

Rosemary Gaby

Venturing Outside: The Emergence of Australian Open-Air Theatre

In December 1933 the Perth Repertory Club staged *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in a corner of the Perth Supreme Court gardens with Moreton Bay figs, gum trees and a wall of oleanders serving as a background to the scene, clumps of shrubbery in the middle distance, and seating arranged to form a semi-circle around the lawn-stage. The *West Australian's* reviewer, "Polygon" (well-known thirty years later as the governor general of Australia, Sir Paul Hasluck), was particularly intrigued by the conjunction between the production's "unmistakeable freshness of Elizabethan England" and its Australian setting:

Falstaff trod an Australian lawn last night [...]. The lights of the fairy host of Windsor Forest sparkled beneath a tall gum tree doing duty as Herne's legendary oak; and the fresh and merry tang of Elizabethan country air mingled with the faint whiff from clumps of oleanders blooming in a Perth garden under southern stars. There was something that tickled the imagination rather pleasantly in the simple fact of the transplanting of England's native growth to such a setting. ("The Merry Wives': Shakespeare in the Open Air").

Any attempt to perform Shakespeare's plays outside the confines of a building will generate some sort of interaction between the text and the local space in which it is performed, and often the place of performance generates anachronistic sights and sounds which foreground the temporal and spatial distance between the present moment and the Shakespearean text. Even spectators at "Shakespeare's Globe" in London cannot wholly disregard the modern world, especially when noisy jets fly overhead. In Australia, the distance between Shakespearean worlds and local space is particularly obvious. While references to Africa, India and the Americas do occasionally surface in the plays, "Terra Australis" was uncharted territory when Shakespeare was writing; nothing more than a "South-sea of discovery" (*AYL* 3.2.196-7). When Shakespeare's plays are performed in the open air, audiences in Australia must necessarily embrace the distance between Shakespeare's imagined settings and the tangibly alien space of performance. Plays with fantastical settings, like *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, may be easier to transpose to Antipodean space, but even those comedies reference an obviously European social and physical world.

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Despite, and perhaps because of the anomalous nature of open-air Shakespeares in Australia, they have become increasingly popular in recent years. The Perth Repertory Club's *Merry Wives* was an unusual event in the 1930s, but towards the end of the twentieth century audiences became more and more enthusiastic about watching Shakespearean characters tread Australian lawns. The phenomenon really took off in Australia in the 1980s thanks to the vision and enthusiasm of individual practitioners like Alan Edwards, who instigated productions in Brisbane's Albert Park in 1979, David MacSwan, who began Sydney's *Shakespeare by the Sea* in 1987 and Glenn Elston, whose *Shakespeare Under the Stars* productions began in Melbourne in 1988. Alan Brissenden has argued that in Australia during the last years of the twentieth century Shakespeare's plays "were beginning to be accepted again as entertainment rather than as more rarefied educational or aesthetic experiences" and that outdoor productions (and particularly Glenn Elston's "larrikin Shakespeare") were an important part of this process (258).

In the opening chapter of *O Brave New World: Two Centuries of Shakespeare on the Australian Stage*, Richard Waterhouse draws attention to outdoor productions as evidence of an attempt to find an Australian way of doing Shakespeare (36-7). It is worth pursuing this suggestion, to get some idea of the extent to which local space has helped engender localized performances of the plays. Open-air Shakespeares are produced all over the world, from Cape Town to Colorado, in Britain and its former colonies, and in countries with no real ties to Britain at all. While open-air productions around the world face many of the same staging challenges and provide comparable experiences of Shakespearean texts, the palpable presence of local space makes this mode of performance more obviously local than performances produced within conventional purpose-built theatres. Even within Australia, social, climatic and topographical differences have produced remarkably different performance traditions from one region to another. This paper is an attempt to sketch the rise of open-air Shakespeares in twentieth-century Australia while paying attention to the ways in which local space may have kindled distinctively Australian ways of doing Shakespeare. The story of open-air Shakespeares in Australia can shed light on shifting attitudes to Shakespeare in settler societies and on the widespread popularity of this mode of performance.

Open-air Shakespeares have been staged regularly each summer since 1932 in Regent's Park, London, but they were relatively slow to take off as annual events in Australia. It is possible that some of the rough, "fit up" theatres of the early years of British settlement delivered a theatrical experience that was very close to the open-air stage. However, colonists soon constructed theatrical spaces that quarantined performances from the landscape, climate, and colonial culture outside. Victorian theatres with proscenium-arch stages became the established home for Shakespeare in most major Australian towns and cities right up until the 1950s. Some open-air productions were staged before the Second World War, but these were mostly once-off events performed in the gardens of stately homes for charity. They included productions of *As You Like It* in the grounds of Mona,

Darling Point, Sydney in 1901, at Rippon Lea in 1906 and at Mandeville Hall, Toorak in 1908, as well as two Alan Wilkie productions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Perth and Sydney in the 1920s, and the *Dream* and *Merry Wives* by the Perth Repertory Club in 1933.¹

A review of the Perth Repertory Club *Dream* in February 1933 complained:

