

Becca Davis

Faculty Mentor: Tovah Close

Miller Arts Scholars Arts Award

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Performing Shakespeare:

Attending Shakespeare & Company's Summer Shakespeare Intensive for Actors

I knew even before writing my initial grant proposal in Spring 2023 that attending four weeks of intensive Shakespeare-specific acting training with Shakespeare & Company Summer 2023 would prove more enriching than any other more relaxed, unspecialized program. My exact words in my proposal were: "my hope is that this program will provide a substantial supplement to my theater education at the University of Virginia which does not currently offer classes specifically for classical acting techniques." I also expressed interest in more specialized voice and movement work than what I had previously received. Here I am now, in Winter (almost Spring) 2024, almost laughing at my past self's failure to anticipate what exactly I was getting myself into. I was discussing the benefits this research would have on my career and craft as someone aspiring to work with a Shakespeare-specific theater company, but I had no idea what this program would entail for my mind, body, and spirit in life as much as in art.

I must thank my drama department faculty mentor, Tovah Close who helped guide me to this particular program. She specializes in voice work and I knew she had more experience with Shakespeare than some of the other faculty, so even before meeting her in person I knew she was probably my best option. This foresight was greatly validated after meeting her for everything from her teaching philosophy to her kindness and professionalism made working with her an absolute dream. She mainly helped me in the selection and application process, so I have her to thank for anticipating how well I would respond to this particular program. She also helped me to revise my grant proposal and gave me advise in selecting my portfolio pieces.

Looking back on where I was when applying for the intensive (which was in almost a full semester before I could apply for my grant) I was desperate for some direction in my acting work. I did not feel like I had full control over my voice onstage, and I more often than not felt like a puppeteer of my body rather than an actor immersed in the scene. I would play anger, but not feel a thing, or I would respond to my scene partner without letting them affect me. I was also a nay-sayer when it came to emphasizing the meter of lines and would often do whatever I could to conceal any blank verse when performing Shakespeare.

On the first day of the 2023 Summer Shakespeare Intensive with Shakespeare & Company I was completely caught off guard by their methods. We began by walking around the room and making eye contact with those we passed, and then we were asked to breathe through our slightly-parted lips rather than through the nose. They had us stop in front of the closest person in the room to us and stand across from them, looking into their eyes and breathing them in. We would learn the other person's name and say: "I see you; you are (person's name)." I will not go into detail about every exercise we did, but I wanted to share this initial one to reveal just how little I understood about performing Shakespeare going into this experience. This exercise used no text or character but instead had us deeply and intentionally ground ourselves in our own bodies and our own voices before receiving the body and voice of our peers. This completely contradicted my past approach to acting in which I essentially hid behind character and text and forced me to be observed, with while still being myself.

They would often urge us not to find a "character voice," but to speak in our own voice. The distinction between ourselves and our character would then emerge in the use of the entire breadth of pitch and resonance in our voices, so that instead of "putting on" our character we were our characters' conduits. I had never heard of such an approach to acting that permitted

such a personal approach without resorting to the dangers of “method acting.” We were not becoming our characters, and there was always a ritual of entering and exiting the scene, but in the state of absolute presence that we harnessed in our own selves and our own bodies allowed us to be absolutely present in the situations of our characters when and only when performing our scenes.

What most excites me about the philosophy of Shakespeare & Company is their emphasis on curiosity. They would not speak in terms of “musts” and “shoulds,” but would ask us to follow what inspired curiosity in our work. I was taught in scene work to be interested in affecting my scene partner’s character as well as to be interested in being affected by them. For example, instead of yelling at us not to slouch or cross our arms they would ask us to be curious as to why our bodies felt the need to protect itself. When identifying the urge to be protected rather than just the symptom of that urge, it would become easier to tackle the issue at its root without replacing it with another coping mechanism. In my voice work I would tend towards using my lower resonators, so by being curious about this habit I discovered that the sense of vulnerability within the upper resonators was what drove me away from them rather than the pitch they produced. This discovery allowed me to be more vulnerable on and offstage, opening up a broader range of emotional responses.

I was also interested in how the instructors distinguished between what is “habitual” and what is “natural.” They were always very adamant about the language we chose to use and how it defined our thoughts. Whenever I would claim that I naturally tense my shoulders or I naturally clench my jaw, one of the vocal coaches would urge me to say that I do these actions habitually, for this state of stress and tension is not what our bodies were designed to do naturally (at least outside of the context of being hunted by predators). My aforementioned prejudice against

emphasizing blank verse in Shakespeare was countered by an understanding that rhythm *is* natural and poetry is responsive to the body as much as the body is responsive to poetry. English verse tends to consist of ten-syllable lines, and English speakers tend to breath every ten syllables, so they would challenge us to only breath between each line of verse, no more and no less, in order to see what it revealed about a character's pattern of thought. I found that when one breath contains multiple ideas all expressed in one line, the panic and indecision of the piece emerges, and when one idea is sustained over many breaths, an opposite effect of wisdom and inevitability emerges.

Since completing the program, I have completely changed my approach to Shakespeare and, as corny as its sounds, to life in general. I was given tools to ground myself more in the present and in my body which helps as much with my day-to-day as it does my performance. I feel more connected to my fellow actors onstage just as I feel more connected in conversation offstage. I never would have predicted this program to approximate a spiritual retreat rather than a bootcamp, but I am so grateful that it did since I found my understanding of the material and application of the training to have been sustained more so than if orders were merely barked at me for four weeks. I am so grateful to Miller Arts and its donors for funding this training which has completely altered the trajectory of my artistic life, and I look forward to applying more of what I learned to future projects.

Budget

Item	Cost	Details/Notes
Shakespeare and Company 2023 Acting Intensive		
Application Fee	\$25	
Tuition	\$5,500	4 weeks of classes, lodging, daily travel to campus, and breakfasts
Subtotal	\$5,525	
Secondary Costs		
Food	\$400	Groceries and dining out
Travel	\$125	Gas for drive to Lennox, Massachusetts and back home to Virginia
Hotel	\$60	Hotel for first night before my provided housing began
Subtotal	\$585	
Total	\$6,110	

Item	Funding	Details/Notes
Miller Arts Award	\$3,000	Applied in my 3rd year, Outcome in my 4th year Distributed June 2023
Personal Contribution	\$3,110	
Total	\$6,110	