

Shakespeare without SHAKESPEARE: The Improvised Shakespeare Company
By Matt Fotis

Shakespeare and popular culture have a long and complicated relationship. Shakespeare is no longer isolated in academies and on the ‘proper stage.’ He’s appearing more and more, and in more and more diverse ways. We see him on stage, on film, and in advertisements. His name is evoked in politics, romance and novels (and romance novels). Shakespeare tourism, folklore and mythology have become a part of our cultural and national identities. This intricate marriage, and the ways in which popular culture constructs, contests and perpetuates Shakespeare’s cultural authority and meaning have become important questions in Shakespearean studies. As Robert Shaughnessy argues, Shakespeare and pop culture has gone from a periphery concern to “one which is making an increasingly significant contribution to our understanding of how Shakespeare’s works came into being, and of how and why they continue to exercise the imaginations of readers, theatergoers, viewers and scholars worldwide.”¹ Quite simply, Shakespeare’s relationship to popular culture matters.

One of the more interesting contemporary Shakespop examples is the Chicago group The Improvised Shakespeare Company (ISC). The players take an audience suggestion for a play title that has yet to be written, and then create a fully improvised two-act play in Shakespearean verse, incorporating the language, style and themes from the Bard’s collected works. Douglas Lanier argues that our ideas and notions about Shakespeare are constantly being shaped and reformed through popular appropriations. As Lanier argues, Shakespeare in pop culture is “an important means by which notions about Shakespeare’s cultural significance [can be] created, extended, debated, revised, and renewed, not only parodied or critiqued.”² As a result many

¹ Robert Shaughnessy, “Introduction.” *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, ed. by Robert Shaughnessy. Cambridge University Press, 2007. 1.

² Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*. Oxford University Press, 2002. 19-20.

contemporary appropriations struggle to both lay claim to and contest Shakespeare's authority. Contemporary uses of Shakespeare, according to Diana Henderson, not only "remake him in our own image...but they also teach us to see that image and the past anew."³ Like many other appropriations, collaborations and adaptations, *The ISC* reveals current attitudes toward and the relationship between popular culture and Shakespeare.

In order to examine in some small way the relationship between Shakespeare and popular culture, and the ways in which pop culture constructs, contests and uses Shakespeare, I will be investigating *The ISC*. I will be analyzing their relationship to Shakespeare and the ways in which they use Shakespeare in their performances in order to create a better understanding of not only how Shakespeare is used in contemporary popular culture, but also to help navigate the relationship between Shakespeare and popular culture and the ways in which each is influenced by the other. How do cultural appropriations such as *The ISC* frame the way that Shakespeare is viewed in contemporary culture? I will briefly explore Shakespeare in popular culture to provide a framework before more fully exploring the history and structure of the group. I will also be analyzing several performance examples, and of course discussing the ways in which an improvised company negotiates the most sacred of all Shakespearean issues: language.

Although Shakespeare's plays are presently associated with high art and primarily appeal to a highbrow audience, that was not always the case. He has undergone a long and complicated shift from a popular playwright to an icon for cultural supremacy. Shakespeare's role has changed throughout history, with his image undergoing what Lanier deems an "unpopularization." Lanier argues that "Shakespeare's special status in the literary canon springs from a complex history of appropriation and reappropriation, through which his image and works have been repeatedly recast to speak to the purposes, fantasies, and anxieties of various historical

³ Diana Henderson, *Collaborations with the Past*. Cornell University Press, 2006. 2.

moments.”⁴ One need only look at the performance history of a play like *Othello* to understand the direct relationship between Shakespeare and the times.

So how did the provincial playwright who created John Falstaff become a symbol for the cultural elite? The simple answer is the printing press, but the more interesting answer is popular culture, and both play a significant role in the ISC’s relationship to the Bard. This essay cannot and will not attempt to outline the complex and varied transformation in detail, but a basic understanding is necessary to help understand his current (and past) relationship to popular culture. While it might seem strange to contemporary audiences for Shakespeare citations to pop up in *Star Trek*, *The Cosby Show*, and on bar napkins (or perhaps it would be strange if he *didn’t* pop up), his place in popular culture is a natural one that dates back to the seventeenth century.