Open-air performances of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (and of other dramatic works) are no new thing in Europe. It appears perhaps surprising that in Australia, which has such manifest advantages climatically, this sort of enterprise should be so rare. ("Open-air Play: 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'")

A variety of factors probably contributed to the relative scarcity of Australian open-air productions in the first half of the twentieth century. The reviewer's suggestion is that Australians lacked devotion to the arts and to Shakespeare, but it also took some time for them to become comfortable with their outdoor environment. The early history of European settlement in all areas of Australia was marked by struggle with what seemed to many to be a hostile, strange, and uncivilized environment. Throughout the nineteenth century settlers systematically replaced Australia's native flora and fauna with more familiar European imports in an effort to tame their new country. It is not surprising that early open-air productions were mostly staged in carefully cultivated garden spaces that contained a high proportion of introduced plants and trees. Like the gardens, theatre became an increasingly more civilized presence in the colony and by the early decades of the twentieth century it was very much associated with formal behaviour and attire. Open-air performance was a particularly risky venture at a time when audiences required chairs and perfect weather to feel comfortable in their evening dress.

Attitudes started to change in the 1950s when Australian theatre practitioners became generally more interested in experimental theatre and the notion of replicating Elizabethan theatre conditions for Shakespeare performance. In the Northern hemisphere similar ideas were taking hold, reflected most obviously in Tanya Moiseiwitsch's designs for the Elizabethan-style setting for the Shakespeare History Cycle that opened in the newly renovated Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon in March 1951, and the Elizabethan stage inside a tent that was constructed for the first Stratford Ontario Festival in 1953. The recreation of Elizabethan performance conditions in itself had little to do with Australia or its increasingly multicultural society in the mid-twentieth century, but it did have the effect of challenging the dominance of the proscenium arch and indoor theatre. The simple act of staging plays in the open air was a move which

¹ I have discussed these productions at some length in "Here's a marvellous convenient place for our rehearsal?: Shakespeare in Australian space", *Australasian Drama Studies* 46 (2005): 124-138.

helped to dismantle some of the barriers which had hitherto separated Shakespeare from the locality in which performances took place.

The beginnings of a more theoretically driven approach to outdoor staging in Australia can be traced to Colin Ballantyne's *As You Like It*, staged under the auspices of the Arts Council of South Australia in Adelaide in 1951. The production began life indoors at Adelaide's Tivoli Theatre in September, and was adapted for a six-night season in December at the old Police Barracks Square behind the Adelaide museum. Both indoor and outdoor versions of the production used a tent structure as a backdrop to the action, with a central section that could function as an inner stage, flanked by two smaller tents that the actors could use as exit and entrance points. In a programme note Ballantyne describes the platform acting area as combining "the principles of the Elizabethan platform stage (in shape and position in relation to the audience), and that known in the United States as 'theatre in the round'" (*As You Like It*). Rather than standing in a pit or watching from galleries, the audience occupied tiered seats which surrounded three sides of the stage (an arrangement that was particularly apt for Orlando's wrestling scene) and audience and players were evenly lit. The site was chosen for its acoustics and its protection from traffic noise, but the Englishness of the architecture may also have been a factor. The colonial buildings surrounding the stage are described in *The News* as "Tudor style", and while this was stretching the architectural facts, the site would have seemed in harmony with the actors' Elizabethan costumes for many audience members. Reviews stress the contribution of Adelaide's warm summer weather. Open-air performance was welcomed as "a civilising factor long overdue in overcoming the discomfort of indoor performance during Adelaide's hot summers" (Wahlquist). Inevitably the outdoor setting must have engendered a sense of both the play's English origins and the beguiling incongruity of appropriating it within local space.

Ballantyne's experiment was short-lived and did not instigate any immediate blossoming of outdoor Shakespeare production in Adelaide. In Perth, however, open-air Shakespeares had already been a regular summer occurrence since 1949 and the impetus to experiment with this mode of performance was particularly strong. The University of Western Australia's Dramatic Society was revived in the immediate post-war years under the guidance of a dedicated group of theatre scholars associated with the English Department—Allan Edwards, Jeana Tweedie (later Bradley), David Bradley and Philip Parsons (Craig 48). According to Terry Craig, in the 1950s the University was the focal point for cultural life in Perth and its open-air venues—the Sunken Garden and the Somerville Auditorium—were in heavy use (47). The landmark production of the decade in Western Australia was *Richard III*, staged at the Somerville Auditorium in 1953. The University of Western Australia Archives holds a large collection of materials relating to the production, including correspondence, financial statements and production notes, which attest to an ambitious undertaking. Instigated by the Adult Education Board, the production was promoted as the centrepiece of the first Festival of Perth. A set was constructed amidst the auditorium's Norfolk pines, with

towers, stairs, and multiple playing areas, including an apron stage, from which the action would occasionally spill into the audience. The aim of British director, Michael Langham, was to reproduce the experience of an Elizabethan stage. In his programme note Langham writes about the advantages of the Elizabethan over modern playhouses, emphasizing the platform stage's "simultaneous advantages of intimacy and magnitude" ("The Producer Speaks").

