



Photos by STEPHANIE KLEIN-DAVIS / THE HARTMAN TIMES

Ralph Cohen is co-founder and executive director of Shenandoah Shakespeare, which opens The Blackfriars Playhouse on Friday with "A Midsummer Night's Dream."



Theater renaissance

The Blackfriars Playhouse - where the play was the thing in old London - is reborn in Staunton

*"Gentles, perchance you wonder at this show;
but wonder on, till truth make all things plain."*

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" by William Shakespeare

STAUNTON — Let's go back 400 years. People are crowded into a little theater. The interior is made of wood and lighted by candelabra. On stage, actors perform the newest work by England's hottest playwright, William Shakespeare. It's boisterous, loud and funny. The audience is part of the show.

Such was often the scene at London's Blackfriars Playhouse near the end of Shakespeare's career.

Such will be the scene here Friday night.

The Blackfriars is reborn — not in London, but in the Shenandoah Valley. It will showcase the work of Shenandoah Shakespeare — the umbrella organization that grew from Shenandoah Shakespeare Express, an improbable venture begun by a college English professor and a student in the late 1980s.

The original Blackfriars Playhouse burned in the fire of London in 1666. This is the only replica in the world, theater officials said.

Its construction over the past 14 months has brought Shenandoah Shakespeare and Staunton together under a national spotlight. Newspapers across the country have written or are planning stories, said a theater spokeswoman, Sally McDonough. The theater was featured Sept. 7 on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered."

Part of the buzz is just the strangeness of it all.

Take a town of 24,000 in the Shenandoah Valley, plunk a \$3.7 million re-creation of an old London theater in its midst, and people will take notice. Even if they think you're crazy.

"Everybody knew it was impractical," conceded Tom Cabe, a Shenandoah Shakespeare board member. "We did it anyway."

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That could be Shenandoah Shakespeare's motto. Born as a traveling troupe 13 years

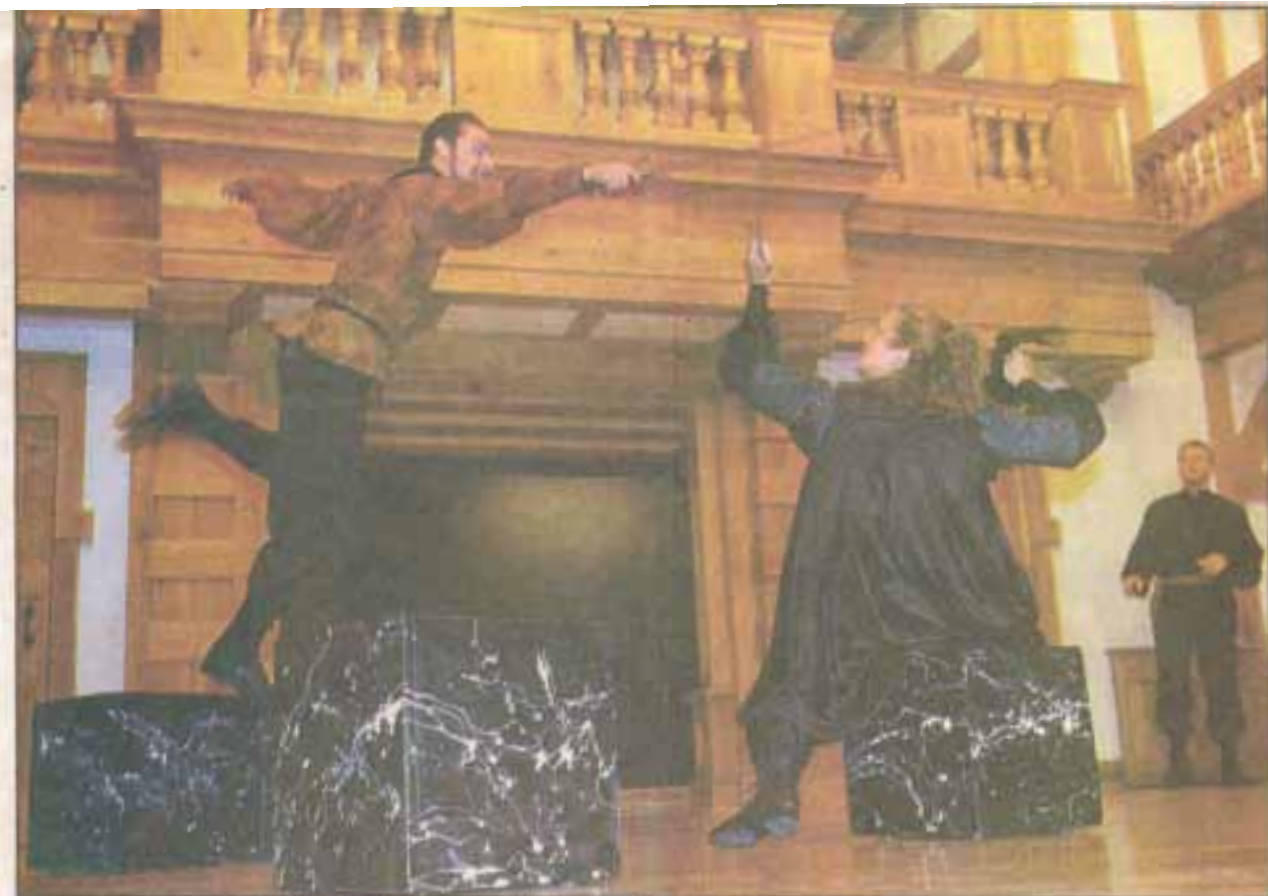
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The Blackfriars Playhouse opens Friday. For tickets and information, call (540) 885-5588.



