew! It was the same at kids' table, only much louder. One of my favorite memories is drifting over to their table to talk with Sterling or Olivia and soaking up the energy and pride that beamed from the actors. They had a right to be proud too. They had just nailed Shakespeare!

Gen and I lived and breathed the Crows. We ran lines with Sterling and Olivia at home, drove them to rehearsals, hauled props back and forth, made sandwiches for Caryl to sell at performances, posted posters, sold T-shirts, ushered, and volunteered backstage in various capacities. We became collectively the “White Family” and any of the four of us could be found engaged in a production at any point. I was amused by the muttering that went on around the house. Olivia and Sterling took line memorization seriously and they would often wander from room to room uttering words in blank verse. If either needed a line buddy, Gen was ready to help (she started college as a Theater major). Occasionally, we would offer ‘notes’ to them. Sterling, for example, frequently pointed



Moving props for a show

his finger at his fellow actors during scenes of strong emotions. It became an in-joke with us and we gently encouraged him to broaden his repertoire of gestures. We encouraged Olivia to continue blossoming. Painfully shy as a child, Olivia became much more self-confident and assertive thanks to the Crows. Her only complaint – until *Twelfth Night* she only played boys!

Behind everything was Shakespeare. In Caryl’s philosophy, he is NOT an intimidating, old dead white guy whose beautiful words are too hard to understand or speak properly on stage, especially for kids. To her, William Shakespeare lives and breathes – which is exactly what happened. The teenage actors *loved* the plays and threw themselves into complex roles with gusto. It was extraordinary experience to sit in the audience watching a fourteen year-old play somber King Henry IV or wily Mark Anthony or cranky Prospero. Although Caryl carefully avoided certain plays (usually involving lovers), she didn’t hesitate to tackle the big tragedies. Whatever the part, she encouraged the young actors to analyze their roles and think about their motivations. It was amazing to watch. Anyone who says Shakespeare is too difficult for kids (or adults) didn’t attend a show by The Upstart Crows!



Unexpectedly, Gen and I became Shakespeare nerds, the consequence of an intense period of question-asking and answer-seeking on our part. Although we had always been big fans of the Bard, watching movie adaptations and attending many plays over the years, including a hitchhiking



Will

adventure we undertook during college to see *Macbeth* at an annual festival in Ashland, Oregon, we never took a deep dive until the Crows came to town. In addition to the productions, we attended many events organized by the nonprofit International Shakespeare Center, founded by Caryl and Robin, which put up an array of lectures, workshops, and readings. We attended other productions in town and went twice to the Colorado Shakespeare Festival with Sterling and Olivia. Gen and the kids also went to the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Canada one summer with the Crows. We watched live performances of plays from England at the Lensic Theater in Santa Fe and looked up all things Shakespeare on TV. And we read his many, many words, as well as

the many, many words of scholars that came with them. I consumed numerous biographies, especially the wonderful books by James Shapiro, a Shakespeare scholar at Columbia University who Caryl and Robin managed to bring to town for a lecture.

Here are some of the notable highlights (for us) in the run from 2015's *Midsummer* production to *King Lear* in 2018:

- Seeing an original First Folio (1623) at the New Mexico Fine Art Museum.
- Watching Olivia play Hermia in a professional production of *Midsummer*.
- Participating in weekly and monthly Shakespeare reading groups.
- Watching a performance of 'Dames of Thrones' by the Ducdame Theater troupe.
- Attending two performance workshops put on by British teachers from LAMDA.
- Watching the Crows hurl Shakespearian curses during a 4th of July parade.
- Participating in a Shakespeare text editing workshop hosted by Robin.
- Watching pop-up Shakespeare on a train as well as in a mining shack.
- The many events of ISC's "Year of Lear" – which culminated with the production.