The strong interest in the dynamics of the Elizabethan stage that developed at the University of Western Australia soon engendered plans to build a more permanent Elizabethan-style venue. Professor of English, Allan Edwards, came up with the idea of incorporating a theatre space into one of the courtyards of the new Arts faculty building, and architect, Marshall Clifton, was able to design the space using modern building materials but following the dimensions specified in the original Fortune contract commissioned by Edward Alleyn and Philip Henslowe in 1599 (Parsons). The New Fortune theatre opened in 1964 with *Hamlet*, directed by Jeana Bradley and Philip Parsons. Reviews and production notes for the piece all express surprise and pleasure at the degree of intimacy between actors and audience made possible by the proximity of the galleries and the seating of audience members in the pit at eye level with the platform stage. The uniqueness of the enterprise was the source of a great deal of local pride: it was claimed that the University had made "theatrical history" (Reid) and had created "the only truly modern Elizabethan theatre in the world" (Hewett 1). The New Fortune was home to many local Shakespeare productions in ensuing years as well as some touring productions by companies like the English Shakespeare Company and Cheek By Jowl. It is still in regular use, with the University's Graduate Dramatic Society and Undergraduate Dramatic Society collaborating to present a summer Shakespeare production every year.

Western Australian has a much more consistent history of open-air Shakespeare production than any other state in Australia. This is partly due to the particular interests of local theatre enthusiasts and to the existence of the New Fortune Theatre, but it must also be linked to its reliably warm and dry summers. Even before the New Fortune was built, open-air Shakespeares were regularly staged in the University's Sunken Garden, starting with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1949, and including productions of *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Macbeth*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in the 1950s and early 1960s. These productions were precursors to the popular Botanical Garden Shakespeares of the 1980s, but interestingly the site did not entirely appeal to some of the directors who worked there. In a 1957 programme note for *Much Ado About Nothing*, Jeana Tweedie argued that plays with an obviously indoor setting could end up looking like "the corpse of an August Bank Holiday" on the garden stage ("The Open Air Theatre"), and in 1961 Colin Ballantyne complained that the Sunken Garden's prettiness was intrusive:

All that cloying charm, that sweet soft olde worlde air, that nature minus tooth and claw, is so anti-theatrical, so opposite

to all the forces which have made the Western theatre what it is today. (7)

The more neutral space of the New Fortune's bare stage seemed more appropriate for Shakespeare and it largely replaced the Sunken Garden as the main venue for open-air productions in Perth until Glenn Elston's touring productions revived the city's enthusiasm for garden Shakespeares in the 1990s.

Other influential experiments in Elizabethan staging undertaken during the 1960s included the Elizabethan Theatre Trust's Circus tent production of *Henry V* which premiered at the Adelaide Festival of Arts in 1964, and the Melbourne Theatre Company's 1969 production of *Henry IV Part One* which premiered in Perth but then moved into the open air at Murdoch Court in the Victorian Arts Centre. Both productions aimed to bring an Elizabethan view of fifteenth-century British history alive for Australian audiences by giving them a sense of the intimacy, pageantry and fast-paced action afforded by the thrust stage. These productions in Perth, Adelaide, and Melbourne expressed a deepening confidence that Australians could *do* Shakespeare successfully and in innovative ways. While they did bring the plays closer to the audience and the space around them however, they did not intentionally foreground the Australian locale. Rather, the aim of all these experimental productions was to encourage the audience to forget its contemporary surroundings and instead engage with the fantasy of being Elizabethan; of experiencing Shakespeare in a seemingly more authentic, original way.

The flourishing open-air Shakespeare industry that exists in Australia today did not really get underway until at least a decade after the MTC's *Henry IV Part One*, when city-based theatre companies discovered the quite different attractions of bringing Shakespeare to their local public parks and gardens. Not surprisingly it was the warmer cities that generated the first regular garden productions. Both Darwin and Brisbane produced local open-air Shakespeares in 1979 that would become more or less yearly events. In Darwin regular outdoor Shakespeares began in the East Point gun-turret: a circular shell, open to the sky and the sounds of the sea, with galleries and a pit reminiscent of an Elizabethan theatre. In this relatively intimate space the Darwin Theatre Group staged *Macbeth* in 1979, followed by *The Merchant of Venice* in 1981, *Lear* in 1982, and *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1983. From 1985 the DTG moved its Shakespeares to the less restricted space of the Town Hall Ruins, a historical site in the centre of the city which provides a vivid reminder of the effects of the city's 1974 disaster, Cyclone Tracy, within what is now a lush garden setting. Several productions followed there from both the DTG and its later more professional incarnation, the Darwin Theatre Company.

In Brisbane open-air Shakespeares began in a garden setting with a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Albert Park in 1979. The park production was the brainchild of director Alan Edwards who had started his professional life as an assistant stage manager in a production of the *Dream* at Regent's Park Theatre, London. By 1979 Edwards was director of the Queensland Theatre Company and in a position to stage an elaborate professional event. Like Perth's 1953 *Richard III*, this production was designed to be an impressive

centrepiece to the city's arts festival. David Rowbotham explained in the Brisbane *Courier Mail* that the eighteenth annual Warana was "a festival costing \$500,000, with a \$116,000 outdoor Shakespeare production as its theatrical highlight" and the introduction of Shakespeare marked a shift from the old Warana "carnival" to something that embraced "both carnival and culture" ("Shakespeare goes outdoors"). As well as a large cast from the Queensland Theatre Company, the production featured artists from the Queensland Ballet Company, the Queensland Opera Company, the Australian Youth Ballet Company and the Queensland Theatre Orchestra, and even dogs from the Dalmatian Society of Queensland. Its poster promises "a stunning fireworks display" and a free "Dream Tripper" bus from the City Hall to Albert Park prior to each performance (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*).

