Interview with the Directors

Will Dickerson
The Merchant of Venice

Tell me what made you choose The Merchant of Venice to direct this season?
I start out by thinking about our audience. As I comb through the plays, I’m usually asking myself things like, “When was the last time, if ever, that they’ve seen this particular show? Does this pair well with the other play? Will people be compelled to watch this story?”

Funny thing happened with people being compelled to watch this story? Ever, that they’ve seen this particular show? myself things like, “When was the last time, if I comb through the plays, I’m usually asking Does this pair well with the other play? Will challenge my preconceptions? It turns out that for this play, right now the answer to all of those questions is “yes.”

Why is it accessible to you? What do you consider the heart of the story?
A pound of flesh — I’m kidding. What if I told you that the world of this play is full of people who are living well beyond their means? A place where people make life-changing decisions based on speculation, greed, and resentment? Where young people live extravagantly on their parents’ dime and view every aspect of life as a kind of game? Sound familiar? Add to that the story of a religious extremist who feels marginalized, persecuted, and finally driven to madness and revenge... It’s a place that I think audiences will recognize. There is also a sad and desperate kind of love that connects Bassanio to Portia, Antonio to Bassanio, and Shylock to Jessica and his way of life.

Wow, I hadn’t looked at it that way. What are your feelings about the anti-Semitism material in this play?
I wish it were more shocking. I wish it didn’t feel like that — but especially the comedies. I think that the job of the director is to find the blend and flavor of each one, see how they intertwine and then tell the story in an interesting way. In this play, I find it interesting that all three subplots never quite converge until the very end when all the potential for danger is past, making it truly, much ado about nothing.

As with many of Shakespeare’s comedies, there are several stories going on in this play. Where will your emphasis be?
Yes, you are right, really all his plays are like that — but especially the comedies. I think that the job of the director is to find the blend and flavor of each one, see how they intertwine and then tell the story in an interesting way. In this play, I find it interesting that all three subplots never quite converge until the very end when all the potential for danger is past, making it truly, much ado about nothing.

I am very interested in your “take” on the women in this play?
Well, of course, Beatrice is the first that comes to mind since she is one of Shakespeare’s great confident women, so very sure of herself, so full of life and energy. I find it interesting though that we see, as I said, her extraordinary vulnerability in this play. It’s why we remember her, she’s so human. Hero, on the other hand, seems more simply defined. One modern edition calls her “lovely, gentle and innocent.” While she is all those things, I hope to mine some gold from within the script with that character. I just don’t buy that she can be treated so badly by Claudio and then instantly forgive him without a word.

What do you mean?
I just think there is something more interesting there than what appears on the page… which is nothing. Well, at least...
look so familiar and remind me of the kind of incantation and verbal violence that play across the television screen every night. I wish that it had been burned up in the crucible of The Holocaut or washed out by the dissemination of reason for Defense. I want to understand the play and it will be a challenge for the actors to internalize and own. I feel a responsibility to present it naked, in a way that reflects our sure that the actors and audience can make their own decisions about how it makes them feel. I am sure that the actors and designers will help me influence those decisions in a way that refuses the collective rejection of all prejudice and persecution.

Merchant’s is often referred to as a problem play. What do you see as the challenges in this role? Well, people are afraid to take the author’s word for it and let it be a comedy. It was an immensely popular play in its day. Shylock is a very difficult villain, and he has so many faces that underride the play’s fifth act. I have some ideas on how to reconcile this and revive it. My concept of the play I’ve ever worked on, as an actor, verse coach, or director, has seemed like a problem at some point. It is thrilling to recognize a truth just another word for challenging? And isn’t art challenging at all?

What is the time period you plan to set Merchant in? Why? Since the 1990s, with the French Riviera setting in Venice, I would be setting the pre-WWII period. Venice in the 1950s, with the French Riviera setting, is one of the most productive, and most exciting in my thirty-some years of acting. I also needed to have these costumes and sets to die for. It is thrilling to recognize a truth and to appeal to me. I watched Gone with the Wind and the idea cemented itself in fact. In fact, I found some scenes that had not occurred to me between Beatrice and Benedick that were incredibly smart, deep, and very human.

