



IN Performance



Hal Holbrook & the Hobarts

By Gary Tischler
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For the Bard aficionados of the Washington Shakespeare Guild, it was to be a night you could look forward to: stories, theories, meanings and quoting of lines from Shakespeare's most debated play, and Hal Holbrook in full white Shylock beard, and as a bonus, there was the Merchant Antonio, in open shirt, Master Keith Baxter. And so it would be a night about the quality of mercy not being strained and Portia and the three caskets, and the arcane stratification of Renaissance Venice society, a full palate, including wine and cheese, an evening at the National Press Club.

And what a night it was.

There were "suspicious devices" on 15th Street, causing said street to be roped off, and causing, in all that, a terrific tuna-can rush hour, gridlock traffic jam, not helped by repeated downpours.

And of course, there was Master Holbrook and Master Baxter.

But who were those kids in blue t-shirts, and what were they doing here?

Well, the kids were lighting up the room with old-fashioned theatrical magic, assuring the Bard's future longevity, for one thing.

For another thing, there was a fourth-grader wading into the gathered many, exhorting them, as a pint-sized Henry V, to remember Saint Crispin's day.

Those kids were members of the Hobart Shakespeareans, wearing proud Will Power shirts, and they were here to wow the venerable audience members of the Shakespeare Guild, who came away from the evening enervated, and looking and feeling much younger.

The Hobart Shakespeareans are Holbrook discoveries, an inner city public school group, most of them having English as a second language, most of them apparently Asian, in fourth through sixth grades, doing the Bard -- and their teacher -- proud. Their teacher, Rafe Esquit, who started out as a young man with little or no experience in Shakespeare -- "never saw a play or anything." He decided to teach his low test score, disadvantaged charges English using Shakespeare and hoping to get special funding from his district. "I made a mistake the first time," he said. "I asked permission, breaking the cardinal education rule of 'never ask permission.'"

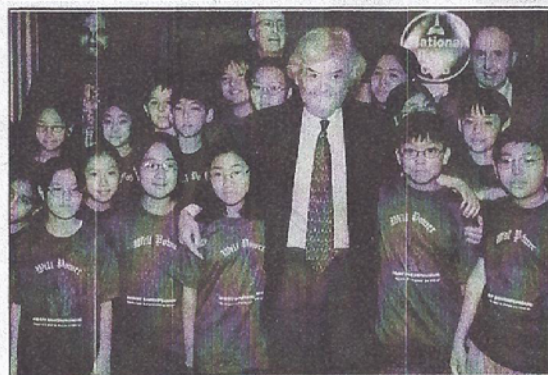
His charges began putting on plays and seeing plays and they were spotted by noted English actor Ian McKellen during a performance of his "Acting Shakespeare" sitting in the front

row, reciting the titles of all of the Bard's 37 plays.

The rest, as they say, is history and history plays. McKellen supported them and has continued to do so for 11 years. They perform from his script, generation after generation. They've gotten the support of people like Holbrook, director Peter Brook and the like. They were at the Press Club at the invitation of Holbrook, here to star in the Shakespeare Theater's production of "The Merchant of Venice." They also performed before members of the Supreme Court.

"It's pretty neat," Christine Kim said. They saw Holbrook in the play. "What we noticed is how terrible and mean the Christians behaved toward the Shylock," she said. "They were incredibly cruel."

Esquit found that Shakespeare was just what the doctor ordered for his students. Test scores went up. The administration approved, even though initially, the group put on "Our Town." "One administrator was delighted," Esquit said. "He said that he had never seen Shakespeare performed so well. And that's a



Hal Holbrook and "Will Power" kids.

Photo by Neshan H. Naltchayan

true story."

Holbrook said that the Michael Kahn production of "Merchant" worked so well because it remained in a Renaissance setting, true to the realities of the time. "By showing Shylock in a ghetto, among his people, you understood that he was acting not just for himself, but for his people," Holbrook said. "This way, too, the play makes more sense. You see the Venetians as shallow people, paying lip service to the law. This is a play about outsiders."

At the Press Club, he was demi-god to the Hobart youngsters, star to the Guild audience, Shakespearean actor to his fellow actors.

He was Hal Holbrook, the best part of all.