

The Shakespeare Newsletter

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"Knowing I lov'd my books, he furnished me..."

Winter 1999/2000

Shakespeare Summer Festivals 2000

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ALABAMA SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL, 1 Festival Drive, Montgomery, AL 36117-4605. 1-800-841-4273 or (334) 271-5353. 29th Season. Kent Thompson, Artistic Director. In rotating rep, through July 23: *Lear* (Kent Thompson); *TN* (Kent Gash); *Err*. (Risa Brainin). Visit on the web: <www.asf.net>

AMERICAN PLAYERS THEATRE, P.O. Box 819, Spring Green, WI 53588. (608) 588-2361. 21st Season. David Frank, Artistic Director. June 10-Oct. 8, Tues.-Sun. In rep: *MND* (Paul Barnes); *WT* (James Bohnen); and three other plays. Located on 110 wooded acres three miles south of Spring Green and forty miles west of Madison. Complete picnic facilities are provided; food is available on the grounds. *MND* tours Wisconsin in the fall; call for details.

BARD ON THE BEACH, 1101 West Broadway, Vancouver, BC V6H 1G2 Canada. Box office: (604) 739-0559. 11th Season. Christopher Gaze, Artistic Director. June 14-Sept. 24. *Temp*. (Douglas Campbell) Previews June 14-16, runs June 17-Sept. 24; *IH4* (Moirá Wylie) Previews July 4-5, runs July 6-Sept. 23; *AWW* (Miles Potter) Previews July 20-22 (matinee), runs July 22-Sept. 3. Performances are Tues.-Sun. Located under the "big red tent" in Vanier Park with a stunning backdrop of mountain, sea, and sky. Visit on the web: <www.bardonthebeach.org>

CALIFORNIA SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL, 701 Heinz Ave., Berkeley, CA 94710. (510) 548-3422. 27th Season. Jonathan Moscone, Artistic Director. Performances outdoors at Bruns Memorial Amphitheater, in Orinda's Siesta Valley. *Shr*: June 1-24; *Ham*: June 29-July 22; *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*: July 27-Aug. 19; *LLL*: Aug. 31-Sept. 23. Visit on the web: <www.calshakes.org>

CARMEL SHAKE-SPEARE FESTIVAL, P.O. Box 222035, Carmel, CA 93922. (831) 622-0100. 17th Season. Stephen Moorer, Founding and Artistic Director. Aug. 11-Oct. 15. *TGV* (Stephen Moorer) at the Circle

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Branagh Wins Gielgud Award

At the Middle Temple Hall in London on 16 January, the Shakespeare



Kenneth Branagh at Middle Temple Hall
(Photo courtesy of www.branaghcompendium.com)

Guild of Washington honored Kenneth Branagh with its Gielgud Award 2000 for his extraordinary contributions to our appreciation of Shakespeare, the Man of the Millennium. Dame Judi Dench, who won the award last year, presented the Golden Quill to Mr. Branagh, and Derek Jacobi, another Gielgud Award winner and another frequent collaborator with Kenneth Branagh, also participated in the star-studded ceremony. As one of the Special Partners for the event, *The Shakespeare Newsletter* proudly rubbed shoulders with such institutions as the Royal Shakespeare Company, the English-Speaking Union, the British Council, Shakespeare's Globe, and New York's own Shakespeare Society, while an *SNL* co-editor was listed in the Acknowledgments in the evening's program among "the people who've contributed to the success of these proceedings."

Middle Temple

The Hall of Middle Temple is famous as the setting for the first recorded performance of *Twelfth Night*, the perfect location for a Shakespearean celebration. Gloriously restored after suffering extensive damage in World War II, the Hall accommodated an overflow crowd that heard a musical prelude from the gallery provided by Philip Pickett and the Musicians of the Globe, who performed music composed both in Shakespeare's time and, in several delightful instances, our own. The

American Ambassador, Philip Lader, offered appropriate greetings.

It is difficult in staging such celebrity events to avoid elements of the trite and predictable, but in fact these elements rarely threatened the evening's pleasures despite the almost-absurd youth of an honoree boasting so many accomplishments. Kenneth Branagh is thirty-nine years old; in less than twenty years he has transformed the Shakespearean map, beginning, perhaps, with his fine performance as Henry V for the RSC in 1983-84, and continuing with countless other theatre performances, most notably as Hamlet for the RSC in 1992.

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Branagh Wins Gielgud Award

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Both of these stage performances prepared the way, of course, for Branagh's most extraordinary contribution to Shakespeare, in three films (*Henry V* - 1989; *Much Ado About Nothing* - 1993; *Hamlet* - 1996) that have made Shakespeare "good box-office" and inspired many other Shakespearean films, including, most triumphantly, *Shakespeare in Love*.

Derek Jacobi led the procession of actors and dignitaries, recalling for the audience the 16 year-old schoolboy who saw Jacobi as Hamlet in Oxford and decided to become an actor. He also recited "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought." Ben Elton, the standup comedian who also writes novels and the *Blackadder* television series, announced that Branagh "owes" him, big-time, for casting him as Verges in *Much Ado* - "I was the bloke standing just behind Michael Keaton, hovering over his shoulder. And he wasn't that easy to understand that close up either." Elton explained that Verges was his first, and last, role in a film, so Branagh "simultaneously created and destroyed" his acting career. But the evening was not about Ken's debt to Ben but about Will's debt to Ken: "The first time I saw a Branagh Shakespeare, I went back to the text afterward because I was convinced that Ken had been playing fast and loose. He hadn't. He'd used word-for-word the text but he made it modern. Ken has introduced our greatest cultural jewel to wary and very reluctant new audiences and left them delighted."

