

St. Stephen's News

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Edited by Anne Hawkins

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FROM THE RECTOR

The Bard gets the measure of our latter-day puritans

SHAKESPEARE fans might be forgiven for thinking Staunton, Virginia, to be an unlikely location for one of America's best Shakespearean repertory companies. But pay a visit to Staunton's Blackfriars Playhouse and judge for yourselves.

Actually, Staunton's not such an odd location for a world class Shakespearean theater. The town is home to Mary Baldwin College and is surrounded by a plethora of other universities and colleges from which to draw audiences.

Most Shakespeare fans are familiar with the Globe, the open-air theater in Southwark, on the south bank of the Thames, in which he was a shareholder. Reputedly the Globe burned down during a performance of Henry V when an overenthusiastic special effects crew touched off a cannon charged with a tad too much gunpowder and set the thatched roof ablaze.

The Staunton playhouse – home to the American Shakespeare Center – is, however, the world's only recreation of the Blackfriars, Shakespeare's indoor theater.

Plays presented at the Blackfriars are staged according to the original practices used in Shakespeare's day. Unlike most theaters, for example, the lights never go out at Blackfriars. The audience can see the actors and each other, and the actors can see the audience.

The audience sits on all four sides of the stage. Most seats are in front of the stage and on a second floor balcony. But, just as in the Bard's day, there is also seating on either side of the stage. For folks keen on emulating the Elizabethan nobility, there are stools on the apron itself and on the balcony above the stage, overlooking the apron.

These seating arrangements mean the actors perform their roles so that they can be seen from every angle. It is a challenge, but, as in the 16th and 17th centuries, it allows the cast to interact with the audience.

Moreover, because Shakespeare's plays contain a large number of parts, casting practices include "doubling" – meaning that many of the actors play a number of roles.

Charlotte and I discovered the Blackfriars some years ago after it was written up in *The Wall Street Journal*. Since then we have made regular pilgrimages to Blackfriars to take in their latest productions. The company maintains a schedule of six performances a week, which enables you, if you get your timing right, to see two different plays on two consecutive nights.

If you consider two nights of Shakespeare overdoing it, the repertoire includes works by the Bard's contemporaries such as Ben Jonson, as well plays related to the period – for instance *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

We made our most recent pilgrimage to Staunton a couple of weeks ago. At the time, the company was presenting *As You Like It* and *Measure for Measure* – a work that is not performed as often as Shakespeare's other plays,

A program note offered an explanatory comment by the noted British director Peter Brook. "As long as scholars could not decide whether the play was a comedy or not, it never got played," he wrote, "In fact, this ambiguity makes it one of the most revealing of Shakespeare's works."

With all due respect to Mr. Brook, *Measure for Measure* might well be revealing, but it is not at all ambiguous. It is one of Shakespeare's most openly political works – a biting

satire that mercilessly lampoons the hypocrisy of puritans, puritanism and the politically correct.

Trouble is that latter day puritans don't seem to be able to see themselves in it – probably because the plot appears to condone premarital sex; a politically correct activity that most modern puritans heartily approve of.

In the play, a strictly moralistic judge (clearly a puritan) revives an archaic law, long fallen into disuse, to sentence a young nobleman to death for fornication. The young man and his pregnant betrothed have not gone through all the formalities of matrimony because they lack the money to do so – a common enough problem in the 16th & 17th centuries.

A contemporary audience would have seen the sentence as a blatant miscarriage of justice. The offense was technical at best. Even the Church would have regarded the betrothed

couple as wed. And everyone in the theater would have cheered on the young people's friends in their efforts to get the sentence revoked and to expose the judge for a double-dyed hypocrite.

The play was written sometime in 1604 when puritanism was a fast rising political force. A new king, James I of England and VI of Scotland, was on the throne and there were fears he would favor the puritan agenda because dour Scottish Calvinists had raised him.

Critics believe *Measure For Measure* was first performed at the Globe Theatre in the summer of 1604. And official records show it was performed before

King James and his court in the Banqueting Hall of the Palace of Whitehall on the day after Christmas.

If it was a warning to the new king to steer clear of the puritans, it was hardly needed. By and large, James handled them adroitly. Not so, his son, Charles I. In 1642, the puritan-dominated Parliament launched the Great Parliamentary Rebellion, a civil war that ended in Charles' execution on January 30th, 1649.

The 12 years of puritan rule that followed amply justified Shakespeare's fears. The puritans didn't ban sex, of course, but they banned fun. People were barred from their parish churches and forbidden to celebrate Christmas and Easter, Constables were sent through the streets ringing bells, and shouting: "No Christmas! No Christmas!"

Playhouses were shut down on moral grounds. Pastimes like bull and bear baiting were also forbidden – not because they were cruel, but simply because people enjoyed them.

For best part of four centuries *Measure For Measure* has discomforted the 17th century puritans' successors. The Victorians banned the play outright as being much too suggestive, and in the early years of the 20th century even the *avant-garde* felt compelled to expurgate it.

It is, perhaps, curious that today's puritans cannot see themselves in the play. But then, like their counterparts in the 17th century, they have nothing against sex though they often share their distaste for organized religion.

True, they don't ring bells and shout: "No Christmas." But you'll find them in our courthouses trying to ban a gamut of things from SUVs, soda pop and Big Macs to prayer in schools and Christmas crèches. **GPH**

FROM THE EDITOR

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AT LONG last we have a new publishing program which gives us the capability of delivering St. Stephen's News by e-mail. If you would rather receive the newsletter by e-mail, please

The Second Lesson: St. Luke 16:1-31

Saturday: 5.00 PM Family Eucharist.

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