

SHAKE UP YOUR *Shakespeare*

by Michael Giltz

If William Shakespeare were alive today, he might reconsider his oft-quoted line, “First thing, let’s kill all the lawyers.” For if the Bard were the litigious type, he could keep a 100-person law firm busy as theatre companies here and yon constantly tamper with his work.



In the past year alone, Cheek By Jowl offered an all-male “As You Like It” at BAM, while SoHo’s Workhouse presented an all-female “Pericles, Prince of Tyre” at the Ohio Theatre of Necessity mounted “Measure for Measure” to emphasize its commentary on homophobia and hypocrisy; while A.R. Gurney wrote “Overtime,” a sequel to “The Merchant of Venice” where one of the male characters came out of the closet. Tom Luback extracted Margaret’s speeches from “Richard III” and the War of the Roses plays to create “The Red Rose,” and Sir Ian McKellen filmed “Richard III” with Nazi Germany as its setting. Oh, and “Macbeth” has just joined the circus (see sidebar).

For most directors, it seems the question is not “to be or not to be” but “to play Shakespeare traditionally or not to play him traditionally.”

The answer is definitely not for Assur Banipal Babilla, the Iranian-born artistic director of Purgatorio Ink, which will present “Othello” in September at the

Vineyard’s 26th Street Theatre. “It’s going to be blasphemous, it’s going to be homoerotic, and the dramaturg on stage will say, “Othello,” like any other great work of art, is about anal penetration,” he says.

While some will find the “anal penetration” comment shocking, true theatre purists are more likely to raise eyebrows over the on-stage dramaturg. “The idea came from a student of mine at Bard College,” says Babilla. “The dramaturg’s a very playful type, so he’s going to be kind of naked from the waist down and look like a professor from the waist up. And he’s going to have a rooster tale coming out of his ass.”

When Babilla also mentions costumes inspired by the Jesuits, a science-fiction aura, and an appearance by King Lear, you might wonder why Babilla’s even bothering with Shakespeare. “‘Othello’ scares me a lot, because of the depths of human stupidity it shows” says Babilla.

An equally idiosyncratic approach is being taken by Barry Rowell, co-artistic director of Peculiar Works Project (like Purgatorio, Ink, a S.P.A.C.E. Grant recipient). Rowell has been mulling over how to do “Coriolanus” for years, at one point planning to put the character in a box. But the tragedy of the Oklahoma City bombing and the emergence of the militia movement finally provided “a Ruby Ridge-like setting” for their production, due at 26th Street in August.

“About a year and half ago, I got the idea that Coriolanus was the ultimate angry

white male...and after the bombing, I started thinking about the play in terms of the militia movement, and the anger that was clearly there and is being directed toward this country,” says Rowell. “So now the idea is that somehow this man came across a copy of ‘Coriolanus.’ and it spoke to him, and he’s taking that text and using as a scenario for his last stand. I’ve taken material from militia web sites by Storm Front and Christian Identity, and transcripts from Congressional hearings.”

Compared to these two, the Public Theatre’s current production of “Henry V” seems almost shockingly radical in its conservatism. Because the Festival’s 36-play Marathon has only a few unproduced works left as it approaches its finish line (including “Timon of Athens,” which comes next to the Delacorte), the choice of play did not come from the deep passion of some director. So while the production, directed by OBIE-winner Douglas Hughes, offers a racial twist—African-American actor Andre Braugher (pictured left) has the lead—the approach is otherwise almost classical. “It begins in Central Park, with a group of actors in contemporary dress, and then at some point it goes back to the original,” says Rosemarie Tichler, artistic producer at the Public.

Is that a problem? For many, a Shakespeare production where the play is the thing is a relief. “I don’t think you have to do [a radical production] for the audience,” says Tom Luback, adapter of “The Red Rose.” “I think that actors and directors do it just because they’re bored doing it the other way. ‘Richard III’ is a terrific play and you could just do it as written. It doesn’t get any better or worse.”

Counters Babilla: “I’m not pretending that I’m being faithful or really doing Shakespeare, because that’s an impossibility. Whatever I do is my autobiography.” ★