

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 24 October 2006 22:36

Certainly, there was cause for concern.



When the Prenzie Players made their 2003 debut with Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, they did so at Rock Island's Peanut Gallery, which didn't have a proper stage and could only seat, at maximum, 40 people. The show had an inadequate budget (between \$200 and \$300), a run of only two performances, and no word-of-mouth; Prenzie's founders - Cait Bodenbender, John "J.C." Luxton, Aaron Sullivan, and Denise Yoder - had every reason to expect *Measure for Measure* to fail.

Yet Friday night's show played to a full house. And on *Saturday*

"They were standing along the window ledge and along the back, where we were doing our *changing*," says Bodenbender at the memory of the beyond-sold-out production.

"We had, like, thirty people standing," adds Luxton, "and that second night, we counted and we had, what, four hundred bucks or something?"

"Six hundred," counters Bodenbender.

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"And I leapt into Aaron's arms," continues Luxton, "'cause I'm small and he's enormous, and he carried me all around the stage screaming, '*Show outta nothin'! Show outta nothin'!!!*' And it was true. It was *totally* true."

Since then, the Prenzie Players have produced another half-dozen Shakespeare titles: *Hamlet*, *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*

, *Macbeth*, *Twelfth Night*

, and

A Midsummer Night's Dream.

And as a nomadic group, they've performed not only at the Peanut Gallery, but in the nursing building of Davenport's defunct Marycrest College and the (similarly defunct) Montgomery Ward building in Moline.

At its *current* venue, Rock Island's Masonic Temple, Prenzie will embark on its most demanding project to date: *The Henriad*, in which Shakespeare's Henry plays - *King Richard the Second* (o

pening Friday, October 27),

King Henry the Fourth

(February 23), and

King Henry the Fifth

(May 18) - will be performed in succession, with several cast members reprising their roles from play to play. It's an enormously ambitious undertaking, one rarely attempted in this country, yet the Prenzie Players are

not

ones to shy away from a challenge.

"Boot Camp for Shakespeare"

On the group's Web site (<http://www.prenzieplayers.com>), Prenzie is described as being

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composed of "actors whose mission is to present serious Shakespeare using financially modest production," and, perhaps not coincidentally, they first met one another through a Quad Cities organization that often boasts the same.



"We all did Genesisus Guild together," reveals Bodenbender, an area native who performed with the Minnesota Opera company. "And we always had our idea of how things *should* have gone. So we'd sit around and pick the plays apart - 'What we should have done is *this*."

""

"That's just something we started doing at parties," says Sullivan, a professional lab technician who graduated from Augustana College in 2000. "We would all get together and, spontaneously, we'd start discussing Shakespeare. We are a *huge* group of nerds."

"We weren't, like, *unhappy* with Genesisus Guild," adds Luxton, who began performing with the venerable Lincoln Park institution in 1992. "I just wanted to be in *doo*
rs

My least favorite thing about Guild was just having to do everything at this *giant*
level, just to get the audience to hear all the words."

Genesisus Guild's outdoor venue also meant that local fans of the Bard were, during most months, deprived of seeing his works, as the Rock Island organization was the only one *produci*
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kespeare on a regular basis.

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Before Prenzie, says Bodenbender, the area would see "two or three Shakespeares in the summer and then nothing all year. So eventually we said, 'We should do our own show, not during the Guild season. Let's do Shakespeare in the *winter*.'"

The quartet couldn't afford to rent a space, but did make an arrangement with Peanut Gallery manager Sarah Jane Boyd, who agreed to house a production for half the receipts. (Then as now, there is a "suggested donation" accompanying Prenzie shows.) Through connections with fellow performers - among them actors from Genesis Guild, ComedySportz, Augustana College, and the University of Iowa - they were able to cast *Measure for Measure*, with Luxton directing. M

Measure for Measure, in fact, was the inspiration for the Prenzie Players' name, which Luxton says was invented "like, two weeks before we opened," after suggestions such as "The Only Men" and "The Beg, Borrow, or Steal Company" were rejected.

Measure for Measure references the "the prenzie Angelo," but Shakespeare scholars aren't in agreement about what the word *means*, and many believe it a simple misprint (of "prince"), as the term doesn't appear in any of the Bard's other works. (Nor, in the Biblically scaled *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, does it appear in the book's exhaustive glossary.) "It's an etymological mystery," says Luxton.