When Charles II restored the monarchy in 1660, one of the first things he did was to end the eighteen year official ban on theatre by issuing two patents for plays, which among other things, complicated Shakespeare’s relationship to popular culture. According to Joseph Donohue, “perhaps with the Puritans’ bias against stage plays in mind, Charles enjoined Killigrew and Davenant to avoid works containing ‘profanation and scurrility,’ choosing instead entertainments which ‘might serve as moral instruction in human life.’”⁵ Shakespeare was one of the playwrights whose work was allowed on the stage, instantly aligning him with the elite, but this alignment only came about because of the political and cultural climate. The 1737 Licensing Act created a further split between the legitimate and popular stage. Along with a changing aesthetic, the censorship forced companies (both legitimate and popular) to give a different shape to his works resulting in numerous revisions and adaptations. The popular stage became the outlet for cultural critics, gradually introducing Shakespeare as a means to comment on and

⁴ Lanier, 21.

⁵ Joseph Donohue, “The Theatre from 1660 to 1800.” *The Cambridge History of British Theatre: 1660 to 1895*. Ed. by Joseph Donohue. Cambridge University Press, 2004. 4.

criticize issues of a cultural, political, historical and social origin, while the more far-reaching legitimate stage further elevated and celebrated Shakespeare's artistic genius.

David Garrick's Stratford Jubilee of 1769 provides another example of popular culture influencing Shakespeare's cultural positioning. The Jubilee, according to Werner Habicht, "established panegyric and quasi-religious rites for paying tribute to Shakespeare. Subsequent cultic commemorations strove to enact—both theatrically and verbally—the poet's apotheosis, praising his godlike creativity and the universal appeal of his immortal works." It also demonstrates the growing difference between Shakespeare on the stage and on the page. Habicht goes on to say "performances of his plays were another matter; these were considered to be—if not altogether unfit for the limitations of the theatre—in need of rearrangement, expurgation, refinement, and improvement, especially if more-or-less popular audiences were to be reached."⁶ Aside from the demonstration of the split between Shakespeare on the page (the artistic genius) and Shakespeare on the stage (the popular playwright), it is important to remember that Garrick's Jubilee came at the end of the Seven Years War, and his work was seen as "an antidote to the tyranny of French culture."⁷ Part of Shakespeare's "godlike creativity" then can be attributed to his relationship to British politics and popular culture.

As the above demonstrates, the printing of his plays also greatly influenced Shakespeare's cultural role. The tension between the page and the stage has perhaps been the greatest contributor to Shakespeare's paradoxical relationship to popular culture. Printed plays increased access to Shakespeare's work, but also helped establish his "literary identity," which led to deification of his works. While the printing of his plays helped further the divide between high and low, his plays in print did not immediately transform Shakespeare's cultural authority.

⁶ Werner Habicht, "Shakespeare Celebrations in Times of War." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Winter, 2001), 441.

⁷ Habicht, 442.

It wasn't until Romantic and 20th century critics and academics began writing about Shakespeare that he became entrenched as a literary genius. As Worthen notes, the rise of print as the prevailing mode for disseminating dramatic writing assured "the literary identity of Shakespeare and the primacy of fundamentally literary ways of calibrating page and stage...not least by the now commonsense understanding that reading guarantees the rich, ambiguous multiplicity of Shakespeare, while the theater can only illustrate a single 'derivative' reading."⁸ One result of this academic and critical tradition (what some call Bardolatry) can be seen in the immense success and popularity of Harold Bloom's unabashed celebration of Shakespeare as an artistic genius in 1998's *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*.

Bloom's book is an interesting study for our purposes. Bloom argues for the brilliance of Shakespeare, positing that Shakespeare "is not only in himself the Western canon; he has become the universal canon." Bloom argues that Shakespeare's genius will always keep him perched above. Yet Bloom partially makes his case by demonstrating Shakespeare's mass appeal and influence. He says Shakespeare "extensively informs the language we speak, his principal characters have become our mythology, and he, rather than his involuntary follower Freud, is our psychologist."⁹ For Bloom, Shakespeare is the pinnacle of culture because of his ability to connect with the masses. Here we again see the contradiction inherent in Shakespeare (and Bloom); he is at once the marker of high culture because of his ability to connect with low or popular culture.

This contradiction has led to one of the many paradoxes of Shakespeare, but also illuminates his unique cultural position. His plays are accessible to everyone, high and low, at once offering a standard of culture in the poetry of his plays (the page) and a visual spectacle

⁸ W.B. Worthen, "Shakespeare 3.0." *Alternative Shakespeare 3*, ed. by Diana Henderson. Routledge, 2008. 58-59.

⁹ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998. 17.

through the performance of his work (the stage). This combination is what makes Shakespeare's plays so fascinating. As Henderson notes of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, what makes them great is "their ability to address an audience hungry for words *as* performance."¹⁰

Shakespeare's ability to bridge the gap between page and stage, even as parties on both sides try to claim him for their own, has historically left him balancing between high and popular culture.