We watched the *Hollow Crown* series on CD; analyzed the merits of an 'original practices' version of *King John*; suffered through two back-to-back group readings of *Merchant of Venice* (a play I dislike); discussed Shakespeare's attitudes toward women in the context of the #MeToo movement; puzzled over the oddity called *Timon of Athens*; struggled through modern versions of *Cymbeline* and *Hamlet*; and laughed along with the wonderful British sitcom called 'Upstart Crow' (and getting many of the wonky jokes). We ate up the three-season Canadian series *Slings and*

Arrows and rewatched classic film versions of the plays, including the amazing ones by Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. We bought Shakespeare bling. We put posters on our walls. We read essays. Gen listened to podcasts by the Folger Library. I read the ‘front matter’ to editions of the plays (and some of the Appendices). In an ultimate act of nerdiness, I beat Gen by a nose in a Shakespeare trivia competition that Robin organized based on the game *Jeopardy!*

Through all this activity, we marveled at Shakespeare’s deep humanity and phenomenal ability to create diverse, vivid, and mesmerizing characters. Personally, I am less enraptured by the speeches and soliloquies in the plays than I am by the banter and sparring between characters, which are more human than anything that comes out of a royal mouth, in my opinion. Shakespeare’s meditations on power, honor, succession, ambition, destiny, and death are rightly celebrated for their deep insights but it is the wenches, knaves, jesters, nurses, friars, fairies, tavern keepers, bawdy servants, philosophical gravediggers, chatty drunks, pompous constables, hotheaded teenagers, rude mechanicals, and quarreling lovers that truly capture our hearts. The great power of Shakespeare is his unparalleled ability to populate his plays with characters from all walks of life and make it work creatively. Of course, he created iconic ‘larger-than-life’ roles too. Falstaff is simply brilliant, a true original. Juliet is audacious and captivating. Richard the Third perfectly villainous. Iago frustratingly enigmatic. Lear maddingly dense-headed. Rosalind smart and cunning. Brutus honorably clueless. All from one pen! Shakespeare’s fertile imagination is truly awe-inspiring.

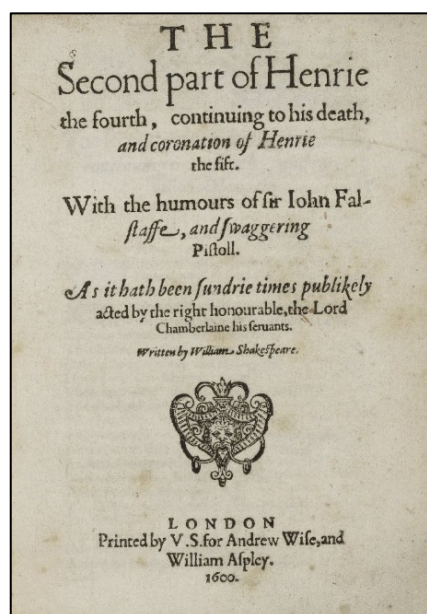


Shakespeare in a mining shack

I have a few humble complaints, however. In my non-scholarly estimation, the first half of many plays are stronger than the second halves. Some endings feel incomplete, some are too contrived, some too rushed, and some have unsatisfactory elements. Macbeth dying offstage, for example, doesn’t give us the resolution we need. The intervention of the goddess Hymen at the end of the otherwise down-to-earth *As You Like It* is bizarre. And Othello really, *really* needed to stick Iago with a dagger, killing him. Shakespeare too often employs an authority figure to resolve

the conflict, such as the end of *Measure for Measure* where the Duke too-neatly wraps up the complicated plot with a series of lengthy (and boring) royal proclamations. Some endings are simply objectionable, such as the horrible way Shylock is treated at the end of *Merchant of Venice* (though everyone treats each other horribly in this nasty play) or the way Petruchio treats Kate at the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Some plays rush to the end so quickly I wonder if Shakespeare were writing to meet a deadline. And some go on too long. I love *Hamlet* but it goes on and on (even the Crows cut it). Some plays are just weird. *Pericles*. *Timon of Athens*. *Loves' Labor Lost*. Or feel hastily written, such as *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. And a few are better in concept than execution. *King John*, for instance, and *Anthony and Cleopatra*.