Much of the budget was spent on adapting the site for performance. A team of carpenters, electricians and scaffolders built a large temporary stage and a fence was constructed around the auditorium area to ensure that noise did not disturb nearby hospitals. The production apparently required four miles of electric lighting cables and three miles of sound cables. Some welcomed the transformation of a "dark lonely area used mainly by derelicts" (Thomas), but the set was also seen as a disappointment: it was "as woodsy as central station" (Robertson) and "phoney", "ridiculous" and "monstrous" (Tickell). The extravagance of the set and costumes reflects a more general reluctance to forego the luxuries of a conventional theatre. Seating was provided for those who did not prefer blankets and cushions, and the male ushers wore dinner suits. The event drew a curiously mixed audience:

Some of the playgoers dressed for a picnic and others for a night out on the town. Track suit tops, sandals and a few sleeping bags were seen alongside silver shawls and red chiffon dresses. Some brought coffee flasks, while others opted for the theatrical scorched almonds and orange juice from the canteen. (Thomas)

Audiences were not sure what to expect from open-air Shakespeare, and like many early open-air experiments this production went to some lengths to reassure patrons that they would not miss out on the comforts or spectacle available in conventional theatre space. The fact that some people opted to bring their sleeping bags, however, signals that this event was moving towards the atmosphere of the family-oriented picnic productions that would become so popular around the country a decade later.

As You Like It, produced for Warana two years later, still provided a choice between Grandstand or \$3 grass seating in order to cater to a wide audience, but seems to have touched the ground more lightly despite its \$100,000 budget. The production's guest director, John Tasker, used rich costumes, floodlit weeping figs, piglets, goats, dogs and galloping horses to encourage his audience to read Albert Park as the Forest of Arden. The attempt impressed the critics; one review described it as a "visually stunning masterpiece" (Cotes) and it was noted that its "three-dimensional style" lent a "wonderful immediacy to the atmosphere"

(Sinclair). A photo from the production shows Carol Burns as Rosalind hanging from the limbs of one of the garden's huge fig trees (*The Tempest*), indicating that in this production the actors really inhabited the gardens surrounding them. QTC's large cast—including Carol Burns, Robert Van Mackelenberg, Ron Graham, Duncan Wass and Peter Kingston—and Alan Lawrence's original music were highly praised, but the key to the production's success seems to have been its recruitment of the park itself. Colin Robertson wrote:

Designer James Ridewood has given Tasker a big start with a set which owes ninety percent to nature. A few platforms of brown boards on the grass and some great lighting by Tony Everingham which allows actors to melt in and out of the darkness and lambs and goats to gambol on the grass and scene steal unashamedly. And the beautiful trees swoop over the scene, dipping their green branches among the actors so naturally you could almost imagine Will himself in the shadows [...]. ("The great bard would like it")

As You Like It was seen as a strategic rehearsal for QTC's next Warana production of *The Tempest*, staged to coincide with the 1982 Brisbane Commonwealth Games. *The Tempest* was a high profile event promoted as a "fantasia of sound and laser light" (McLean). With a \$250,000 budget (Back), director Alan Edwards was able to recruit an Australian actor of international renown, Keith Michell, for Prospero, as well as the Queensland Ballet Company and the Lyric Opera. The production opened on October 5 for an audience that included the Duke of Edinburgh and several Commonwealth Games dignitaries, and despite being plagued by rain was regarded as a highlight of the festival, drawing, according to Edwards, an audience of 19,000 people. There was no explicit attempt to Australianize this *Tempest* (as did Simon Phillips in 1999 with his celebrated indoor QTC production featuring dancers from the Jagera Jarjum Aboriginal Dance Group), but one reviewer saw it as "one of the most cogent statements on the land-rights issue this week" (Masters, "Consistent Inconsistency"). Although the production received mostly enthusiastic reviews for its spectacular effects—it was described as a "visually big show", with "lighting designs that seem to rival those of 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind'" (Rowbotham, "A 'Tempest' of majesty")—it marked a shift away from the previous year's encounter with the gardens. The Brisbane City Council had built a new concrete amphitheatre for the Commonwealth Games with a shell-like awning to cover the stage. Richard Fotheringham points out that this was done without consulting the QTC and dispelled much of the magic of the venue (229). There could be no further fig-tree swinging.

Certainly the concrete shell seems to have detracted from the following year's Warana production of *Much Ado About Nothing*. The performances of Carol Burns and Bille Brown as Beatrice and Benedick were widely praised, but not so the staging. Alan Edwards chose to set the play in Fascist Italy with Italian accents, 1930s music and costumes. One review found the context "gratuitously

offensive” (Masters, “Little ado about taste”) and another complained of “slick gimmicks” including the use of a motorcycle and sidecar, an armoured car and a donkey and cart (“Now really, this much ado just won’t do”). The production’s comic exuberance impressed some reviewers and may have suited the al fresco context, yet at the same time the Italian piazza setting suggests that this *Much Ado* was working against rather than with the park in which it was performed.