Bond and Briers, McEwan and Hoskins

Samantha Bond, gorgeous in a shimmering outfit, recalled playing Juliet opposite Branagh's Romeo and treated the audience to a reading of Juliet's "Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds." Bob Hoskins expressed his pride in being in the same business with Ken Branagh, while Richard Briers, who made his reputation as a comic actor, noted that his work with Branagh in all of his films had transformed him into a respected classical actor and reduced his income by 65%. But Briers exercises his comic talents once again in Branagh's latest film, *Love's Labour's Lost*, as the curate Sir Nathaniel, paired-off in the film with "Holofernia" - Geraldine McEwan, another Branagh collaborator, who played Katherine's nurse in *Henry V* and directed *As You Like It* for Branagh's company in 1988. McEwan also praised Branagh from the Middle Temple stage and joined Dame Judi and Sir Derek in reading messages of congratulation from luminaries who could not be present, including Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise, Richard Attenborough, Ian McKellen, Julie Christie, John Cleese, Joan Collins, and Martin Scorsese.

Timothy Spall, known to most audiences for his sensitive role in Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies* and for his Mikado in Leigh's *Topsy-Turvy*, also played Rosencrantz in Branagh's *Hamlet* and portrays the "fantastical Spaniard" Don Adriano de Armado in the new film. Calling Branagh "a great guy and a brilliant man," Spall read more testimonials from such stars as Robert DeNiro, Robin Williams, and Billy Crystal (the gravedigger in *Hamlet*): "Bravo Ken, and I'll wear the tights again whenever you need me." Helena Bonham Carter acknowledged "having known Ken 'quite well'" and called him "one of the more extraordinary people of this world." She read Woody Allen's tribute to "one of my best pupils." And Brian Blessed, again a stalwart member of the Branagh acting team, wrote that what he loved about Branagh most was his "profound generosity to everyone" associated with his work.

Keith Baxter recited a passage from *1 Henry IV* to honor both Sir John Gielgud and Kenneth Branagh. Sean Rafferty of the BBC spoke of Branagh's

closeness to his roots in Northern Ireland and of his support for young people in Belfast through his favorite charity, the Ulster Association of Youth Drama. After Stephen Fry described Branagh in glowing terms, Patrick Doyle, who has composed the music for all of Branagh's Shakespeare films, came to the piano on stage and played some of the moving music of his "Non Nobis" from *Henry V*, particularly moving given Doyle's own struggle with cancer.

Branagh Accepts

When Branagh came to the stage to accept the Golden Quill from Dame Judi, he expressed gratitude for the award in words that justified all the honorifics heaped upon him that evening, emphasizing how much his success depended on those who had helped him along the way. Naming many absent collaborators, he also praised many members of the audience and singled out one in particular, Dame Judi Dench's husband Michael Williams, whose acting, he declared, had taught him so much about the profession. Branagh described a production of *King Lear* in which Williams was playing the Fool: "I stood for the first time in my life in the presence of truly great acting. It was effortless reality and compassion and humanity and wit and pathos and it was all at the service of the play and of his fellow-performers and it was a spine-tingling connection to great art. He has said that you can never be more on stage than you are in life, so I know for sure that what I saw in *Lear* all those years ago was no accident."

New Film

Twice during the afternoon on that third Sunday of the new year, the Shakespeare Guild, in cooperation with the British Academy of Film and Television Arts, demonstrated Branagh's ongoing commitment to Shakespeare by screening his latest film, a musical version of *Love's Labour's Lost*, at

the BAFTA headquarters near Piccadilly Circus. Already released in the UK, the film will debut in the United States in June.

This treatment of the play will remind some viewers of Joseph Papp's version of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in Central Park some years ago. Just as Papp used rock music and the extraordinary talents of Raul Julia and others to transform a little-known play into a contemporary hit, Branagh has taken another little-known play and transformed it into a classic Hollywood musical, complete with routines that pay homage to the great American music of the 1930s by such composers as Cole Porter and Irving Berlin. The choice of composers will remind some audiences of the RSC's most recent production of *Two Gentlemen*, in which a small onstage ensemble backed a lovely chanteuse to provide *entr'acte* music of the same kind.

The script, what there is of it, is Shakespeare's text, but the joy of the film is in the music and dance. *Love's Labour's Lost* represents a departure for Branagh: his earlier Shakespearean films were crafted to attract new audiences to the playwright, but here the director has decided to use a Shakespearean comedy as a framework rather than as an end in itself.

Viewers were treated to generous receptions featuring tea and scones. Those who attended the second screening travelled to Middle Temple immediately after the reception. This correspondent was privileged to walk from the West End to the City in the company of several distinguished senior Shakespearians and their guests.

The formal ceremony at Middle Temple was followed by a lavish reception offering the best food and the best imaginable dinner companions, lovers of Shakespeare from many professions and several continents. [J.W.M.]



Kenneth Branagh and Judi Dench at Middle Temple