"We took it to mean 'rigidly precise,'" says Bodenbender. "Like, *beyond* precise. Anal-retentive."

Yet while that definition fits the organization's commitment to emotional truth, when it comes to strict adherence to traditional Shakespearean style and text, Prenzie is anything *but* anal-retentive.

From the start, the group didn't want to be beholden to realistic period detail. "One of our rules is that if we can't do something well, then we have to find a different *way*," Bodenbender says, explaining the intentionally anachronistic costume, prop, and scenic-design choices. "So if you can't have it be *real*, it's better just to do something totally stylized and let the audience use their imagination."

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Neither did the group want to be completely beholden to the Bard's *dialogue*; as Bodenbender explains, historical speeches and references "that created the emotional effects that Shakespeare was going for aren't going to have the same *effect* on people now. The times have changed."

With Luxton as script editor, Prenzie has instead sought to honor the *spirit* of Shakespeare's texts. "When I'm cutting," says Luxton, "I'm thinking, 'What's his intention here? Now what would he do with our actors?' It's not just me doing whatever the hell I want."

What *doesn't* change, though, is Prenzie's commitment to presenting the Bard's works - as the Web site states - "with meticulous attention to language, speed, and feeling."

"The one sort of realism that we don't compromise on is emotional realism," says Luxton. And "because we have sort of anachronistic sets and costumes and stuff like that, it becomes all the more urgent that everybody knows completely what they're saying, and that they're completely, emotionally invested."

"You have to spend time with it," says Yoder, an Augustana College employee who first performed Shakespeare in Genesis Guild's *The Taming of the Shrew* in 1998. "What were you doing as your character? What's your mood? Why are you angry when you're delivering this? Otherwise, you're just saying lines."



"It's very much like what Hemingway said on the principle of the iceberg," says Luxton. "Ten

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percent of the story is apparent on the surface and this giant 90 percent is underwater. There's a tremendous amount underneath [the dialogue], underlining and supporting everything that's happening."

Such connection to character and emotion is especially important considering the performers' close proximity to their audiences; not working on traditional stages, the actors oftentimes perform among those in the crowd - even, on occasion, one-on-one.

"It's really upsetting," says Yoder, "especially when you first get started, to realize you're going to be giving your speech *to an audience member*. At first, it scared the crap out of me - all of a sudden you're looking in someone's eyes going, 'What are my lines again?'"

Bodenbender adds, "It's really interesting to get new actors to Prenzie, because they're saying lines and I'm, like, 'No, no, just say it to that *one person* you're next to in the audience.' 'But no one else will be able to hear me.' 'Yes, but *that* person gets the greatest treat!'"

"It's so exciting that every different flank in the audience - every different *row* - is getting an entirely different show," says Luxton. "One of the great things about theatre as opposed to film is that in film you're constantly being directed as to where your attention should lie, and in theatre, it's your *hoice* where your attention should lie. And theatre doesn't take advantage of that enough." C

What results, Bodenbender says, is a delicate balance between artifice and truth. "The relationship that Prenzie has to reality is kind of complicated and paradoxical. On one hand, it's supposed to always feel real. We *want* it to be real. On the other hand, we're not pretending that it's not theatre."

Bodenbender adds that one of the group's performers "referred to Prenzie as Boot Camp for Shakespeare." She laughs. "That's about right."

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"This Is *Huge*"



"For me," says Sullivan, regarding Prenzie's decision to produce *The Henriad*, "it had its roots several years ago, when the Guild did *Richard II* [in 1999], and J.C. was cast as Harry Percy, which is a small, minor role. Years later [in 2003], they did *Henry IV*, and coincidentally - not by any kind of design - he was cast as the same character. And I was, like, 'Someone should do these plays with a continuous cast, so we see the minor characters of *Richard II* become major players in *Henry IV*, and continue on with the cycle,' and that idea eventually kind of worked its way into our group consciousness.

"And then we found out that people do that in England," he adds, "but no one really does it here. We're gonna be, like, the fourth or fifth company in the nation to do this."