By 1984 the amphitheatre was not the QTC’s first choice for its annual Warana Shakespeare. They had planned to premiere *Henry V* in the new Queensland Performing Arts Centre, but the theatre was not finished so they had to return to their open-air venue once again. The history plays tend to be less malleable than the comedies as far as temporal and spatial settings are concerned, but Edwards took his cue from the play’s chorus and Trevor Nunn’s 1975 RSC production to bridge the gap between contemporary Australia and fifteenth century England by highlighting the text’s self-reflexivity. On a simple, steeply raked octagonal stage the players began their performance in rehearsal mode, in jeans, sneakers and spectacles, then gradually replaced jeans with costumes to lead the audience into the world of the play. Edwards himself played the chorus, remaining in modern dress throughout. The company was moving towards a more localised approach to Shakespeare, through its recognition of the theatrical possibilities of audience self-consciousness. Its last Warana-linked open-air Shakespeare was *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in 1987. This production, directed by Geoffrey Rush with Bille Brown as Falstaff, made direct reference to Brisbane by exploiting the fact that Windsor is a Brisbane suburb. It used a second world-war setting, and Fenton, presented as a visiting American Soldier, rode off with Anne on an army motor-bike. Falstaff exited on an old Brisbane tram (Fotheringham 230).

In 1982 Alan Edwards announced his intention to stage an outdoor season of Shakespeare every year, noting that “seven thousand more people saw ‘The Tempest’ than would see any other season at the SGIO Theatre” (Cullinan). Edwards retired as director of the Queensland Theatre Company in 1988 and at that point their open-air Shakespeares ceased. Interestingly, however, it was during the last years of the 1980s that the phenomenon really started in Sydney and Melbourne and it was from these major centres that the industry would take inspiration in subsequent decades.

In Sydney the picnic Shakespeare tradition began rather modestly with a series of productions from a group which came to be known as Spectacle Theatre Company. Their first production in 1985 was *The Taming of the Shrew*, staged at the Sydney Cricket Club’s oval in Rushcutters Bay. The play was directed by Amanda Morris and featured many recent NIDA graduates, including as Kate, Merridy Eastman, who would later become a leading comic player in Glenn Elston’s shows. Spectacle went on to produce a spaghetti-western inspired *Much Ado About Nothing* in 1986 and a science fiction *Comedy of Errors* in 1988. *The Comedy of Errors* opened at Tumbalong Park, Darling Harbour, transferred to Shelly Beach, Manly, toured to parks in Newcastle, Mudgee and Orange, and even appeared for one night on the River Stage in Brisbane as part of Expo ’88. As a not-for-profit operation (many of its performances were free) Spectacle was

heavily reliant on sponsorship, and difficulties finding funding brought about the company's demise.

Another Sydney company which was formed around the same time however, did establish itself as a long-term prospect. "Shakespeare by the Sea" has been producing plays at the Balmoral Beach Esplanade since 1987. The company was formed by David MacSwan, who has explained that he came back from London "broke" and unable to find a job, so he set about finding an affordable site to direct his own productions. Walking along Balmoral Beach one day he was suddenly struck by its potential as a venue for Shakespeare. Initially he had no plans to do more than one season and his first productions—*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night*—were funded on \$300 borrowed from a landscape gardening company (Lobley). Since 1987 the company has gone on to produce a wide range of histories, tragedies and comedies, and has even ventured to put on John Fletcher's *The Tamer Tamed* as a companion piece to *The Taming of the Shrew*.

The immediate popularity of MacSwan's open-air venture had a lot to do with the beauty and relaxed atmosphere of the location, but also the upbeat and resourceful approach of the director and his cast. Because of difficulties cordoning off the playing space the company has never sold tickets, relying instead on donations collected by the cast and crew at the end of each show. The area is a popular daytime spot for picnics and swimming, so for some audience members the show is a continuation of their day at the beach. The only real drawback of the site is its vulnerability to sea breezes which can blow fiercely enough on occasion to send half the audience (and half the evening's takings) home by interval. Plays are performed with basic lighting, minimal props and sound effects, no microphones and in modern dress. While the actors do reference the contemporary location and popular culture from time to time, the company's production style is generally pared down and free of gimmicks, relying on solid delivery and good voice projection to tell the story. Creative textual editing and doubling of parts are necessary to suit the relatively small cast. The Band Rotunda on the esplanade serves as the company's regular stage, although their first production of the *Dream* used the sea wall above the beach for its opening scenes, then moved the audience across a little bridge to the lightly wooded space of Balmoral Island (Barnsley). Audiences saw fairies climbing out of trees and Oberon seemingly jumping off a cliff.