Shylock’s over-reaching, his unnatural demands for a pound of flesh as cruelties to humanity? Will there be any comedy? I think then that revealing moment at the end may be richer than we think. That’s something we will be playing with in rehearsals, finding moments that are between the lines so that subtext can come alive and breathe some additional air into that character. The other woman in the play is, in many ways, the Shakespeare; she has her own spark and since she gets caught up unwrapping in the enlarging of the plot that is the distinctiveness of women, she’s an interesting victim as well.

Tell me about the time隙期apologies for your Much Ado? Originally, it wasn’t set in Messina on the island of Sicily, but as I was studying the play, there was something about that wonderfully acerbic dialogue between Beatrice and Benedick that had begun to speak to me in a Southern accent. It makes me uncomfortable, and it is a very dynamic villain, and he has sort of been filled with change and opportunities on the verge of making a conscious, comfortable, efficient and effective use of these resources. It won’t be the end before we begin to realize the differences.

First of all, anything major can’t be done if you just put your heart and soul into the Parks in norther also in production or touring for five months out of the year and yet, because of my teaching responsibilities, the artistic director is still a part-time position. While we have managed that way for a long time, it has been clear for some time now that we were making a point where there will no longer be possible. With the help of a recent grant and a private citizen, we have a chance to establish a sustainability fund that has allowed us to begin to make strides toward making the artistic director position full-time permanent.

Thanks to Bob Bell and the School of Film and Photography at MSU. For the last eight months, we have been able to secure some much needed time from my teaching to focus more fully on Shakespeare in the Parks, and also begin work with our wonderful consultants. The midseason meeting allowed us to envision various planning projects for the far several years. I am thrilled to have kicked off Shakespeare in a much more ambitious way. Our organizational board will be the first step. First, to the first time in our history we are hiring a Director of Educational Programs. Formerly, I have been left to establish a sustainability fund that has allowed us to begin to make strides toward making the artistic director position full-time permanent.

Secondly, we are hiring a Director of Educational Programs. Formerly, I have been able to focus on growing and funding our two educational programs, Shakespeare in the Schools and SHAKESPEARE! Finally, Kelly, our Director of Community Relations, will continue to manage the summer tour, expanding her wonderful work with our local bar and community and will add fund- raising for the summer tour to her duties.

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As You Like It

The 9th annual fundraiser held last fall in the Black Box Theater on the MSU campus, Elise Donohue, the patron saint of Shakespeare's works is to students in Montana and Wyoming, and how vital it is to support those programs that bring his words to life in a live experience--as how vital it is to support those programs that bring his words to life in a live experience. As a teacher from Ennis, MT, put it, “The students were highly interactive during the workshops, but more to the point, the performance itself, which elicited more audience interaction here than anywhere else. During the talk-back, the entire student body AND faculty rose to their feet and engaged in some collective ‘Fencing Dancing’. You should have seen that sight!”

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Journal Entries

From The Company Manager

This fall, Mark Kurtz, our amazing company manager, decided to keep a “journal” of sorts to chronicle the experiences the company members were having each day along the road. It turned out to be a very special gift making the tour come alive for those of us that would never get the chance to see every school every day. Here are some of our favorite excerpts:

> They are REALLY picking up on the thematic implications in the play: at the end of the play when Malvolio vows his revenge and storms off downstream, an anonymous student from the crowd yelled, “You can come with me, buddy!” I quite touching.

> The Verse workshop is taking shape, as is the Status workshop, and when we have kids as sharp as these, both of these workshops truly soar. I am hearing lots of feedback that we have “really stepped up” the workshops this year.

> By far the most responsive audience I’ve ever played on a school tour— even more responsive than your above-average summer crowds, they were laughing and listening to things my admittedly-critical mind never thought any high school kids would grasp, and they gave us our first standing ovation on tour so far.