Carolyn Ratteray (inset, above) as Juliet calls to Romeo from the balcony above the stage during a pre-opening performance. Tybalt (left), played by J.C. Long, fights with Mercutio, played by Allison Glenzer. In Elizabethan theater, all roles were performed by men, but actresses assume male roles in some Blackfriars productions.



The Blackfriars Playhouse is on Market Street in the historic downtown area of Staunton.



A workman (right) steadies a chandelier being raised at Blackfriars Playhouse. The playhouse boasts handmade chandeliers and balusters, three levels, recessed paneling and tongue-and-groove flooring.

Theater

ago, the company from the first has aimed to return Shakespeare to the masses. Founders Ralph Cohen, an English professor at James Madison University, and Jim Warren, then a JMU student, perfected a bare-bones approach to the plays with minimal sets and costumes — which was Shakespeare's approach as well, they say. "A lean, mean Shakespeare machine" was the assessment of an early critic.

The troupe will continue to mount traveling productions as Shenandoah Shakespeare Express. Shenandoah Shakespeare currently uses nonunion professional actors from around the country. The theater hopes to have a resident Actors Equity Association company of performers by 2003, said Kim Glassman, marketing director. Actors Equity Association is the union representing actors and stage managers in American Theater.

Wherever they perform, count on Shenandoah Shakespeare to leave the house lights up, as theaters did in Shakespeare's time, to involve the audience in the action. The approach breaks down barriers to understanding, Cohen said. "It's much easier to understand a conversation you're in. You're having fun."

It was Staunton hotel owner Joe Harman, a former English major, who brought Staunton and the traveling troupe together. "I had been reading about Shenandoah Shakespeare for several years. I thought, 'They really ought to be in Staunton.'"

Harman called Cohen, who liked the idea. Then he arranged a meeting between Shenandoah Shakespeare and community leaders. The project quickly gained momentum. Much of the \$3.7 million cost has been underwritten by local and state governments and some private contributions. Fund raising is ongoing.

We're very interested in cultural tourism," explained William Hamilton, the city's economic development director. Staunton already attracts tourists for its Victorian architecture and as the birthplace of President Woodrow Wilson. "Shakespeare adds another element to it," Hamilton said.

The theater's plan to show several plays in rotation — its fall season offers four, including "Hamlet" — could make it appealing to some who might not come this distance for a single show, project backers say.

Said Hamilton:

"Our hope is people will find enough to do that they'll stay a week."