Many stories have emerged over the years of the ways in which the actors from Shakespeare by the Sea have had to improvise in response to their environment. Stray dogs frequently wander on stage, and when lighting has failed due to adverse weather or errant children the performers have been known to borrow emergency lighting from members of the audience. David MacSwan tells one particularly evocative story about a clash between Shakespeare's world and local space during a performance of *Macbeth*:

One year we were doing the Scottish play (*Macbeth*) and Lady Mac was there, doing a speech which was very satanic and evil:

“Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here; and fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full of direst cruelty”. And these kookaburras in the trees next to the stage started to laugh right in the middle of it, which sent the audience off into hysterics. The woman playing Lady Mac then shot the kookaburras a look of pure evil and hate—and they stopped bang on cue. She got an astonished standing ovation from the audience. (Adamson)

Kookaburras are not the only hecklers the company has had to deal with over the years, but it is the very informality and inclusiveness enforced by the Balmoral Beach setting that has made the project commercially viable. Unlike many indoor venues Shakespeare by the Sea attracts a heterogeneous audience, described by MacSwan as “a popular audience—not the theatre-goers, but lawyers and punks and grannies and kids and surfers” (Freeman). By 1996 the Balmoral Shakespeares were drawing crowds of up to 1000, despite five years of competition from Glenn Elston’s popular Shakespeares in the Botanic Gardens (Adamson).

Elston’s open-air Shakespeares started in Melbourne around the same time as MacSwan’s, and the story of their genesis is remarkably similar. Like MacSwan, Elston began producing outdoor theatre in Australia after spending some time living and working in London. He has frequently explained that it all began when he read *The Wind in the Willows* during a cold London winter and was caught by the idea of adapting it for outdoor performance in Australia. Elston returned to Australia in 1986 to become general manager of the Athenaeum Theatre in partnership with Tim Woods and Greg Hocking. Elston, Hocking and Woods secured the FEIPP (Fantastic Entertainment in Public Places) contract with the Melbourne City Council and went ahead with a production of *The Wind in the Willows* in Melbourne’s Royal Botanical Gardens in 1987. After success in Melbourne and further productions at the Adelaide and Castlemaine festivals the following year, Elston turned to Shakespeare in the summer of 1988/89 with his first Melbourne production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. An estimated 60,000 people saw this first Elston *Dream* (Bellamy) and it created such a buzz that the event quickly became a Melbourne institution.

The 1988 *Dream* began at dusk and established the mood of the evening through the introduction of a front-of-house fairy who distributed “fairy-repellent” in the form of Aerogard sachets as a solution to the problem of mosquitoes at the lake-side setting. The play proper began with Theseus and Hippolyta emerging from the lake in bathers and “rolling about wildly on the grass” (Radic). Elston’s aim was to make the play “readily accessible to the general public” (O’Donnell) so the production adopted a broad humoured, knockabout approach, with a heavily pruned text and striking lighting effects and pyrotechnics. It was a very energetic and physically demanding production for the actors; Puck hung from trees and did somersaults on the grass while the lovers raced in and out of the palm plantation. The casting of Alan Clarke, an ex-Circus Oz performer, as Puck was crucial to the

physicality of the production. One review describes him as “the world’s sexiest grown-up little boy” whose acrobatic flair “conceals a capacity for subtle grace” (Walsh). The cast of eight shared eighteen roles and included Phil Sumner as Theseus, Quince and Oberon, Doris Younane as Titania, Roger Selleck as Bottom and Simon Hughes as Flute.

One of the main difficulties posed by the outdoor venue was its lack of good acoustics. With no walls to reflect sound, the actors had to be very conscious of their voice projection and inevitably relied upon relatively broad acting styles. As explained in one review:

The acting is not high on subtlety. What magic the production has is a function of the natural setting rather than the performances.
(Radic)

The natural setting, however, largely dictated the style of performance, so acting and locale enjoyed a symbiotic relationship. The comic gusto with which the actors engaged with the gardens was integral to the show’s success. Audiences were drawn into both the story and its setting through the agency of the performers’ bodies. When moving from Athens to the woods and back again spectators had to pick up their bits and pieces and walk to different sites. They were guided by fairies in a comic gesture towards synergies between place and play. Of course the business of moving also reminded the Antipodean audience of its temporal and physical distance from Shakespeare’s world, but this theatrical self-consciousness was part of the fun. The perambulatory tradition persisted through many subsequent Elston productions and contributed to the egalitarian character of the gardens’ experience: even those who secured prime spots by arriving early could not hold onto them for the entire show.

The physicality of this first “Shakespeare Under the Stars” production became a hall-mark of the company’s work and inevitably took its toll on actors’ bodies. Jean Kittson was cast as a gangly Helena for the first *Midsummer Night’s Dream* but did not make it into the January season. A decade later Simon Hughes looked back fondly on the risks of outdoor performance:

The first time that any of us suspected that this outdoor theatre caper might not be such a walk in the park (!) occurred early on. It happened in the first season of *Wind in the Willows* when Mole discovered that she was allergic to bee stings The inaugural night production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* fared little better. In a demonstration of athletic thespianism, Jean Kittson threw herself in to the air and landed on a tree stump. In unguarded moments some of us can still hear the unmistakable crack of La Kittson’s collarbone breaking. Another resounding report was Nicholas Bell shattering an elbow as, in the guise of an ass, he fled a frankly randy Titania. It didn’t end there.