> I love coming here. The kids are always polite, smart, active, hard-working, and respectful. Oh, yeah and fun. The teachers are great too!!

> What a fantastic little school this turned out to be. This entire day was awesome. A small but true performance followed by us engaging and personal round of workshops as we’ve had yet. Whenever we leave a school, and the students want a group photo, and then wave at you out the window as you drive off, it is a good day indeed.

> You can always tell when you’re at a school that truly nurtures the arts; the principal even got up and gave our summer tour a huge plug, and expressed great interest in another visit from MY SHAKES!

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> A lovely little town, two great schools (the senior and the elementary) across the street from each other and a remarkably helpful and creative faculty. All these factors made for a perfect start to the last week of tour.
What They're Saying About MONTANA SHAKES!

The actors enthusiastically kept the young students on task and moved at a perky pace.

The energy level of the actors was outstanding!

The students were engaged and motivated to learn.

Excellent pacing and audience participation. The age-appropriate nature of the workshop–really hit the target.

I liked the wonderful energy of the performances and their ability to perform so many different roles.

You got rave reviews from kindergarten through twelfth grade teachers for the performances and also for the workshops.

The actors called on as many students as possible and were very respectful, humorous and informative. It gave the students a chance to see a play that they may not normally get to see.

The children loved the comedy part, but were also very engaged in the suspense of the story and design.

The quality of the acting was impressive, we thoroughly enjoyed it and the energy of the school was wonderfully.

The presenters were so animated and vocal, the kids really responded to them. The next time my students hear of William Shakespeare they will have some background knowledge. Great actors, fun for all.

I heard one boy in my class say, “I’m going to remember this until I’m 17 years old.”

The acting kept the students and adults enthralled. I laughed until I cried! I was thrilled to see my students so excited about Shakespeare.

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Neither a Borrower nor a Lender Be
The Merchant of Venice by Mark Robert Blackman

You might think that this cautionary quote I’ve used for a title likely comes from The Merchant of Venice in some form, though, it’s from Hamlet.

Of all of Shakespeare’s plays, The Merchant of Venice may seem the least likely to be performed today. Often, it is lumped in with the comedies, but it’s nothing like the rest of those. It is a tragedy? Well, it has elements of that genre, certainly. The play twists and turns like a mountain road, contradicting itself even in the next scene; sometimes in the next line. For example: {

Markovitch’s popular play The Jews of Malta predated Shakespeare’s play by several years and, by the way, The Merchant of Venice was sometimes known in its day as The Jew of Venice, according to the title page of the 1600 quartos.

This little idiom is intriguing, because, like so much else about this play, it is incongruous. Titled The Jew of Venice, the title character is Shylock. Titled The Merchant of Venice, the title character is Antonio.

Among the wealthiest merchants in Venice, Antonio is asked by his friend Bassanio for a loan of three thousand ducats—a colossal amount—so that he may leave Venice to woo the heiress Portia. Antonio, whose cash is tied up in his shipping concerns, agrees to cover a bond that Bassano puts up for a moneylender.

Bassano turns to the Jewish lender Shylock and puts up Antonio as a guarantee. Shylock, who despises Antonio because he has, in the past, spurned him for being a Jew, agrees to the loan on the condition that if it cannot be paid back before a specific date, Shylock may take a pound of Antonio’s flesh.

Shylock’s demand for “a pound of flesh” has entered the lexicon; it has become a synonym for any unreasonable recompense—no matter how lawful it may be. This sensational bargain fascinated the audiences of Shakespeare’s day just as it does in our own time. For centuries, in the play was written, Shylock was generally played broadly as a repulsive sort of clown or as an unredeemable monster, but it is generally accepted that in the early 19th century, Edmund Kean was the first actor to play the character sympathetically. Since Kean, the actor/audience/authorial relationship has changed. For example, Al Pacino’s portrayal of Shylock turns the audience’s sympathy to Bassano, the moneylender, as Bassano manages to get to the altar, though he protees all the way to the end.