The challenging notion was certainly embraced by Luxton. "In my opinion," he says, "*Henry IV; Part I* is the best play ever written. *Hamlet, Othello* ... very, very close. But *Henry IV* actually has

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everything

. You've got romance, you've got battles, you've got this hilarious character, Falstaff It's just brilliant.

"But one of the problems with those plays as done," Luxton continues, "is that nobody knows English history at all, and there's a certain amount of knowledge amongst the audience that he [Shakespeare] takes for granted. And so to make *Henry IV* perfectly meaningful, in a way you'd *have*

to do

Richard II

first. And then there's no reason not to put

Henry V

in there, because that's where it all ends up."

(Bodenbender adds, however, that attendance at one is not mandatory for enjoyment of another. "All three shows are independent," says Bodenbender, "so if someone doesn't go to the first one, they can still have a good time.")

The plays would appear to compose a perfect Shakespeare trilogy except for one problem: It *is*

n't

a trilogy.

Henry IV

is actually

two

works -

Henry IV Parts I

and

II -

and instead of producing both, Prenzie opted to merge the pieces into what Luxton calls "a seamless narrative."

"My goal was to get the entire story into one play," he says, "with everything that is delicious and wonderful and joyous, and the kind of things that are cut out are jokes that were topical references in 1596. Or the second rebellion - *Part II* is structured around a *second* rebellion that breaks out against Henry, so the scenes involving the rebels in

Part II

are just

gone

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"But that kind of thing has been done, to my knowledge, at least twice before," he continues. "Orson Welles did it in *Chimes of Midnight*, which is brilliant, and the BBC did a production of it in 1996 It's essentially the play. There's a lot of really delicious Falstaff stuff, there's crucial scenes like the death of Henry IV, Hal's turning away of Falstaff ... that's all there. My cuts of *Richard II* and *Henry V* are much closer to the originals.

"In my cuts, I've emphasized every single thing that you need to know, so somebody who doesn't even know where England is on the *map*," he laughs, "will have a thoroughly satisfying theatrical experience."

Despite forming a trilogy, though, the works composing *The Henriad* will be helmed by different Prenzie Players - Luxton is directing *King Richard the Second*, Bodenbender will assay *King Henry the Fourth*, and Sullivan *King Henry the Fifth*. (Yoder, for her part, has no immediate plans to direct. "I'm a much better critic," she laughs. "It's just not my bag.") Yet Sullivan says that, considering the plays' styles, that's

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fitting.

Among the separate works, he says, "there are some strains that follow, but the structure of the shows is so very different. *Richard* is so formal and so cerebral, and *Henry* is so organic and free-flowing, and *Henry V*

is almost like a fairy tale - I mean, the divinity of the king is so imposed on the character, and the play is structured with a chorus, which is nowhere

in the other two plays. The plays are so different that the shows have to be different."

There will, though, be consistencies, particularly in casting. Among those who assume continuing roles in at least two of *The Henriad's* productions - in addition to Luxton and Sullivan - are familiar local performers Brian Nelson, Jeff De Leon, Jeremy Mahr, Bryan Woods, and Linnea Ridolfi.

Understandably, the dedication of Prenzie's casts makes the founders wish they could afford to pay them; as Bodenbender says, "That's a big commitment for people who are doing it just because they love you." And considering the cost of venue rentals, stage modifications, scenic design, and advertising, for starters, the Prenzie Players would like the financial freedom to spend more than what Bodenbender says is their current budget per performance, "between \$500 and \$1,000, \$1,500 tops, and that's for everything."

But as Prenzie's founders freely admit, more money - though desirable - isn't essential. "We are a theatre group with a small budget and we like it that way," says Bodenbender. And when die-hard Shakespeare fans have the opportunity to present an epic of

The Henriad's nature to audiences, who's going to complain about

pay

?

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"When we first decided to do it," says Sullivan, "I was, like, 'Oh my God, guys, this is *huge!* When you guys realize *how* big this is, give me a call.' And about three months ago, they were, like, 'You were *right!*'"

"If there's one thing we definitely have, it's ambition," says Luxton. "No *money*, but lots of ambition."

The *Henriad* begins with King Richard the Second at the Rock Island Masonic Temple, running from Friday, October 27 through Saturday, November 4. For more information on the Prenzie Players, visit (<http://www.prenzieplayers.com>).