Pucks have fallen awkwardly; Helena's collapsed in the heat and one unfortunate Hermia bitten by a dog. It might all have been wicked Puck's work if such mishaps hadn't also occurred in *Twelfth Night* and *Romeo and Juliet*. ("In the Garden")

Besides insects and injuries, the obvious drawback of the open-air experiment was the unpredictability of the weather. The company adopted a system whereby tickets for shows cancelled by rain could be re-used on an alternative night, but the show often went on in spite of bad weather. Elston made every effort to turn this unpredictability into a positive feature, stressing in promotional materials that confronting the elements created an unusual bond between actors and audience. In 1989 he was quoted as saying:

Rain changes the whole dynamics of the performance. We have to entertain the audience ad-lib under the trees. It's like we're all in this together. (O'Donnell)

Similar sentiments inform a 1993 interview in Adelaide:

We live in such a controlled environment these days that it's nice not to be controlled, to be outside and feel the wind say. Audiences feel a lot freer outside. (Mullighan)

The discomforts of the uncontrolled environment—heatwaves, insects, wind, and rain – are ameliorated to some extent by the fact that audiences can drink, eat, and move around relatively freely before and during performances. In recent years Melbourne productions have all been staged on the Southern Cross lawn near the Botanical Gardens Observatory. Audiences no longer have to pack up their belongings to move sites during a performance, so many arrive early, setting up beach chairs, rugs and elaborate picnics. Unlike theatre-goers at conventional venues who sip glasses of wine only during interval, Elston's audiences bring or buy bottles to consume throughout the show. Actors moving around the audience before the play begins regularly find groups celebrating birthdays or engagements, and cast members have become quite skilled at spotting people who can be drawn into the show at opportune moments. At *Twelfth Night* in 2006 Sir Toby drew three audience members on stage to join in with his drunken foolery in 2.3 and cleverly thrust them between himself and Malvolio when Malvolio stormed in to castigate the revellers. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2007 Puck challenged an audience member to emulate his tumbles, and, in the performance I saw, pretended to be quite put out when the chosen man successfully performed the feat and received greater applause than he did.

Over the years many actors from popular Australian soap-operas and stand-up comedy shows have been drawn into Elston's productions to help attract a younger audience. The first cast of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Sydney in 1993, for example, included Guy Pearce, Tracy Mann and Nicolas Eadie,

while a Melbourne revival of the *Dream* in 2000 included *SeaChange* stars Kate Atkinson and Kevin Harrington alongside stand-up comedians, Greg Fleet, Wil Anderson and Corinne Grant. Audiences at Elston productions tend to be much less inhibited than those who attend Shakespeare productions in conventional theatres; they can be more easily distracted, but with the right amount of energy and comedic inventiveness from the cast they tend to be less critical and more readily involved. Inevitably scatological jokes and references to local pop culture have become an integral part of the Elston show, with phrases like “Puck off”, “Not happy Jan” (from an Australian TV advertisement), and “C’mon” (Lleyton Hewitt style) guaranteeing easy laughs. Australian Shakespeare Company actors now wear microphones, allowing them to circumvent many of the acoustic difficulties of performing outdoors, and impressive lighting and sound effects help make the plays entertaining and accessible. Some of the excitement of the early Melbourne productions has been lost in recent years, however, because of the necessity for productions to be staged in the less costly Observatory Gate site. Actors no longer swing from trees, and although fruit bats still dot the night sky, the interaction with nature is much less dramatic than it used to be.

Unlike Shakespeare By the Sea and many other less ambitious open-air theatre groups, Elston’s company (now known as the “Australian Shakespeare Company”) has toured widely within Australia and has developed into a high-profile commercial enterprise. The company ventured outside Melbourne initially with *The Wind in the Willows* which they took to the Adelaide Festival of Arts in 1988. A series of Adelaide festival Shakespeares soon followed, with tickets for the first *Midsummer Night’s Dream* in Adelaide sold out before the festival began in 1990. The company premiered its *Twelfth Night* there in 1992 and in later years also took *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and its rock and roll version of *Much Ado About Nothing*. By 1993 the company was successful enough to take the *Dream* to Botanic Gardens in both Adelaide and Sydney while running *Twelfth Night* in Melbourne. The *Dream* made it to Brisbane in 1994 and to King’s Park in Perth in 1997. According to the *Age*, by the end of 1995 more than 600,000 people had seen Elston’s outdoor productions, and it was even claimed in the *Financial Review* that “director Glenn Elston is to Australian Theatre as Kerry Packer was to Australian cricket” (Preston). Financially Elston, Hocking and Woods have sailed close to the wind on occasions—the Melbourne cast of *Romeo and Juliet* in the summer of 1995/96 had to defer their wages after bad weather and poor sales forced the last-minute cancellation of the Sondheim musical “Into the Woods”—nevertheless the shows continue to attract audiences after two decades of performances, despite competition from many new open-air groups. In recent years, with the help of some government funding, the Australian Shakespeare Company has managed to take shows to places as far flung as Jabiru, Kununurra, Tennant Creek, Mt Isa, Weipa and Thursday Island.