When Claudio and Hero confront the witty couple with their own written evidence holding their protestations, Benedick finally backs off and says that yes, he will, in fact, take Beatrice for his wife; “but, by this light, I take thee for pity.” Beatrice, like all good wits, wants to have the last word, but Benedick innites, “Peace! I will stop your mouth, and promptly loses her.

In the end, it certainly turns out to be much ado about not much. Just love, really. And how it can be believed the human spirit and that the course of our lives and make us do things we never would have considered otherwise. Nothing, indeed.
Journal Entries from an Actor

Elise Donohue and Tempo Auditions at 4 Midsummer Night’s Dream at Arts Park in Gardiner.

A walk-on part in A Midsummer Night’s Dream was offered as an auctioned item at The Rust of the Row, the highest bidder would be on stage. Not only that, I was part of the company from the outset. I scanned through the script, selected the actors for their parts (during auditions), and watched them read their parts, watched them interact with each other. I listened to discussions of interpretations, as they all became the characters that the audience knows and sees onstage. I saw sets built, costuming fitted, and props assembled.

Two things stand out. One was during a performance in the Grove at MSU. As a full moon rose above the trees, I thought of my Mom and brother. Shakespeare had been a sort of bedrock for both of them. I thought how pleased they would have been thinking of me in a Shakespeare play!

Now these many months later, I recall what a truly remarkable experience it was for me. It was a whole succession of wonderful moments but two return to my mind with special clarity. One occurred during a performance in the Grove at MSU. As a full moon rose above the trees, I thought of my Mom and brother. Shakespeare had been a sort of bedrock for both of them. I thought how pleased they would have been thinking of me in a Shakespeare play!

The other was during our Gardiner performance. The late summer sun was setting. I knew behind the stage, like a backdrop, stood the Roosevelt Arch and beyond that was the Yellowstone Park. It was so clear — what an incredible endeavor we have in Shakespeare in the Parks.

This summer I’ll be back in the audience. But with a road to Shakespeare, I’ll remember when I was part of “we fer, we happy fer, we hand of brothers.” My thanks go out to each and every member of the company — Elise Donohue.

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SALT LAKE CITY

Mike McDonald, Will Printt Shakespeare in the Park

SALT LAKE CITY

Cheryl Buckenham, Washakie Museum
Introducing the Summer 2011 Season

Montana Shakespeare in the Parks Summer 2011 Tour Schedule

JUNE
15 Bozeman Much Ado 8:00 pm MSU-Grove
16 Bozeman Much Ado 8:00 pm MSU-Grove
17 Bozeman Much Ado 8:00 pm MSU-Grove
18 Bozeman Merchant 8:00 pm MSU-Grove
22 Bozeman Merchant 8:00 pm MSU-Grove
23 Bozeman Merchant 8:00 pm MSU-Grove
24 Bozeman Merchant 8:00 pm MSU-Grove
25 Bozeman Merchant 8:00 pm MSU-Grove
27 Hobson-Utica Much Ado 6:30 pm Utica Clubhouse Lawn
28 Lewistown Merchant 6:30 pm Fergus County Fairgrounds - Gazebo
29 Malta Merchant 6:30 pm PC Court House Lawn
30 Wolf Point Merchant 6:30 pm Bridge Park

