



## 'Compleat Works' Offers Kaleidoscope of Words and Action

By Susan Mayall

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After a week of sizzling heat it was a perfect summer evening for the gala grand opening of the 2008 Livermore Shakespeare Festival at Concannon Vineyard. Guests gathered under the grape arbor for dinner and good Concannon wine. Players from the company performed snippets from Twelfth Night, strolling minstrels entertained.

As the sun went down people gradually wandered across the lawn. Seats were ranged in front of the old Victorian house that had recently been moved from its site on Tesla Road. Its new white paint, its porches and pillars formed an eye catching backdrop for the low brick platform where the performance took place.

And what a performance! All 37 plays in 97 minutes! "The Compleat Works of Shakespeare (abridged) (revised)" was written by the Reduced Shakespeare Company, and first performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1987. It became London's longest running comedy. The playwrights left room for improvisation, adlibs and local references. This production took full advantage of the opportunity.

That's what makes it so hard to review. It's an incredible kaleidoscope of words and action, all at breakneck speed, full of allusions and memorable phrases - some of them Shakespeare's! The three actors, Nikolai Lokteff, Ted D'Agostino and James Hiser leap, literally and figuratively, from role to role, changing costumes and characters and sometimes actually disappearing from the scene. Aspects of Shakespeare's plays (the parts not emphasized when I was in school!) receive full attention here, like bestiality, lust, incest, and androgyny. The players are "racially challenged" by "Othello" and come up with a hilarious "Afro-Italian Rap" version. "Titus Androgynous" serves a pie made of blood and ground bones to the victims' mother.

Ophelia is analyzed, and the whole audience helps put the "layers" of her psyche together again. The three kings pass their crowns in a frantic football game, and the fastest "Hamlet" ever (43 seconds) ends the show.

A revealing moment comes when Ted, the semi literate, New Age student type, described by the other two as "systematically sodomized by soap operas," recites a famous speech. Jeering at first, suddenly he starts to listen to what he's reading, remarks "This is cool!" and ends reading as if he meant it. This can happen with Shakespeare - one reason why we quote him unconsciously almost every day.

How to do justice to all this? It's a super spoof, literate and visually entertaining. The actors' timing, whether impromptu or scripted, was perfect. I'm not sure how you'd take it if you knew no Shakespeare at all, but perhaps you'd react the way Shakespeare's own audience may have reacted to Pyramus and Thisbe and the Wall in "Midsummer Night's Dream." They probably rolled on the floor of the Globe, even if most of them knew no classics.

So even if you think you hate Shakespeare, try out this show. It forced me to look up "Titus Andronicus." And don't worry about the children - they'll go for the slapstick and won't notice the innuendos. It's a great family outing for a summer evening, with a beautiful setting and a talented company.

"The Compleat Works of Wllm Shkspr (abridged) runs July 24, 26 and Aug. 1 at Concannon Vineyard, 4590 Tesla Road, Livermore. All performances begin at 7:30 pm. Picnic grounds open at 6 pm. Tickets can be purchased at (800) 838-3006 for \$30/25. For more information or to buy online, go to [www.livermoreshakes.org](http://www.livermoreshakes.org).