As the above examples demonstrate, Shakespeare and popular culture are not in opposition, and the relationship is vitally important to understanding Shakespeare. As Lanier and others have argued, popular culture and societal views have *always* shaped ideas and notions about Shakespeare. He has been refigured and repurposed throughout history to meet the specific needs of the time, the changing interpretations of Shylock, Prospero and Caliban serving as examples. As a result Shakespop not only works to appropriate Shakespeare and place him within contemporary culture, but also works to preserve Shakespeare's cultural authority. Therefore, investigating a group like The ISC, a group that celebrates Shakespeare's language in performance while completely throwing out the actual language (i.e. the text), can give us a deeper understanding of what Shakespeare means to contemporary culture, and how that meaning is created.

The mixture of Shakespeare and improv at first seems like an odd marriage. Yet when one considers the artistic process, they actually blend nicely. Shakespeare in his time was a popular form of entertainment, more closely associated with bear baiting than opera. Likewise improvisational theatre is a pop art, traditional theatre's unacknowledged bastard child. Furthermore, both rely on collaboration. As Henderson notes, collaboration "lies at the heart of the artistic process, both modern and early modern, more accurately capturing the practice of

¹⁰ Henderson, "From Popular Entertainment to Literature," 18.

Shakespeare and his inheritors than does the notion of isolated genius.”¹¹ Shakespeare had many collaborators, including John Fletcher, Thomas Middleton and others. There perhaps is no more collaborative contemporary art form than improvisation, which relies on an ensemble to create a spontaneous performance solely by relying on each other. One of the main texts of the genre is named *Art by Committee* after all. In the book there is an interview reprinted with Del Close, the father of long form improv, in which he extols the virtues of collaboration:

I wanted to do a show where we could create *art by committee*. I really hate it when I run into someone who says, ‘Well, you can’t think as well as a group as you can as an individual. Art is an individual undertaking, so you might as well not even try.’ *No!* Art is possible by committee. Basically all you need is some structure, traffic patterns, game rules, and some kind of image of what it is you want to do... What the audience laughs at – and indeed will cheer at – are the moments of discovery – moments of connection – where the art by committee – where the group brain – really does start functioning. We see amazing kinds of communication going on between people.¹²

Tina Fey, who trained at iO and The Second City in improvisation, commented on using the collaborative nature of improvisation as a way to write, commenting that “I’m always surprised when I meet someone who thinks that sitting and writing is the only way of creating [material]. It’s like meeting someone who thinks that in-vitro fertilization is the only way to make a baby. You want to say, ‘No, there’s this whole other way of doing it that’s natural and sometimes pleasurable.”¹³ As Henderson argues, “the magic of creativity...is a social event, even when a genius is in the room.”¹⁴ In many ways then, improv is a great contemporary outlet.

Recently named the “Best Improv Group” of 2009 by *The Chicago Reader*, The ISC is the brainchild of Blaine Swen. He began his improvised experiment in Los Angeles at iO West

¹¹ Henderson, *Collaborations*, 2.

¹² Charna Halpern, *Art by Committee*. Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishers, 2006, 8.

¹³ Qtd. In Anne Libera, *The Second City Almanac of Improvisation*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004. 139.

¹⁴ Henderson, *Collaborations*, 7.

with the group Backstreet Bards. In 2000, the group performed in improv performances known as cage matches, where two groups face off with competing twenty minute performances. The group was an instant sensation winning ten consecutive matches. Their success forced them out of the cage match (after ten consecutive wins a group is required to retire from competition), but opened other doors. As Swen notes, “the audiences had grown so large that they offered us a regular Friday night spot. So we became the Spontaneous Shakespeare Company at iO West.”¹⁵ The company was relatively short lived, however, and Swen left Los Angeles in 2001 to come to Loyola University in Chicago to study for a graduate degree in Philosophy. It wasn’t until 2005 that Swen brought the improvised Bard back to the stage. Along with a group of fellow improvisers, he produced a show at Donny’s Skybox at The Second City. Audiences again began clamoring for more. Charna Halpern of the legendary improv theatre iO caught wind of the group, and brought them to iO where they quickly became a mainstay, performing every Friday night since 2006.

