

SHAKESPEARE IN AMERICA

When the English colonists sailed for the New World, they brought only their most precious and essential possessions with them, including the works of William Shakespeare. The earliest known staging of his plays in the colonies was in 1750. By the time of the American Revolution, more than a dozen of his plays had been performed hundreds of times in thriving New England port cities and nascent towns and villages hewn from the wilderness. The young nation, brought together under a unique Constitution and collective will, found common ground in a love of Shakespeare.

In his famous travelogue *Democracy in America*, the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville remarked on the popularity of Shakespeare across the new nation in the 1830s: "There is hardly a pioneer's hut that does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare. I remember that I read the feudal drama of *Henry V* for the first time in a log cabin." One such log cabin belonged to the family of Abraham Lincoln, a frontiersman whose formative reading consisted mainly of the King James Bible, Blackstone's lectures on English law, and Shakespeare. Like so many American presidents, Lincoln had a lifelong fondness for the Bard. "There is, assuredly, no other country on earth in which Shakespeare and the Bible are held in such general high esteem," wrote the German journalist



Edwin Booth, an American actor in the mid-1800s, wore this costume in *Richard III*.

Karl Knortz in the 1880s.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Shakespeare was the most popular playwright in America. His plays were produced in large and opulent theaters and on makeshift stages in saloons, churches, and hotels. From big cities on the East Coast to mining camps in the West, his plays were performed prominently and frequently. In fact, Shakespearean actors from England came to America because the job prospects with touring troupes were plentiful and exciting. Shakespeare was so

integrated into American culture by the nineteenth century that Mark Twain had his young hero Huckleberry Finn travel along the Mississippi River by raft with a pair of rogues who tried to pass themselves off as Shakespearean actors to earn money in riverbank towns.

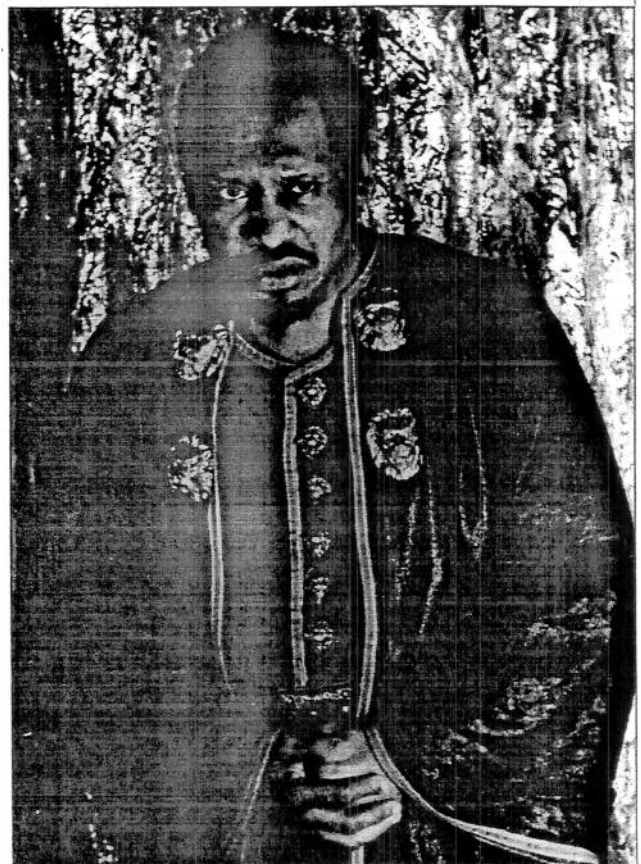
Shakespeare productions attracted a broad audience across socioeconomic and ethnic lines. Audiences articulated their knowledge of and reactions to the plays by hissing, whistling, stamping, clapping, and reciting passages along with the actors. The plays were often accompanied by music, acrobatics, dance, magic shows, minstrel shows, and stand-up comedy during breaks between acts. Shakespeare's most famous lines and scenes — "To be or not to be" — were parodied through short skits, brief references, and satirical songs inserted into other modes of entertainment, demonstrating how well performers and audiences alike knew his work.

Shakespearean allusions and quotations were a regular feature of nineteenth-century newspapers. In schools, his plays were taught as rhetoric. Students would memorize passages of his plays and recite them aloud. While audiences admired the playwright's gift for language, they found his themes to be representative of their own trials and tribulations. His characters coped with love, hate, jealousy, ambition, and mortality just as his audience members did in their own lives.

Shakespeare's plays were performed by well-known film actors in the twentieth century. Here, Paul Robeson as Othello.

Only in the twentieth century did the nature of Shakespeare's relationship to the American public change. He was still the most widely known, respected, and quoted dramatist, but his work gradually came to be seen as part of high culture rather than popular culture. His plays became more a form of education than entertainment, more the possession of an elite crowd than the property of all Americans. The accessible dramatist whom audiences once identified with and even parodied now became the sacred dramatist to whom everyday people could hardly relate.

There are many reasons for this change of reputation, among them an increasing separation of audiences, actors, and acting styles. Specialized theaters evolved that catered to distinct interests such as avant-garde theater, theater of the absurd, musical theater, and others. Radio, film, and television executives chose to



feature fewer Shakespeare plays because they were perceived as unprofitable. Simultaneously the oratorical mode of entertainment and education that was prevalent throughout the nineteenth century and which helped make Shakespeare popular did not survive. And the American language moved rapidly away from the rich Elizabethan style of Shakespeare, making his words alien to a people who once so effortlessly understood their power.

Still, for more than four centuries, Shakespeare has played a defining role in American culture. Today he remains America's most widely produced playwright—performed in theaters, on film, in schools, at festivals, and read in millions of homes across the country. The nature of Shakespeare's relationship to the American people will continue to change and develop, but the relationship itself will undoubtedly remain strong well into the future.

Borrowing from the Bard

These books, films, and musical scores are among hundreds that use phrases from Shakespeare for their titles — even though their content does not overtly draw upon Shakespeare's work.

Pomp and Circumstance (1901) — This famous musical score by Sir Edward Elgar is often played at graduations. The title comes from a line by Othello.

The Sound and the Fury (1929) — William Faulkner's tragic novel about a post-Civil War family helped to establish him as one of America's greatest writers. The title is taken from Macbeth's speech following his wife's death.

Brave New World (1932) — This futuristic novel by Aldous Huxley tells about a Utopian community gone wrong. The title comes from Miranda in *The Tempest*.

North by Northwest (1959) — In this classic film directed by Alfred Hitchcock and starring Cary Grant, an advertising executive is mistaken for a spy and pursued across the country. This title is also a famous phrase of Hamlet's.

Winter of Our Discontent (1961) — This haunting novel about an overstressed American family contributed significantly to John Steinbeck winning the Nobel Prize in literature. The title comes from the opening speech by Richard, Duke of Gloucester, in *Richard III*.

What Dreams May Come (1998) — Robin Williams searches heaven and hell for his wife in this dramatic film. The title comes from Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy.

Band of Brothers (2001) — In this Emmy Award-winning film directed by Tom Hanks, an Army rifle company parachutes into France on D-Day. The title is taken from the King's famous "St. Crispian's Day" speech in *Henry V*.