If we can learn from the flaws, we can also learn from the things that work in the plays. For me, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Midsummer Night's Dream* are nearly perfect works of art. They are flawless in their construction, pacing, and range of emotions. And then there's the language!



Both *Richard* plays are beacons of greatness, for different reasons. Of course, *Henry IV, Part 1* deserves its timeless reputation. As does *Hamlet*, in which Shakespeare gets huge marks for elevating his game – the mark of all great artists. Conversely, there's *Henry IV, Part 2*, which is a stink bomb of a play. We read the drama closely as part of a weekly Shakespeare reading group and unanimously thought it was terrible. Analyzing why *Henry Part 1* works so well while its successor does not might be interesting as an exercise – but it may not be worth the slog. In any case, among Shakespeare's many innovations over the course of his lifetime *Henry Part 2* has the dubious distinction as the progenitor of a literary and movie staple: the stinkeroo sequel.

Getting to know Will also meant getting to know the world in which he lived. I love the historical windows into the Elizabethan universe that scholars provide. One of the great pleasures of reading James Shapiro's books was learning how current events in Shakespeare's life likely influenced his writing. As Shapiro put it, Shakespeare may be timeless but he was definitely a man of his times as well. The Duke of Essex's disastrous military campaign in Ireland (and rebellion against Elizabeth I later), for example, crops up in the plays in subtle ways as does the treacherous Gunpowder Plot of 1605. I love the glimpses we get into the writer's creative life too. In Shapiro's

book *1599*, we learn that Shakespeare began the year by completing *Henry V*, dashed off *Julius Caesar* in time for the grand opening of The Globe in midsummer, composed *As You Like It* and then began writing *Hamlet* in the late fall – all within twelve months! The man was on fire. My favorite T-shirt features a portrait of Shakespeare above the words “*This Shit Writes Itself*.” I also enjoyed *Contested Will*, Shapiro’s history of the silly authorship “controversy” in which he states up front that he firmly believes Shakespeare is the author of the plays – an opinion, he notes, that represents the consensus of professional Bard scholars. To critics who insist that the author had to be a woman, a member of royalty, or an elite university graduate – anyone other than a glovemaker’s son from the provinces – in order to put words in the mouths of such amazing women, kings, and dukes, Shapiro notes that no one suggests that the play’s author had to be a murderer to write about killing or be a drunk or a scoundrel to write about behaving badly. Did Shakespeare need evil in his heart to conjure Macbeth’s ambition or green-eyed fury to summon Othello’s jealousy? To the skeptics, Shapiro offers a simple and devastating rejoinder: it’s called *imagination*. Shakespeare’s was unique and feverish. End of story.

A quick word about scholars. I think Shakespeare would be shocked (and perhaps pleased) by the sheer quantity of literary analysis that has been heaped on him for more than two hundred years. If he had known that every word, line, and typesetter error, not to mention every obscure source and allusion would be fodder for nonstop analysis I bet he would shake his head in astonishment (I did). Then there’s the endless discrepancies between printed versions of the plays. Of course, it would have been helpful if Shakespeare had published his plays during his lifetime, as his friend Ben Jonson managed to do. One wonders why he didn’t. After all, he oversaw the publication of his Sonnets as well as his two long allegorical poems, popular in his day (but not anymore). It’s enough to make one wonder: did Shakespeare consider playwriting to be just his “day job” and dense poetry instead to be his ticket to immortality? (This is the plot line for an episode of the comedy series “Upstart Crow” and gets a laugh from Shakespeare nerds like us). We’ll never know, of course. That’s part of Will’s appeal. Since we know so little about him, we can project whatever we want. I like to think he was a regular bloke with an extraordinary gift who liked to drink beer with his mates in the pub while listening carefully to the conversations around him, including the tall tales loudly told by a pub regular – an old, drunk, fat blowhard going on about his extravagant exploits. Or maybe Will ran into a pompous constable in the street outside his lodging and took mental notes of the man’s mangled words. The possibilities are endless.