Yet they are not like your typical improv group. Yes, they perform in tunics and speak in iambic pentameter, but it is their dedication to Shakespeare’s work that sets them apart. They aren’t content with parodying Shakespeare by simply peppering their language with ‘thees’ and ‘thous.’ And they don’t simply recreate a comedic burlesque of Shakespeare’s plays. They are trying to create original work informed by Shakespeare; truly, as Henderson argues, collaborating with him. A recent performance, “Two Many Dudes to Remember,” (titles are given by the audience), featured several Shakespearean tropes and themes, among them: royal marriage and crown succession, mistaken identity, a twin brother and sister separated by time and circumstances, cross dressing and swapped identities, forbidden love, a group of players

¹⁵ Patrick Sharbaugh, “Chicago’s Improvised Shakespeare Company hones its Piccolo Fringe act to a fare thee well.” *Charleston City Paper*, June 7, 2006.

performing a play within a play, a massive death scene, sexual innuendo with both bawdy and metaphoric language, homoerotic sexual innuendos, an old crone with mystical powers, and in true Shakespearean comedic tradition the play ended with a marriage as well as a trademark rhyming couplet. And all of these are from just one performance! But the ISC isn't trying to recreate Shakespeare or simply show off how many references they can cram into one performance. The group always strives to make the material fresh and original; "we really try to create an original play," Swen says.¹⁶

One of the ways the group avoids simple parody is through rigorous study. The group meets regularly to discuss Shakespeare's plays and other works, and of course immerse themselves in the language, which, Swen says, becomes second nature. He likens it to reading Mark Twain:

when you put the book down you sort of think with a southern accent... If you read Shakespeare and you put it down, you sort of start thinking with 'thees' and thous.' So in order to make sure we're staying true to the form, we constantly read Shakespeare and keep our noses in the text so that when we put it down it's fresh and we can jump up and just start speaking with a sort of Elizabethan language... We are more and more delving into his works and watching plays together and even getting together for film nights and vocabulary quizzes and things like that.¹⁷

But they don't limit themselves to Shakespeare. Swen steeps his players in Elizabethan drama through plays and films, Renaissance Faires, seminars with local scholars, and even quizzes. The group recently spent several weeks reading and discussing Plato's *Republic*. They meet regularly to rehearse, but unlike most improv rehearsals they dedicate the first hour to lecture and discussion. These forums, Swen says, have contributed to making "our improv... a lot richer... which means our shows fly intellectually on two different levels. We've grown in many of the ways that someone might expect: a greater facility with Elizabethan language; a better

¹⁶ Sharbaugh.

¹⁷ "Improvised Shakespeare adds fresh, comedic turns to Bard's turf." *What's on Winnipeg.com*. July 21, 2009.

sense of Shakespearean character archetypes and plots; better listeners with richer reactions to discoveries within scenes. But most importantly, we continue to have more and more fun.”¹⁸ As we can see, the traditional separation between page and stage has influenced the group, but much like Shakespeare himself they try to bridge that gap.

These intellectual discussions have an impact on the performance in several ways. Performer Thomas Middleditch credited the forums for giving his improv a sharp intellectual edge and greater emotional complexion and depth. He remembers a performance where he was playing the son of a bloodthirsty queen, “and I had to kill someone else to satisfy her bloodlust. At the end, I stabbed her. People gasped. He [Swen] and I took that moment, no jokes, just, you know, acted.”¹⁹ The group’s dedication to knowledge illuminates their performance (both in terms of Shakespeare and improv technique), and also serves to support a learned approach to Shakespeare more often found in English departments than in improv theaters.

Since most readers probably have not seen The ISC, let me briefly describe a recent performance I attended on October 9, 2009 – “Two Many Dudes to Remember.”²⁰ The all male company takes the stage while modern punk music fills the theatre.²¹ The players are dressed in faux Elizabethan tunics, contemporary dress pants rolled to the knee, dress socks and gym shoes. This mixture of past and present, high and low immediately sets the tone for the performance. It is apparent right away that notions of highbrow and inaccessible Shakespeare should be left at the door; this performance is a Shakespeare for the people. Their collaboration is immediately apparent, setting a tone not only of revelry and modernity, but also of reverence. This is further

¹⁸ Steve Heisler, “No holds Bard: ISC frees its group mind with highbrow ideology.” *TimeOut Chicago*. May 24-30, 2007.

¹⁹ Heisler.

²⁰ I attended three different performances between October and November 2009.

²¹ The group currently has eleven members, but due to the weekly performance schedule and other factors an individual performance usually only feature five to seven players.

reinforced during Swen's introduction, where he announces the group will perform a world premiere Elizabethan play, and "we'll do it all using the styles, the themes, and the language of the immortal Bard, William Shakespeare." When Swen mentions Shakespeare's name, the entire company bows their heads for a moment of reverential silence.

