

To Infinity and Beyond: SHAKESPEARE FOR THE NEW CENTURY

By Scott Horstein

Like the Elizabethans of William Shakespeare's England, we are living through the turn of a century, a historical moment of innovation and upheaval. What will the future hold for us? And how should we lead our lives? Technological breakthroughs offer wondrous new lifestyles to us, and in some ways the promise of our democracy shines brightly. Yet our political systems feel shaky, war rages abroad, and our most basic notions of family and faith feel under threat. In such a world, what does it mean to fall in love? To seek revenge? To be just? To stay true to a friend?

The Old Globe's 2007 Shakespeare Repertory Season gives us the new century in three tenses: past, present, and future. *Hamlet*, a tragedy, bids a nostalgic yet ruthless farewell to the past. *Measure for Measure*, a dark comedy, revels in change in the present tense as a new way of life. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a comic romance, gazes into the future through the eyes of the youth who will inherit it.

All of these plays capture the excitement and anxiety of England during Shakespeare's lifetime (1564-1616). Plots to overthrow Queen Elizabeth and her Protestant Church of England abounded, with even Jesuit priests falling under suspicion as potential Vatican spies, while the Catholic nations of Spain and Scotland planned invasion. Churchgoers found themselves grappling with a new official Protestant religion, as Elizabeth replaced the Catholic crucifix on the country's altars with her own royal coat of arms, and persecuted the practice of Catholic ritual. Ireland rose up in rebellion against England's oppressive colonial rule.



COSTUME SKETCH OF GERTRUDE BY ROBERT MORGAN.

A power vacuum at court divided Elizabeth's advisors into factions, plotting for the succession of the childless queen. Meanwhile, the feudal agricultural basis of the English economy was giving way to a new kind of society based upon manufacturing, and the population was exploding. Yet despite these troubles, Englishfolk flocked to the playhouses, filled with not only despair but hope for what the new century might bring.

In an early scene in *Hamlet* (1599), the soldier Marcellus utters his famous line, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." Reflecting the power struggle around Elizabeth's succession, Shakespeare puts the questionable Claudius on the Danish throne, and Danish statecraft devolves into lies and paranoia. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern stake out Hamlet. Polonius sends Reynaldo to spy on his own son, Laertes. Ophelia deploys as an *agent provocateur* against Hamlet. In the end the spymaster himself gets done in, when Hamlet mistakes the undercover Polonius for Claudius and kills him, costing Denmark its chief minister.

While the state falls apart, Shakespeare's hero manifests a curious nostalgia for the past. Hamlet loves the old-fashioned, creaky drama of the traveling Players, visits a graveyard to ponder the dead who have gone before him, and venerates his dead father above all else. The present and future seem useless to him, which is why he asks the audience in his famous monologues why he should even bother. Why continue breathing when the best is already past?

*How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't! ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. That it should come to this!*

Hamlet goes on to grapple with the weighty philosophical, religious and moral complications of taking revenge, and in so doing, reveals his sensitivity to the changing world. By the end of the play the rotted Danish court, the fond old forms of the past, even Hamlet's profound genius, have all consumed themselves, and for good or for ill, a stark new reality is upon us. Hamlet's foil, the Norwegian prince Fortinbras, marches into Denmark, pausing only briefly to commemorate the old world he is sweeping away.

Measure for Measure (1604) moves past mourning straight into the hurly-burly of a new era. Shakespeare focuses his comedy on the practicality of the moment. In the foreground, the plot centers on how the protagonists will resolve the intractable problem of Angelo's offer to Isabella. In the back-



DUKE FROM *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*, COSTUME SKETCH BY ROBERT MORGAN

ground, the plot centers on how the sex trade will adapt to the problem of revolving political leadership.

Shakespeare risks violating the spirit of comedy by threatening grievous harm to Claudio and Isabella. The humor lies in the great seriousness of the lead characters, and the absurd knots they tie themselves into. Angelo is shocked by his own obsessive lust for Isabella, while the crusading Duke and devout Isabella arrange a tryst in a church garden. Together

they form an absurd trinity: a sham friar of a Duke, the puritanical but mesmerized Angelo, and the idealistic Isabella.

What can a good Christian justify in the name of justice? This, the play's most intractable problem, comes to a head in the Duke's famous sentencing of Angelo at the end of the play, which draws its language from the Book of Matthew:

*Haste still pays haste, and leisure answers leisure;
Like doth quit like, and Measure still for Measure.*

But what does this mean? Does it mean that we take an eye for an eye? Or does it mean that we should do unto others as we would have them do unto us? This crisis of faith is necessary and all too human, and Shakespeare celebrates it as vital to the new era.

The Two Gentlemen of Verona (c.1594) gazes deep into the new century through the romantic eyes of the children who will inherit it. Shakespeare purposefully gives his four lovers, Valentine, Proteus, Julia, and Silvia, very little time to establish and develop their relationships. These are less great loves and friendships than they are great loves and friendships fantasized about, dreamt about, yearned for. The result is not a great love story, but four parallel case studies of youth gripped by desire. Our lovers reach for a bright new future and in the process risk

losing themselves, as Proteus poignantly expresses in his prayer to Love:

*I cannot leave to love, and yet I do.
But there I leave to love where I should love.
Julia I lose, and Valentine I lose.
If I keep them I needs must lose myself.
If I lose them, thus find I by their loss.*

In order to do right by Love, Proteus says he must betray Love. Such contradictions soon become ridiculous. Unlike Hamlet, who pined for the old ways, and unlike Isabella, Duke Vincentio, and Angelo, who fought over pieties, the characters in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* make a mockery of every convention they depend upon. Valentine and Proteus pledge eternal brotherhood to each other, but their posturing over friendship, love and honor makes them foolish. The antiquated knight Sir Eglamour proves that chivalry is dead by running away at the first sign of danger. Even the notion of man's best friend becomes ridiculous. Crab the dog is indifferent to his master Launce, while Launce works to put Crab's best paw forward, going so far as to take the blame for Crab's doggy indiscretions.

The twenty-four hour party state in Milan sums up the need for a new world with meaningful leadership. Meanwhile, out in the forest, Valentine develops into the man who just might be that leader. The humor of the play lives in its gentle ridicule of our world, but its romance lives in its hunger for the future.

These three plays gives us portraits of people not unlike ourselves mucking through a time of great change, and give us the opportunity to gasp, shake our heads, gaze in admiration, laugh and bear witness to the birth of a new century.



JULIA FROM *THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA*, COSTUME SKETCH BY FABIO TOBLINI