For all the brilliant words, stunning array of characters, and deep themes in the end it is the thrill of live performance on stage that matters most and is the key to Shakespeare's enduring appeal to audiences of all ages. This realization hit me over the head one afternoon in London. Olivia and I traveled together to the city when she was fifteen (pre-Crows) so I could speak at a conference. Among our many touristy amusements was catching a production of *Julius Caesar* at the famous Globe. I had signed us up as groundlings (where you stand on your feet in front of the stage for the entire play) which I thought would be fun. I wasn't prepared for what happened. According to scholars, *JC* was likely written for the grand opening of the original Globe in June or July of 1599. I believe it. The play fit the reconstructed space exquisitely. When Marc Antony delivered his famous funeral speech to the raucous throng of groundlings in front of him (salted with actors), it just...*worked*. I don't know how to describe it, except to say the moment was pure theater. *Great theater*. It was easy to imagine that Shakespeare had the Globe's particular shape of theatrical space in mind when he wrote the play, with the face-upturned groundlings on three sides of the stage, the rounded bank of seated playgoers only a short distance away, and the sky above. It was electrifying. Explanatory footnotes, source sleuthing, and academic analysis of his wordplay are fine, but what we saw on stage that day is what people want from a play and Will knew it.

Three other reflections on my unexpected immersion into Shakespeare: First, I remain as awestruck by the playwright today as I was forty years ago. That was a surprise. As the saying goes 'familiarity breeds contempt' though there's a more polite warning: if you like a writer never meet them in person. You're bound to be disappointed. My exposure to all things Will bred not contempt but an even deeper admiration of the artist despite *Merchant of Venice* and all those Appendices in the back of the books. He holds up to scrutiny. He made a few mistakes and wrote some clunkers, but who hasn't? If he was a bit of an intellectual show-off or if his allusions were often obscure, he can be forgiven (the Will character in the TV series *Upstart Crow* protests that his comedies are "very funny if you read all the footnotes"). It's one of the small prices we pay for genius. And what a genius! The T-shirt had it exactly right: this shit *did* write itself. Shakespeare had a natural faculty that is found in our greatest creative minds – to our eternal gratitude.

Second, and more prosaically, getting to know Will reminded me how important art is to our well-being as individuals and as a society. I know it's a cliché to argue that we need music, theater, dance, sculpture, literature, and the other creative arts in our lives to feel whole, but it feels *especially* necessary in this day and age. Our immersive dive into Shakespeare coincided with a

particularly unhinged moment in our nation's political history, commencing with the improbable rise of a vain, depraved, malignant charlatan to the highest office in the land. It continued with a daily cavalcade of mortifying developments across the nation. Science, reason, civility, decency,



Sterling and Olivia

honor, and plain common sense were tossed out the window to land on a growing garbage heap of American politics and regressive social behavior (for which I partly blame the Internet). Shakespeare became a refuge, a quiet place where scheming kings and noble queens and selfish scoundrels of the fictional sort held the stage for a change. We could leave the anxiety of the daily news behind and escape to a land filled with charming dukes, fairies, Romans, and make-believe fools. And listen to poetic language instead of the blather that passes for discourse today. It's an unimaginative complaint, I know. But Shakespeare's great art reminds us of our great possibilities, the heights we can achieve and the beauty we

can create, if we try. And we must try – for our children, if for no other reason.