This moment of solemnity works to both subvert and assert Shakespeare's status as the ultimate symbol of high art. The audience generally responds to this display with laughter.²² Their laughter is an acknowledgment of society's Bardolatry, but more importantly by bringing that viewpoint into the performance from the very start allows the audience to connect with Shakespeare on a more "equal" level. It allows the audience to drop any preconceived notions, fears or anxieties about Shakespeare that are common among many theatre-goers (the novice improv audience member usually has similar fears and anxieties about improv). The reverence allows the audience to poke fun at their own feelings toward Shakespeare and the assumption that if one doesn't get Shakespeare it's a failing of one's education and intellect. Furthermore, it pokes fun at the highbrow usage of Shakespeare by other artists. As Henderson argues, "more often than not, modern artists invoke Shakespeare as precisely what he could not be in his own time: a source of unquestioned artistry and authority."²³ Thus the moment of silence is working on several levels, both cementing Shakespeare's canonical status and subverting those that place him there.

Improvisational theatre in general has a similar relationship with traditional theatre, much like the popular and legitimate stages of eighteenth and nineteenth century England. Improv actively works to mix the high of traditional theatre with the low of popular culture, trying to

²² The audience laughed for each performance that I attended, and for each performance that I have seen on video. While I cannot assume this is the reaction every time, it is safe to say that generally speaking audiences laugh at this display.

²³ Henderson, *Collaborations*, 3.

alleviate audience fears that they “won’t get it” because it’s theatre, so it should be no surprise that The ISC begins their performance in this way. This example of mixing of high and low by celebrating the high is apparent time and again throughout the performance. While the company performs this silence to get a laugh, they also are not doing it as a parody. There is a definite grain of truth behind the silence. As we have seen through their rehearsal process, the group truly does elevate Shakespeare, so the moment of silence works on several levels, both constructing and contesting Shakespeare’s cultural status and authority.

The basic plot for this performance pulled in several plays, including *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Tempest*. Following an episodic structure, the performance follows star-crossed lovers Benvolio and Bianca. Clearly drawing on *Romeo and Juliet*, Benvolio’s “wingman” is none other than Romeo himself, who is rather asexual throughout the performance, contrasted with Bianca’s nurse-maid, who is a hyper-sexual take on the Nurse from *Romeo and Juliet*. The two Italians have come to Verona, England (the setting sets up one of the more parodic lines of the play when a guard finds Benvolio and Romeo and cries out “There are Italians in the streets of Verona!”) to capture the hand of the lovely Princess Bianca. Mimicking the secondary plot line from *The Taming of the Shrew*, Bianca plays the unwed ingénue. Rather than an unmarried older sister in the way of her love, however, her father the king has planned a political marriage with Prince Ferdinando of Spain. The king wants Bianca to marry so that she and her husband can be next in line for the crown since nobody wants Bianca’s half-wit older brother Peter to claim the crown.

Over the next ninety minutes Benvolio and Romeo have a falling out over a misunderstanding, Ferdinando proves to be as dastardly as his accent (and Catholicism) suggests, the king finalizes the royal marriage, and Bianca and her nurse-maid sneak out in disguise a la

Portia and Nerissa, to find their true loves. Bianca's over-sexualized nurse-maid has thrown herself at Romeo in an inversion of Act II, Scene iv of *Romeo and Juliet* where she is sent by Juliet to find Romeo and reports back of his continued affection. The nurse-maid later throws herself at Ferdinando (which provides a humorous scene featuring a series of nautical sexual metaphors sinking deeper into the abyss of vulgarity), but since she was disguised at the time, Benvolio, who overheard their textual mating, assumed that she was actually Bianca.

Through a series of mistaken identities, cross dressing, and bloody fights Benvolio, Bianca and the twenty-odd characters introduced all converge at the royal masquerade where Ferdinando and Bianca are to be wed. Interrupted by a performance from a group of players who discover that pantomime is not simply presenting a series of sexually suggestive poses, the play comes together in a series of fights waged between the many characters played by the five actors. Dressed as her brother to deceive her father and Ferdinando, Bianca and Benvolio ultimately come together after a bloody battle between Ferdinando and Benvolio that leaves nearly everyone dead (in the midst of the chaos one of the actors called out "raise your hand if you're not dead."). The play ends with a pair of marriages, first a same sex marriage between the dying Chamberlain and Apothecary, and finally with Bianca and Benvolio.

