

## Tongues in Trees: A Sound Installation

TO BE HONEST, a project involving a sound installation and Shakespeare initially appealed to me mainly on an aesthetic level. I thought it would be cool to hear Shakespeare’s oh-so-famous words outdoors among the trees in the sculpture park at the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, a favourite place of mine, a place with the perfect blend of artistic expression: one created by human endeavour, the other by nature.

The idea of interventionist art, or art in unexpected places, fascinated me. I imagined someone cutting through the park, late for class, suddenly assaulted by a *What, Ho!* shouted from the trees, or romanced by a *But, soft what light through yonder window breaks...* whispered from the bushes. Once I delved into the project, I realized how actors’ itinerant voices could transform the park into a stage.

THE SETTING IN Shakespeare’s plays is more than mere instruction to set design—it signifies a way of life, a way of thinking, and of being. Shakespeare debates the merits of the “painted pomp” within the palace walls against the freer countryside, a place where anything can happen, life is raw, and “tongues [are] in trees” (*As You Like It*).

Created by Dawn Matheson for the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre’s sculpture park, *Tongues in Trees* is a motion-triggered, audio intervention featuring Shakespeare’s best known monologues recited by adult literacy learners from Action Read (Guelph).



LEFT Richard Dankert  
“Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art  
thou Romeo...”  
*Romeo and Juliet*  
(Act II, scene 2)

RIGHT Cheryl Turner  
“I know a bank where the wild  
thyme blows...”  
*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*  
(Act II, scene 2)

The milieus represented on Shakespeare’s stage mirror the class distinctions in his Elizabethan audience, a time when *everyone* went to the theatre. “Groundlings,” or commoners, were packed in at ground level; royalty in the balconies above. Shakespeare’s words were intended for all classes, a beautiful inclusiveness. You didn’t have to be cultured, educated, or even know how to read to *get* Shakespeare. (The majority of his audience was “illiterate.”) You just had to have the experience of being alive, to have ever pondered your purpose, or to have asked the question: “What is this quintessence of dust?” Shakespeare structured his poetic phrasing to imitate the rhythm of a human heartbeat. In my mind, this is his greatest genius: his ability to understand and articulate emotion.

What has changed is Shakespeare’s audience. Today, the Bard is associated with the learned, the cultured, and the upper class. His words are quoted in the classroom, not on a downtown park bench or in the lineup at the food bank, at least not knowingly. In the theatre, the main floor seats are now the most expensive in the house. And in contemporary society, Shakespeare is used as an icon of literary achievement, and not seen as an artist of and for Everyman, Everywoman.

The Stratford Festival of Canada really is a magnificent place for lovers of Shakespeare: at peak season over one thousand employees live and breathe the Bard’s words, devoted to the continuance of his art. I worked behind-the-scenes there, documenting the creative process of staging Shakespeare’s play *Coriolanus*. At the gala opening of the 2006 season, the Ontario Coalition for Poverty staged a protest as a political platform before the who’s who of the affluent and powerful. Police officers in riot gear erected hundreds of metres of fencing to quell the



small gathering of activists. Never had I seen such disparity: ticket-holders in gowns and tuxes, wine in hand, and resolute protesters wearing placards and banging drums. In Shakespeare's day, the debate would have been played out inside. In fact, the issue of class inequality is hotly debated in *Coriolanus*, the very production presented at the gala opening. Oh, the timeliness of Shakespeare!

LEFT Kathryn Ssedoga  
"The quality of mercy..."  
*The Merchant of Venice*  
(Act IV, scene 1)

RIGHT Dave Harnden  
"Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and  
tomorrow..."  
*Macbeth* (Act V, scene 5)

STILL, SHAKESPEARE'S INFLUENCE has been immense, his work touching virtually everyone, begging the question: *Who owns Shakespeare?* With thousands of adaptations of his work, the answer is suggested: *Anyone who stakes claim does.* That is why I love this great debate over authenticity of authorship: *How could the son of a glove maker, a lowly player with no university education, write the greatest works of the English language?*

*Tongues in Trees* is set out of doors and performed by adult literacy learners from Action Read (Guelph). The eight participants (actors) share similar circumstances that contribute to their literacy challenges as adults, through learning disabilities and/or limited access to education due to troubled or low-income histories. All had heard of Shakespeare, but only two participants had some familiarity with his work: one from a family of academics, the other through *Star Trek*.

*We didn't get to learn about Shakespeare in Special Ed, I was told.*

*I thought Shakespeare had nothing to do with my life. I figured he just wrote about history.*

*My girlfriend said I wasn't cultured enough for Shakespeare.*

*Then finally, Cool. If I can do Shakespeare, I can do anything.*

With the help of David Prosser, director of literary services at Stratford, I selected fifteen of Shakespeare's most recognizable speeches, boiled



LEFT Shawn Turner  
“To be or not to be...”  
*Hamlet* (Act III, scene 1)

RIGHT Deborah Murray  
“All the world’s a stage...”  
*As You Like It* (Act II, scene 7)

them down to their basic modes of expression, and presented them to a group of curious learners at Action Read. (The staff at Action Read was initially hesitant about the project—unsure of the level of interest and potential lack of relevance of Shakespeare’s writing to their learners, they were pleasantly surprised by the attendance.) We started with Shakespeare’s most quoted speech, “To be or not to be,” in which Hamlet asks himself: *Should I commit suicide or not?* I asked if anyone could relate. Nearly every hand in the room was raised. From there, we discussed each speech and together threw out adjectives that described the state of mind of the speaker. Then the personal stories came, the connections made.

One Hamlet had suffered more “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” than anyone I’ve ever met, his physical appearance evidence of “the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.” Another participant embraced Portia’s plea for mercy as a post-mortem appeal at a rape trial last fall where she, the victim, was brutalized on the stand, her history of mental illness used against her.

Yet another embodied King Henry V, his whole life an uphill battle. His only weapons are dogged determination and a rag-tag army (the few people in his life that have always been at his side). He heads to court in a few weeks for an assault charge: “Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more” to “imitate the action of the tiger; / Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood, / Disguise fair nature with hard-favour’d rage.” This is his everyday survival tactic.

Another participant chose Romeo, having loved a girl in his late teens whose disability his parents could not overlook: “star-crossed



lovers” in a 1980s special ed class at John F. Ross high school. Macbeth’s despairing speech, “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day...” seemingly written for one participant who lost everything: wife, two young children, job, self-esteem, and, finally, his sanity. “Out, brief candle!”

With each exploration of Shakespeare’s monologues, they responded: “been there” and “got through that.”

And so, this project that began as merely a “cool” audio installation has become the catalyst for a deeper understanding and appreciation of Shakespeare’s writing in the context of community, literacy, and how we all make meaning together. Never have his plays had more relevance.

LEFT Kendra Dewar  
“But soft, what light through  
yonder window breaks...”  
*Romeo and Juliet*  
(Act II, scene 2)

RIGHT Andrew Saunders  
“Once more unto the breach,  
dear friends...”  
*Henry V* (Act III, scene 1)

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