Lastly, a life's journey is the sum of many steps, some short, some long, some dull, some adventurous, some ordinary, some totally extraordinary. If we're lucky, our lives are filled with all types of steps, including many that were unexpected. Getting to know Will and the Crows was one of those steps and our lives were blessed for it. The questions I asked weren't anguished for a change and the answers didn't involve confronting any of our modern challenges, unless you consider the complicated, contradictory, and highly vexing ways humans behave to be modern. They're not. We haven't changed. Neither has our interest in our behavior as seen through the art we create and watch. We are endlessly and obsessively fascinated with *ourselves* – what we do, why we do it, when, how, and where. Our need for honor. Our foibles and follies and murderous instincts. Our lust, greed, anger, ambition, treachery, and jealousy. Our kindness, companionship, and deep capacity to love and be loved. All of it. Like Narcissus, we stare at our mirrored reflection without pause, rarely looking beyond the end of our nose. When the mirror is Shakespeare, our self-vanity makes sense. We learn something about ourselves and our behavior. Yet, Shakespeare reinforces our base narcissism. Aren't we interesting! Witty! Star-crossed! What a perceptive dude

that playwright was! Let's give him, the actors a big round of applause. Us too. We deserve it, after all, for being so interesting. Not looking beyond our nose, however, has serious consequences for ourselves and the wider world of life. All the world's *not* a stage for us to strut about in our time. There are other actors – *many* others – that share the stage with us. Animals, fish, trees, microbes, insects, whales, protozoa. Many are in trouble. We neglect them at our peril.



It all came together for us in late July of 2017 when Sterling and Olivia tackled *Hamlet*. Each played the daunting Dane in separate casts in a memorable Crows' production of the play. The setting was the open-air amphitheater at the Santa Fe Botanical Garden, located in the foothills above the city. It was a bit of a gamble on Caryl's part. Santa Fe endures a monsoon season each summer and the early evening hours can feature a drenching downpour often accompanied by a brief but potentially dangerous lightning storm. Acting outdoors would be a challenge for actors in other ways too. Being heard, for instance. I love young actors, but vocal projection is not one



Olivia as Hamlet

of their strongest skills. Often during rehearsal – no matter what performance space was being use – sooner or later we would hear “Louder!” issued in Caryl's firm voice from the director's table. In an outdoor setting, the wind threatened to blow away some words. Not that it mattered with *Hamlet*. There were plenty of words to blow away, even in the reduced version that Caryl and Robin employed (the play still ran three hours long). There were logistical complications too, including creating curtained dressing spaces for the actors,

hauling bulky props and costumes from the distant parking lot, feeding and hydrating the players and playgoers sufficiently (and providing cushions for the rock-hard seats), staying warm in the cooling air, and trying not to be distracted by the amazing sunsets. Rain delays during performance complicated things, though they were short and atmospheric. They added a touch of natural-forces-at-work that fitted the plot line.

The challenges were surmounted and what ensued was some of the best Shakespeare I have ever had the pleasure of watching. The kids were wonderful but what really struck home was the

theatrical environment. As the young actors did their thing only a few feet away from the audience, wind blew, rain sprinkled, temperatures dropped, and lightning flashed in the distance. Each performance began in sunlight and ended in darkness, the final tragic scenes illuminated by a bank of floodlights on the ground. The story's steady descent into darkness was mirrored by the steady loss of light. By the time everyone dies at the end, it was full night. It was a truly unforgettable experience. It was also a fitting way for Sterling and Olivia to end their time with the Crows. Both would be heading to college for their Freshman year less than a month later. The hugs, the applause, the roses, the tears were earnest and well-earned. It was difficult to accept that time had flown by so quickly. Just yesterday they were just teenage kids in funny costumes, laughing and crying with the other actors as they tackled *Midsummer*. Now they were adults, ready to move on into the world and cut their path. They had grown so much under Caryl's tutelage and Will's words. It was hard to watch it come to an end, but raising children is a lot like a play – you share a stage for a while, work hard behind the scenes, hug each other, and then watch it quietly fade away into thin air, leaving memories.

Mine were wonderful.

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*The Crows*

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The Grass Canoe / Will