The performance featured several instances of mixing high and popular culture. For instance, when one of the king's servants was helping the hapless king open doors with his mind, he quipped to the audience, referring to royalty being bestowed with honors and awards that they haven't earned, "It is rather unexpected—and some may argue undeserved?—for you to win such an award." The line was in reference to the day's big news: President Barack Obama winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Furthermore, the play blended the improvisational and Shakespearean practice of doubling. Only in this instance, one actor could play (and in improv

often must play) several major characters. This allows for the group to present the type of sprawling cast found in Shakespeare's plays, while also showing the virtuosity of the performers. But more than that, it directly comments on Shakespeare's doubling, and links the two popular forms of entertainment. Furthermore, the doubling debunks the idea that Shakespeare can only be acted by highly trained and respected classical actors.

With the sample performance in mind, I want to look at three specific examples to further illuminate the relationship between The ISC, Shakespeare and popular culture. The first is a scene from a June 2008 performance that cleverly inverts Hamlet's famous advice to the players, the second is the publicity poster for the group, and last but not least is language.

Hamlet's Advice to the Players

While there was a 'players scene' in "Two Many Dudes," I want to look at another example of a 'players scene' that provides an excellent example of the way The ISC uses Shakespeare. This scene closely mirrors (and inverts) the famous "advice to the players" scene from *Hamlet*. In the play, Hamlet's speech urges a more realistic acting style, "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you" (3.2.1-2). He goes on to not only encourage natural movements and speech, but also to denounce improvisation, "And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them" (3.2.38-39). For the Improvised Shakespeare scene, the rules of improv are the subject of the scene. The idea is the same – acting advice, only the topic is inverted. The lead player of "The Queen's Men" is instructing the players in the ways of speaking without a text.

The lead player, in a scene echoed in nearly every beginning improv classroom (whereas one can safely assume Hamlet's speech has made its way into an acting class or two), calms the fears of his fellow players and extols the virtues of improvisation. When the players question

what they shall say and do, the lead player responds “Thou shalt say what flies into thy brain. Thou shalt follow thine impulse. We shall make do with what we have been given.” He urges them to trust one another, one of the basic concepts of improvisational theatre.

The scene then takes one more step beyond a recasting of Hamlet’s famous speech. After the players have bought into the idea of improvisation and trust, they then begin acting out what can best be described as a corporate retreat. The players enact trust falls and trust exercises, building an ensemble and drawing a parallel between modern business and improv. This is not accidental. While the parody is humorous, it is also self-reflexive since many improv theatres actually make a large percentage of their revenue through corporate training, where improvisers teach corporate executives and managers the theoretical concepts of improvisation to help foster a more collaborative, creative and productive workplace.²⁴ At the end of the scene another player triumphantly returns to the stage with a script. He is greeted with a laugh, followed by the lead player’s final declaration, “The script is of no use to this band of players.” This obvious allusion to the actual players is not lost on the audience. Therefore this scene ultimately works on several levels, combining pop culture and Shakespeare, as well as using one of Shakespeare’s most famous quotes to teach people about the tenets of improvisational theatre.

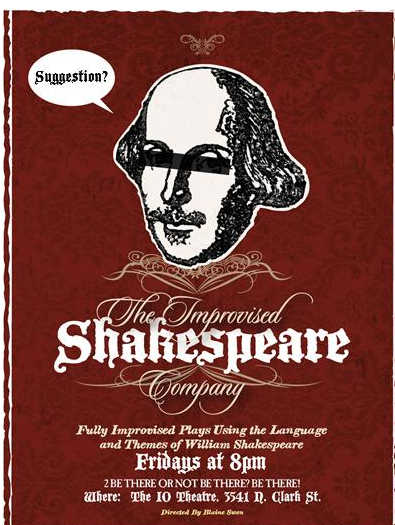
It also falls into the ambivalent maze that many popular adaptations/appropriations fall into. The scene both contests and reifies Shakespeare’s cultural authority. On the one hand the scene is blatantly contradicting a portion of Hamlet’s advice by encouraging improvisation. Yet at the same time it is supporting the primacy and importance of this passage in contemporary culture (and acting theory). This scene is seen by many as Shakespeare’s acting advice, and as

²⁴ John Sweeney’s *Innovation at the Speed of Laughter* is an excellent source for further reading on improv as a business model.

such it is great advice. By using this scene to promote the tenets of improvisational theatre then, The ISC is presupposing and maintaining Shakespeare's cultural and artistic authority.

The Poster

Visual arts and advertisement are two of the most popular forms of appropriation and citation, so briefly analyzing the publicity poster for the company can help shed light on some of the questions raised. Foremost among them, who is The ISC playing for? A playbill or poster is designed to seek out audience, to speak directly to a certain demographic, so in analyzing the poster we can create a deeper understanding of the relationship between the group and popular culture. Posters are a powerful part of the performance, according to Carol Chillington Rutter.



