

Insider



Here's the scoop on our new theater

By Virginia Francisco
Special Writer

Shakespeare, you mean.

I know what you mean. But at the Blackfriars it's Shenandoah Shakespeare.

Shakespeare — the greatest English poet?

But all you ever got was ordinary black letters on white pages. No color, no sound, no people. You were alone with all those words. And bored, maybe? It's not like that at the Blackfriars, let me tell you!

Shakespeare's plays are alive there. Wait 'til you hear poetry acted by a real human being, right out loud like Shakespeare did!

You know what I like best? Shakespeare knows the same people I know! Folks who think they are high intensity bulbs, but really are clueless. Or they're bright enough, but can't see a trick. Then they make really dumb mistakes, or even commit terrible crimes. They oughta know better. Fools in love. Criminals in power. Bigots, liches, clowns — well, you know them too.

Just what does a poet know about acting? Hey, Shakespeare was an actor first and last. He worked right onstage with the biggest names of his time. They taught him, close up, showed him all the power of the acted word, in some of the lustiest plays ever. And with the audience just inches away, he learned right quick what works and what — well, bores a person to throwing stuff at actors' heads.

OK, OK. Shakespeare and his guys acted at the Globe, right? What's this Blackfriars?

Shakespeare acted and staged

plays in all sorts of places for at least 10 years before his company moved into the Globe in 1599. And even the Globe couldn't be used year-round because only part was roofed, and even the best seats were open to the yard on one side. Kind of like our stadiums — no fun in winter and rough weather. Still, nobody wanted a theatre in his neighborhood.

Finally Shakespeare and his closest associates bought part of the old Blackfriars monastery. Like

good Stauntonians, they renovated it, into a beautiful indoor theatre approached by a grand staircase. The theatre kept the monastery's name, just like our road names remember long-gone toll gates and apple orchards and iron mines.

The new Blackfriars was pure luxury — a roof and seats for all. The benches were backless,

true, but seats beat standing around the stage. And body heat and dozens of candles kept people comparatively warm, in a closed room only 46 feet x 76 feet — about 15 adult strides by 25 strides. When spring came the company just moved back across the river to the Globe, so Shakespeare wrote for performance in both theatres.

Our replica Blackfriars is the only one in the world now — the London theater was pulled down centuries ago. Of course, it has a few adjustments for safety and comfort, like indoor toilets and electric light. You can even rent a cushion and a seat back for your bench.

What's so great about the way



News Leader File Photo

A scene from "A Midsummer Night's Dream"

people did plays 400 years ago? It's like this. Wherever Shakespeare and his fellows acted, they were really close to their audiences. Even in the big outdoor amphitheatres people stood smack against the stage on three sides, while galleries or balconies stacked up other viewers right behind the standers. The Blackfriars is much smaller, and galleries keep actors and audience really close. Some of us sit on stools on the stage. Actors can touch the nearest members of the audience, talk right to every single one, hear the back-chat of the show-offs, and even call people on stage to help out. Just like Shakespeare's time, the actors dress partly like us and even sing our songs, never mind when the play is supposed to happen.

Candles are always on, so we're in the light. We're hearers and watchers — active, busy with the concerns of the

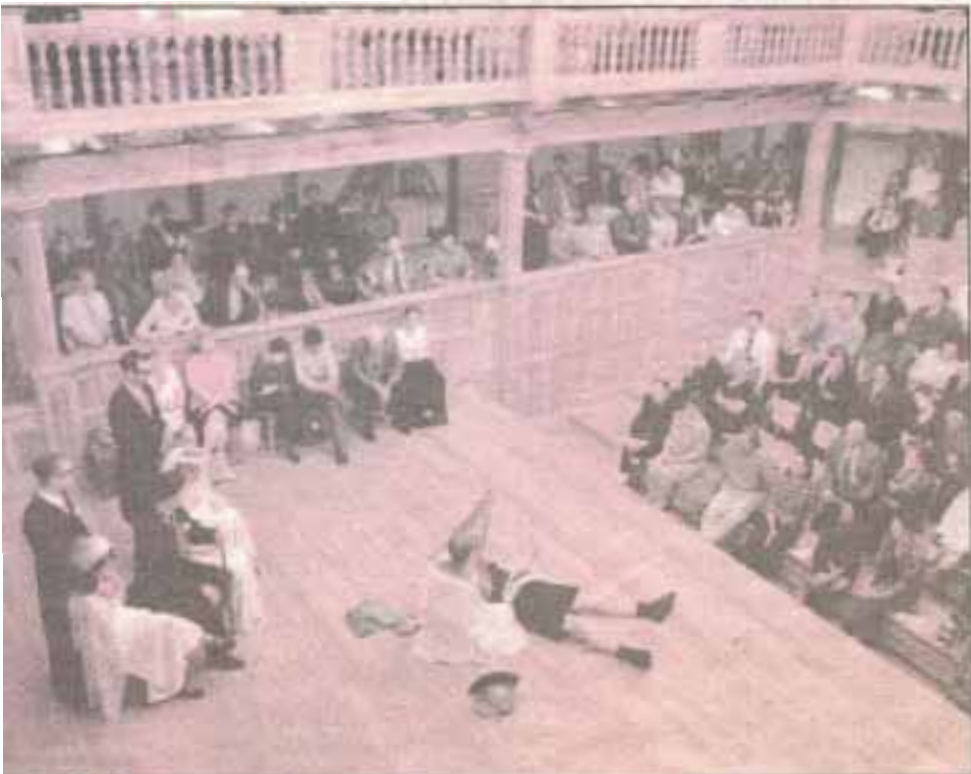
human community being lived right in our faces.

We see and hear that the actors are us and the folks we know, just as they were folks Shakespeare knew. We feel the emotions of our onstage selves with awesome intensity. We roar laughing as they — and we — learn the wisdom of frequent reality checks, cry for them and ourselves as they learn the consequences of wrongdoing and repent too late.

And no intermission. The two hours' traffic of the stage, Mr. Shakespeare called it.

So take care of your personal needs before you enter the theatre, that's my advice. And expect a feast for the heart and soul.

— Virginia R. Francisco is a member of the theatre faculty at Mary Baldwin College.



Mark Miller/News Leader File Photo

The newly opened Blackfriars Playhouse on South Market Street in Staunton.

This Week at the Blackfriars:

■ **Tonight** — The Alchemist, 7:30 p.m.

■ **Friday** — A Midsummer Night's Dream, 7:30 p.m.

■ **Saturday** — Hamlet, 2:30 p.m.; Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead, 7:30 p.m.

■ **Sunday** — The Alchemist, 2:30 p.m.**

■ **Tuesday** — A Midsummer Night's Dream, 10:30 a.m.

For The Blackfriars Playhouse full schedule log on to www.shenandoahshakespeare.com.

■ Tickets at the Blackfriars Playhouse range

from \$10-\$24. There will be four "Pay What You Will" performances during the fall season.

Those who reserve a seat for these performances pay regular price. The "Pay What You Will" tickets are only available at the door the night of the performance.

■ To order tickets, visit Shenandoah Shakespeare online at www.shenandoahshakespeare.com or call the box office at 885-5588.

Some shows have limited availability. They include:

- **Oct. 3** — sold out
- **Oct. 11-14** — sold out

**Pay-what-you-will performance.