JULY
1 Sidney Much Ado 6:30 pm Veteran’s Park
2 Beach, ND Merchant 6:00 pm Beach Swimming Pool Park
3 Glendive Much Ado 8:30 pm Makoshika State Park
4 Ekalaka* Merchant 5:00 pm Dahl Memorial Lawn
* Declaration of Independence will be read prior to the performance by the company and artistic director.
5 Miles City Merchant 6:30 pm Pumping Plant Park
6 Three Forks Merchant 6:00 pm Fisher Park Butte
7 Sheridan, WY Merchant 6:30 pm North Park
8 Forsyth Merchant 6:00 pm Campbell County Fairgrounds
9 Hardin Merchant 6:30 pm Hot Springs Park
10 Roundup Merchant 6:00 pm Wild West Park
11 Powell, WY Merchant 6:30 pm Powell City Park
12 Cody, WY Merchant 6:30 pm Cody Park
13 Laurel Merchant 6:00 pm Laurel Park
14 Absarokee Much Ado 6:30 pm Fishtail Family Park
15 Big Timber Merchant 6:00 pm City Park
16 Billings Much Ado 6:30 pm MSU-Grove
17 Billings Merchant 6:30 pm MSU-Grove
18 Red Lodge Merchant 6:00 pm Red Lodge City Park
19 Williston, WY Much Ado 6:00 pm Williston City Park
22 Gillette, WY Merchant 6:00 pm Gillette City Park
23 Cheyenne City Merchant 5:30 pm Cheyenne City Park
24 Gardiner Much Ado 6:00 pm Gardiner City Park
25 Anaconda Merchant 6:00 pm Anaconda City Park
26 Dillon Merchant 6:00 pm Dillon City Park
27 Pocatello, ID Much Ado 6:30 pm Pocatello City Park
28 Pocatello, ID Merchant 6:30 pm Pocatello City Park
29 Alpine WY Merchant 6:30 pm Star Valley Ranch
30 Butte Merchant 6:30 pm Butte City Park
31 Helena Merchant 6:30 pm Montana State University Quad

AUGUST
1 Deer Lodge Much Ado 6:00 pm Deer Lodge City Park
2 Phillipsburg Merchant 6:00 pm Phillipsburg City Park
3 Hamilton Much Ado 6:00 pm Hamilton City Park
4 Boulder Merchant 6:00 pm Boulder City Park
5 Butte Merchant 6:00 pm Butte City Park
6 Missoula Much Ado 6:30 pm Missoula City Park
7 Great Falls Merchant 6:00 pm Great Falls City Park
8 Kalispell Merchant 6:30 pm Kalispell City Park
9 Great Falls Merchant 6:00 pm Great Falls City Park
10 Missoula Much Ado 6:00 pm Missoula City Park
11 Hamilton Much Ado 6:00 pm Hamilton City Park
12 Helena Merchant 6:30 pm Helena City Park
13 Helena Merchant 6:30 pm Helena City Park
14 Missoula Merchant 6:00 pm Missoula City Park
15 White Sulphur Springs Much Ado 6:00 pm White Sulphur Springs City Park

SEPTEMBER
1 Big Sky Merchant 6:30 pm Big Sky City Park
2 Butte Merchant 6:30 pm Butte City Park
3 Hamilton Merchant 6:00 pm Hamilton City Park
4 Missoula Merchant 6:00 pm Missoula City Park
5 Helena Merchant 6:30 pm Helena City Park
6 Missoula Merchant 6:00 pm Missoula City Park
7 White Sulphur Springs Much Ado 6:00 pm White Sulphur Springs City Park
8 Butte Merchant 6:00 pm Butte City Park
9 Helena Merchant 6:30 pm Helena City Park
10 Missoula Merchant 6:00 pm Missoula City Park
11 Hamilton Merchant 6:00 pm Hamilton City Park
12 Helena Merchant 6:30 pm Helena City Park
13 Helena Merchant 6:30 pm Helena City Park
14 Missoula Merchant 6:00 pm Missoula City Park
15 Hamilton Merchant 6:30 pm Hamilton City Park
16 Helena Merchant 6:30 pm Helena City Park
17 Kalispell Much Ado 6:00 pm Kalispell City Park
18 Seeley Lake Much Ado 6:00 pm Seeley Lake City Park
19 Eureka Merchant 6:00 pm Eureka City Park
20 Libby Merchant 6:00 pm Libby City Park
21 Hamilton Much Ado 6:00 pm Hamilton City Park
22 Missoula Merchant 6:00 pm Missoula City Park
23 Missoula Merchant 6:00 pm Missoula City Park
24 White Sulphur Springs Much Ado 6:00 pm White Sulphur Springs City Park

All performances are free... every summer!

*This indicates a free indoor performance

Montana Shakespeare in the Parks
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