She argues that posters are the first encounter with a performance, and are “provocative go-betweens, arranging our deeper conversation with a play, a production, a way of seeing Shakespeare. They tease us into thought, act like commentary.”²⁵ So what does the ISC's poster tell us?

Foremost it sets up an audience expectation for an adaptation of Shakespeare that is not about him, but uses him. This is not going to be a post-colonial version *The Tempest*, for example.

Rather the poster works to manage audience expectations about the performance, and more importantly asks audiences to drop any preconceived notions about Shakespeare and/or Shakespeare in performance.

While there are many components to the poster that bear mentioning, I'd like to mainly focus on the black line over Shakespeare's eyes. Shakespeare's visage, what Lanier has deemed

²⁵ Carol Chillington Rutter, “Shakespeare's popular face: from the playbill to the poster.” *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, ed. by Robert Shaughnessy. Cambridge University Press, 2007. 269.

the “Coca-Cola of canonical culture,” is perhaps the most oft quoted of all Shakespearean usages in popular culture and one that instantly connotes several meanings. Attaching his image predisposes an audience to interpret it in particular ways, to associate it with particular ideas, to expect it to have certain qualities. The historic style communicates Shakespeare’s status as a figure for aesthetic tradition. His

high-domed forehead, the face’s most recognizable feature, bespeaks his work’s association with intellectuality and by extension with elite culture. The comparatively unadorned quality of the portrait (no crown of bays or allegorical accoutrements) and the somewhat naïve quality of the rendering accord with Shakespeare’s reputation as a natural genius whose work has its roots not in study but in God-given talent or as a poet writing for and about ‘the people,’ about a shared human nature and not the experience of the privileged few.²⁶

This view of Shakespeare fits into what the company does. But the image has been slightly altered.

The black line over Shakespeare’s eyes transforms the image and its meaning. It implies that Shakespeare would not approve of the group, or of what they are doing to his language. The black line contests Shakespeare’s authority (and those that grant it to him) and gives agency to the group, and to the popular masses. Shakespeare is helpless to stop the group, his image frozen in time unable to do anything. While his visage can be used to symbolize traditional high art, it can also be used to signify what popular culture defines itself against. Here yet again, we see the tension between contesting Shakespeare’s elitism while often times celebrating his genius, or what Lanier deems the “one especially long-lived paradox of the Shakespeare trademark is that it is popular culture’s favorite sign of high culture.”²⁷ Therefore the poster works in much the same way that the group does; both contesting and constructing Shakespeare’s cultural authority.

The Language

²⁶ Douglas Lanier, “Shakespeare™: myth and biographical fiction.” *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, ed. by Robert Shaughnessy. Cambridge University Press, 2007. 94.

²⁷ Lanier, “Shakespeare™,” 95.

“Their experience doing Shakespeare flowers in the language: they relish iambic dialogue, execute perfectly timed asides, occasionally utter rhyming couplets, and drop parodic phrases, and well-placed anachronisms. Even the ending echoed the real plays: story lines resolved tidily—and uproariously.” - *Chicago Reader*

“A delightful evening that celebrates the best of both iambics and long-form improv.” - *The Chicago Tribune*

“Set aside your preconceptions about Shakespearean theater. It’s not all pretentious, puffy-garbed players trained to speak foreign English at the Raised Hand School of Acting. iO Chicago’s rollicking hit show ‘Improvised Shakespeare’ is smart and knowing enough to delight Elizabethan drama fans and charming enough to win over the most avowed Anglophobes.” - *Centerstage Chicago*

The language that the group uses in performance clearly has its root in a textual base. One can see in their approach a reverence for the text, a common theme in contemporary popular Shakespeare – a deification of Shakespeare’s language that serves as the foundation for an adaptation or appropriation that ultimately rewrites that language. While many contemporary examples try to tear down the language and with it notions about high and low art, the ISC uses the language to connect with a popular audience. In other words they “address an audience hungry for words *as* performance.”²⁸ It is an interesting dichotomy that marks many contemporary examples, from musical adaptations to rap and hip hop appropriations such as *Rome and Jewels*.