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Shakespeare in America is hot. Several plays recently have been made into movies. Shakespeare acting companies abound.

There are Shakespeare festivals in Colorado, Texas, North Carolina, Florida and Utah. Also Seattle, Richmond, Atlanta, Cleveland and Fairbanks, Alaska. There is Shakespeare in Oregon and in Washington, D.C. In the world of Shakespeare, "festival" can denote everything from a summertime event to a permanent operation with multiple stages. The Alabama Shakespeare Festival in Montgomery runs year-round in a new \$21.5 million theater and attracts 300,000 visitors a year.

For the 300-seat Blackfriars Playhouse, the real worry may be not that doing Shakespeare is a long shot, but that so many other troupes in other out-of-the-way places are performing his plays, too.

Are we approaching a surfeit of Shakespeare destinations?

"I used to wonder about that. There are a great many," said Bill Patton, who for 42 years ran the famous Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Ore. But Patton also called the Blackfriars Playhouse "a very interesting project. It

seems like a beautiful building."

So what makes Shearandosh Shakespeare think this will succeed?

"Thirteen years of watching a company as English professor and a student put together for \$300," said Cohen. "We know it works."

"In all the communities where they have Shakespeare festivals, it's a small town that is picturesque and appeals to tourists," said Harman, the hotel owner. "And Staunton does that."

"These plays are just so good . . . so malleable and so wonderful," said Jim Warren, artistic director. "And for us, there are people who are going to want to see them in this wonderful building. It's the most beautiful theater space I've ever been in."



Lord and Lady Capulet, played by Anthony DeLuca and Becky Peters, mourn Tybalt in a pre-opening performance of "Romeo and Juliet."

Handmade chandeliers and balusters. Wooden pegs for nails. Three tiers for spectators — okay, two, since the upper tier won't be used because of

occupancy limits — but it might have been packed in Shakespeare's day. Everywhere you look is wood and craggy timbers. To reconstruct the Blackfriars interior, workmen used

57,000 board feet of white oak, the closest they could find to English oak.

You'll have to go inside to see it, since the theater's understated brick exterior is designed to mesh with Staunton's Victorian downtown instead of replicating the original theater's outside walls, which were stone. There is an upside to this, visitors who come into the auditorium from the theater's bland lobby often feel they're entering another world.

Some members of the troupe who saw the space for the first time actually cried, said Warren, the artistic director.

"It's pretty rad," confirmed actor Clifford Chamberlain, 31.

The original Blackfriars was the first completely enclosed theater in the English-speaking world.

Built within a medieval church

ing had once used by monks known as the Black Friars, the theater was used by Shakespeare's acting company after 1608. The playwright died in 1616.

The Blackfriars was visited by wealthier theatergoers who could afford to pay for the roof above their heads — unlike the common folk who visited the Globe Playhouse across the Thames. There is a re-creation of the Globe in London, but the Shenandoah Shakespeare Blackfriars is unique. There are plans to build a replica of the Globe here as well somewhere down the road, Cohen said.

"The idea of a recreation is to distinguish the theater from other Shakespeare festivals," said Tom McLaughlin, the project's architect. "Plus, it's a natural fit with the way Shenandoah does Shakespeare."

There is another reason: The new Blackfriars will be a teaching tool. Mary Baldwin College in Staunton is working closely with Shenandoah Shakespeare to offer master's degrees in Shakespeare and Elizabethan literature, and school visits and scholarly seminars are planned for the new theater as well. It will be open in the daytime for tours.

It must be said that this Blackfriars is not a perfect replica of the Elizabethan theater. It's a little larger, and the chandeliers will use electric bulbs, not candles. The fire marshal wouldn't have it any other way.

And then there's the beautiful natural finish of the oak. In Shakespeare's day the woodwork would have been painted bright colors.

Theater officials concede they'll probably have to paint it someday for authenticity's sake — no matter how much it hurts.

Paint or no paint, the Blackfriars Playhouse will soon trade sawdust for fairy dust in its opening night production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Said McLaughlin, the architect: "It's a Stradivarius waiting for Itzhak Perlman to play it."

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