

# THE BARD'S NEW GARB

The Shakespeare Festival lures audiences with strange new settings and styles

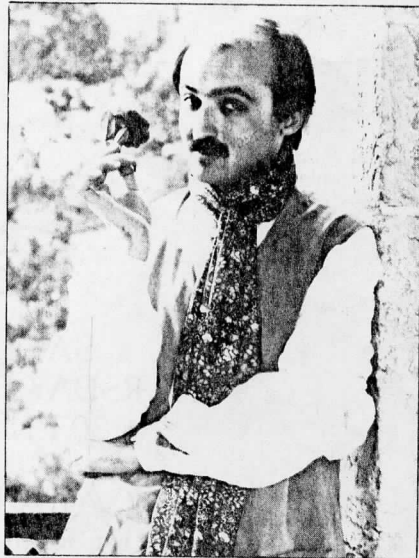
When Joseph Papp started his Shakespeare in the Park in New York City two decades ago it seemed like a wonderful midsummer night's entertainment. Not many people believed that Papp's shot in the park would become a Big Apple Institution with an international reputation.

South Florida, the perennial upstart, needs less time than New York to establish its traditions. Like the Miami Film Festival and the Miami Grand Prix, if something returns for a second season it becomes a cultural custom.

Now in its fourth season, the Shakespeare Festival at Vizcaya have become a custom enjoying remarkable growth. The first year's attendance of 5,000 doubled to 10,000 the second year, then jumped to 24,000 the third. This year it is expected to nearly double again to 44,000.

What makes this fête such a success? It seems surprising that highbrow fare could draw such large South Florida audiences. Certainly the newspapers have been little help. *The Miami Herald* did not seriously review the festival in its early years because it used non-Equity (non-union, hence non-professional) acting talent. *The Fort Lauderdale News*, in a recent review of the Stratford Shakespeare company's visit to Broward, simply ignored the festival in its discussion of Shakespearean performances in South Florida over the last few years. Even former Miami mayor Maurice Ferre was heard to say "Shakespeare Who?" when asked about grant monies for the Festival.

Maybe it's just that local audiences have enjoyed the performances so much that they



Shakespeare actor Michael Mauldin dallies in traditional garb; Claudia Robinson plays "The Santera" in the innovative *Julio Cesar*.



keep coming back and bringing new converts. Could such a thing be true?

"Get the audience while they're young and you ensure a house in 20 years," says Gail Smith, head of the South Florida Theater Company, which stages the festival. The SFTC began with that philosophy—of reaching out to young audiences—by first touring Florida schools in 1979 with *Sweet Nancy from Pike*. The way they reached out with Shakespeare was by adapting his works, starting with abbreviated approaches and finally moving to this year's full redressing in contemporary garb.

After the first year of touring, the company

included in its repertory a show called *Much Ado about Theatre*, with excerpts from Chekov, Shakespeare, Gilbert and Sullivan, and one contemporary author. The Shakespeare portion enjoyed such success that Smith decided to look for a place to produce either a full length play or some sort of evening of the Bard.

With help from Chris Warren of Dade's Parks and Recreation Department, Smith found a home for the idea at Vizcaya. What better backdrop for Shakespeare than an Italian Palace where Lillian Gish used to frolic with her buddy James Deering?

Its first year at Vizcaya the company did



*The cast from Moliere's Doctor In Spite of Himself*

a collage of Shakespeare called *Lovers, Liars and Lunatics*. It was a gamble, producing a potpourri of scenes from different plays, but the idea attracted 5,100 patrons. Now the latest *Shakespeare Quarterly* calls SFTC's creative festival the hottest thing going in the southeast. It is the only such festival in Florida and the only one in the US being played outdoors in the winter. Among its most ballyhooed productions is this year's *Julio Cesar*, the company's remake of *Julius Caesar* with a Fidel Castro protagonist.

"The hook for this season," says Smith,

"is that Fidel Castro is going to be shot at Vizcaya. Cesar is patterned after Castro, Brutus is after Raul since he is probably the only one who could get close enough to kill him, Cassius is a KGB agent, Marc Antony is an American right-wing sympathizer leaning towards the US and we've got a first Hispanic-American Secretary of State."

Why tinker with Shakespeare? "Anybody can do safe theater," says Smith. "We're not interested in doing safe anything. This is a game of risks and we want to reach a wide audience, especially the guy who's never

cracked Shakespeare. The NYSF and the Texas Shakespeare Festival are always sold out.

"Scholars have put Shakespeare on a pedestal and make his work inaccessible to the average guy. We want to present it so it is fun and available to everyone. And we'll risk commissioning new music or an adaptation to do that."

David Black, now with the Miami Beach Development Corporation, spent 18 years with Papp in New York before coming to Miami. He agrees with the popularizing formula: "Those purists who complain about 'fiddling' with Shakespeare either forget or don't know that Shakespeare never invented his own plots. He took well-known stories and adapted them to whatever period he pleased with whatever anachronisms he might want to throw in to please the locals.

"Martin Sheen did *Hamlet* with Papp in the sixties, with a Puerto Rican accent. Gertrude was a floozy and Claudius a bumbling military man. The important thing about an adaptation is to go all the way."

Fanciful adaptations are just one similarity in the origins of the New York Shakespeare Festival and the South Florida Festival. Also, both began as simple touring companies with scant budgets and both are now, albeit work-