Perhaps the biggest issue facing any contemporary Shakespearean production—whether a faithful staging of *Othello*, a film adaptation of *Henry V*, or a commercial featuring “to be or not to be”—is the language. Shakespeare’s language is often used by high culture to assert Shakespeare’s cultural supremacy. The reverence of the play texts, the oceans of ink spilled analyzing the plays and the tradition of academic close readings all help to place Shakespeare’s language on a pedestal perhaps higher than any other artistic pedestal in Western art. Language

²⁸ Henderson, “From Popular Entertainment to Literature,” 18.

supposedly offers us the ‘authentic’ Shakespeare. The ways in which the text is treated as scripture reinforces the idea of the language holding the key to Shakespeare, and henceforth the key to cultural and artistic authority. As Lanier notes, “the value accorded the Shakespearian text is so widespread that it seems perverse to think otherwise; where *else* might one locate the authentic Shakespeare than in Shakespeare’s exact words?”²⁹

Adaptations and appropriations must constantly negotiate the language, and the strong attachment many have to the aesthetic authority it represents. The major question facing nearly every contemporary popular representation remains the same: “is Shakespeare’s language essential to Shakespeare? Can that language be changed, translated, reduced, or even jettisoned entirely and the result remain in some sense Shakespearian?”³⁰ How then does a group that improvises negotiate the issue of language? Shakespop has a fundamental ambivalence about Shakespearian language. On the one hand, popular appropriations recognize the inherited cultural authority of Shakespeare’s language and often take pains to preserve and co-opt it. On the other hand, because high culture has erected Shakespearian language as the stylistic achievement in English, popular culture has used Shakespearian language as a foil against which to establish itself as popular.

One example that helps position The ISC’s approach to language is the Firesign Theatre. Working in the mid-1960s and 1970s, the foursome created psychedelic stream of consciousness radio recordings mixing high and pop culture. At first glance the group may appear to simply be a burlesque, but upon closer inspection Firesign’s approach is best described as parodic homage, one that celebrated Shakespeare’s language. Like Firesign, and unlike many other comedic Shakespeare adaptations/appropriations that simply mock Shakespearian language, The ISC

²⁹ Lanier, 59.

³⁰ Lanier, 62.

works to celebrate the language. While the group still works to subvert the authority that exists within that language, they clearly have a reverence for it. This is evident from the very beginning of the performance, when the group takes a moment of silence to celebrate the Great Bard. Yet The ISC has a unique relationship to language since it is completely improvised and not an adaptation or appropriation of a particular play or idea.

By removing the ‘language,’ and all of its connotations but maintaining its authority, but still celebrating the poetry, The ISC make their performances more accessible and less threatening to popular audiences who sometimes assume they simply ‘won’t get the language.’ Through improv the group is able to avoid language issues that other groups and adaptations must face. By having modern actors speaking in Elizabethan vocabulary, improv allows the players to modernize the language without vulgarizing or desecrating the text. The audience revels in the modern players ability to ‘naturally’ speak in an Elizabethan style. By celebrating the language without the ‘language’ the group supports Shakespeare’s cultural authority and supremacy while also subverting the common deification that usually accompanies Shakespearean language.

But why Shakespeare? Why not mix improv and Socrates? By using Shakespeare, the group asks us to rethink our notions about Shakespeare. More and more Shakespearean adaptations and citations appearing in more and more diverse ways and places beg the question, what exactly is Shakespeare in the twenty-first century? The ISC takes that one step further by asking what *makes* Shakespeare SHAKESPEARE? The language? The text? The tunics? By questioning what makes Shakespeare, the group also puts a new twist into the stage versus page debate that has contributed to Shakespeare’s meaning and reception for centuries. By removing the text the group privileges performance, but does so knowing that all Shakespearean

performance comes from a text – whether it be a traditional production, adaptation or revision. Even an improvised performance stems from the page. As we've seen through the group's rigorous study of Shakespeare's works, a printed source still informs a production even if there is no printed text. Lastly, Shakespeare's cultural authority and prestige brings people into the theatre, and it brings them to improvisation, which is continually fighting for new audiences. As we have seen, Shakespeare is one of pop culture's favorite ways to critique the culture and aesthetic he seemingly represents. Likewise, improvisational theatre is a traditionally subversive form, which can be seen in the dismissal of the primacy of the text. By combining the two, what perhaps is the defining characteristic of postmodern art in the twenty-first century, the group asks fundamental questions about the meaning, creation and primacy of art. What is art? And who decides what is good (i.e. Shakespeare) and what is bad or popular (i.e. improv)?

The ISC seems to be saying that Shakespeare and modern popular culture should not be separate terms waged in a battle between cultural strata, but should be a way to understand Shakespeare in a broader context. Shakespeare should not be solely seen as the bearer of cultural supremacy, but as a part of popular culture whose survival and authority depends upon his relationship to that culture. The ISC works to negotiate the distance between the popular playwright and the bearer of cultural supremacy, asserting and subverting popular notions about The Bard, ultimately presenting Shakespeare without SHAKESPEARE.

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