Elston’s success has inspired many others to follow suit. In Tasmania, State Theatre Company, Zootango, ran a series of innovative productions in the Hobart Botanical Gardens between 1992 and 1996. They were succeeded by Directions Theatre Company whose annual summer productions remain a popular

local event. In Western Australia, Deckchair Theatre Company, and more recently Shakespeare WA, followed on from Glenn Elston's touring productions with annual Shakespeares in King's Park, Perth. Adelaide has seen several successful productions associated with the Adelaide Festival fringe from home grown companies like Lightning Strike with its garden productions at Carrick Hill, and Rough Magic whose productions have included *The Tempest* at Adelaide Zoo. Brisbane-based company, Grin and Tonic, has been producing theatre in unusual venues for many years, and in 2004 returned Shakespeare to the Roma Street Amphitheatre used by Alan Edwards in the 1970s, opening with *Twelfth Night* and continuing with seasons of *Macbeth* and *As You Like It* in 2005. In 2007 the Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble moved into the Roma Street Parkland with a production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, followed by productions of *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* in 2008 and 2009. Many regional theatre groups also produce annual open-air Shakespeares, including Townsville's Tropic Sun Theatre Company which has a tradition of staging productions of Shakespearean tragedies, histories and comedies in Queens Gardens, and Shakespeare in Queens Park, Toowoomba, associated with the University of Southern Queensland. Australia's current love-affair with wine has been cleverly exploited by Essential Theatre, a group founded in 1997, which takes its "Shakespeare in the Vines" to vineyards in regional Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia.

That open-air Shakespeares can generate extraordinary devotion from performers and spectators alike is demonstrated by the ongoing popularity of productions mounted by the Victorian company, Ozact. Founded in 1996 by Ballarat University performing arts lecturer, Bruce Widdop, and drawing its cast mainly from Ballarat performing arts students and graduates, the company specialises in staging the plays in unusual outdoor settings. Ozact has mounted productions in national parks, caves, tourist theme-parks and vineyards and its list of past productions includes *The Tempest* at Loch Ard Gorge, *Pericles* at Port Fairy's Battery Point and at Warrnambool's Flagstaff Hill, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Naracoorte World Heritage Caves, and *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear* at Heatherlie Quarrie in the Grampians National Park. These shows attract local residents and passing tourists, but are also attended by open-air Shakespeare enthusiasts who are prepared to drive for several hours on country roads to see a performance. The plays are heavily abridged so that travellers can feasibly drive home afterwards if necessary and the location is always an integral part of the experience. Audiences tour the site, take photos, and attend to the story at the same time. Most productions incorporate several moves so that audience members are required to gather their belongings and actively follow the shifting scenes of the play. Rhyming interpolations provide transitions between the location shifts and explicate the plot for audience members new to the plays.

The opening motto on Ozact's website promotes it as "Australia's leading environmental Shakespeare company" (*Ozact*) and the descriptor "environmental" neatly invokes both its connection with the natural environment and its deployment of environmental theatre techniques. Bruce Widdop has noted that his audiences are impressed by the "startling synergies between place and play" that emerge

from his productions (Hodges), and his focus has always been on finding spaces for performance that might usefully mirror the Shakespearean worlds performed within them. Ozact performances attract an audience of diverse ages and backgrounds, many of whom have had little previous exposure to Shakespeare, so priority has had to be given to lucid storytelling rather than radical re-readings of the plays. Its productions tend to avoid modern dress and contemporary references, and to downplay the temporal and spatial distance between the present moment and the Shakespearean text. Despite the company's conservative approach to Shakespeare's plays, however, Ozact does offer a meaningful and unusual theatrical experience by providing simultaneous encounters with Shakespeare and with some extraordinary outdoor locales.

Open-air productions in Australia vary widely, from amateur to highly professional, from low-budget to spectacular, and from middle-brow to avant-garde. Numerous productions are staged by specialist open-air companies like Shakespeare by the Sea and Ozact, but many other companies also include open-air Shakespeares within their programming on an occasional basis. There is an ongoing expectation that nationally funded companies in Australia will give priority to Australian work, but some have found that open-air Shakespeares can provide a timely boost to their budgets. In Hobart in the 1990s, State Theatre Company, Zootango, found that Shakespeare in the Botanical Gardens could offset the production of new experimental works in indoor spaces, and in Darwin the Darwin Theatre Company continues to include open-air Shakespeare within its programming. Its 2006 production of *Othello* in the Amphitheatre at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, used Aboriginal actor, Tom E. Lewis, in the title role, thus maintaining in spirit the company's "strong commitment to nurturing theatre that expresses unique local stories" ("Profile").

Open-air Shakespeares are now a firmly established feature within Australia's theatrical landscape. They are no longer a novelty and may not generate as much excitement as they did in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but they are something that many people look forward to as a part of their Australian summer in the Southern states or dry season in the far North. Their popularity reflects an increasing willingness in post-colonial Australia to embrace the country's climate and topography, and to negotiate creatively the distance between Shakespearean worlds and Antipodean space. On (mostly) balmy evenings and with interpolations from fruit bats and kookaburras, Australian open-air Shakespeares do become local stories, transformed from their European origins into something rich and strange.

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