

Do the words of a 16th-century playwright still have relevance today? Two Goddard alumnae are exploring the Bard's message in wildly different venues.

# Revealing (and reveling in)

# SHAKESPEARE

BY CHRISTINE TOTH (MFAIA '07)

If Shakespeare, through his plays, explored what it means to be human, then two Goddard alumnae are furthering that inquiry in their work with the Bard. Lisa Wolpe (MFAIA '07) and Sharon Lajoie (MFAIA '05) continue to find not only relevancy but revelation in their separate practices. Wolpe, the artistic director and founder of the Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company, presents work through her all-female, multi-cultural theater company. On the other coast, Lajoie, a former associate professor of theater at New England College, delves into this work with a prison theater program.

Shakespeare, as a humanist, used theater to shape and describe the complex aspects of the human condition. Acting gives the performer the opportunity to view a character from within, and ultimately, for the audience to view a reflection of those intimate facets of our selves. As *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman said, "We connect with art to share something larger and more enduring than ourselves."

The reach of both Lisa's and Sharon's work pushes both the actors and their audiences toward a deeper exploration of what it means to be fully human. Using their own vision, they take the staying power of Shakespeare into very contemporary, if not convention-breaking realms, and thereby continue to illuminate a larger, more enduring experience of Shakespeare's work.



LIZ BUCKLEY (MFAIA '05)

## Shakespeare Goes Behind Bars

Among other endeavors, Sharon Lajoie found herself teaching in the prison system in New Hampshire, an unintended career choice. She was teaching at New England College, and one day a colleague called across the parking lot, "Hey Sharon, do you want to teach in the prison?" To which she offhandedly answered, "Yeah, sure." After getting into her car, she thought suddenly, "What did I just agree to?"

What she agreed to was teaching in the college's baccalaureate program at a prison in Concord, a position she began in 1994. Though the bachelor's program was diminished in 2002 with the loss of grants and other funding, the prison still offers acting through its recreation program.

While some might be intimidated by working in close quarters with convicted criminals, Sharon is unfazed. Her legendary cursing and general no-nonsense demeanor set the tone, and she says she has a good affinity with most of the inmates.

"The first year I taught acting there, we did scenes from various plays, and later David Mamet's [play] *Duck Variations*." Then, years later, she decided to do *Macbeth*, a momentous choice for her.

"This was the first time I directed Shakespeare," she says. "I needed to put myself in a piece that I felt comfortable with, and *Macbeth* was the first play I ever read." In high school, Sharon says that Shakespeare rocked her world. "It's what drew me into theater," she says. "It opened

up new worlds for me.” Then, as an undergraduate in college, she took English classes and eventually became a college professor herself, but she says she was still petrified of Shakespeare. She addressed this fear head on when she started in Goddard’s MFAIA program.

“When I went to Goddard, it was my priority,” she says. “I thought, ‘I can’t be a professor and be afraid of Shakespeare.’”

So her first semester, she really dove in. She studied five Shakespeare plays, looking particularly at the father/daughter relationships in the plays. “I had struggled with my own relationship with my father, and it was mind blowing what I found,” she says. “It was as if I had a friend in Shakespeare.” She explains that studying the plays illuminated parts of her that she forgot existed. “He sometimes sits with me; it’s as if he knows what I’m thinking.”

Though by this point she had developed a rapport with the inmates she worked with, she had to muscle them into doing Shakespeare.

“I really had to push, because they didn’t want to do it,” she says. “Shakespeare opens you up as a human being in ways you never thought possible, if you are willing to go there.”

She explains that these men are disassociated, disconnected. Feelings cause pain, and so they try to avoid them. Sharon believes that in order to come back to society, they need to reconnect with being a human with feelings, and she says Shakespeare helps this process more than any other writer.

“I watched them struggle with this production, and they were all winners in my eyes,” she says. “Some were more able than others to handle those feelings onstage. For many it was a safe place to reconnect with those feelings. Because it can be intense, I tell them not to go anywhere that doesn’t feel safe.”

To support the actors, Sharon says there was a “theater therapist” on site who was on call during the making of *Macbeth*.

An inmate named Eric played Macbeth. “I didn’t know when he took the role – the men cast themselves – that his crimes were very similar to Macbeth’s,” Sharon says.

He didn’t want to take on the role at first. As Eric later wrote, “When we embarked on this journey in August of 2007, I was enthusiastic about the company doing Shakespeare, however I was not willing or rather uncertain of my capabilities as an actor to act at that level. I was extremely intimidated and could not foresee myself getting over that.... As the actors began casting themselves, it became clear nobody was willing to step up and play the lead role of Macbeth. Guess I wasn’t the only one intimidated. I eventually threw caution to the wind and took it on. It would later turn out to be, if not the best choice, one of the best choices I have ever made in prison.”

Eric struggled with the narrative being so close to his life’s story. When Sharon asked the actors for their thoughts, he wrote, “*Macbeth* afforded me an opportunity to open my eyes to greater possibilities in my life, not only as an actor, but also, more importantly, as a man. With the help of some really wonderful people, I was able to explore

and understand the meaning of this process and where I stand in all of this. I looked at dark side of myself, which I knew existed but blocked out. I had to accept some harsh realities in myself but in the long run, it will only help me grow. I had to dig deep inside and deal with some demons that I’ve suppressed for nearly 20 years and face the harsh reality of things that made me make specific choices in my life.”

“It’s so crucial for them to put themselves back together, so when they go back ‘outside’ they can deal with those feelings,” Sharon says. She recently contributed an essay to a forthcoming book, *Performing New Lives: Theatre with the Incarcerated*, edited by Jonathan Shailor. In her piece, “From the Meanest Creature,” she writes, “Theater artists are transgressors; we must be, to create what we do.”

“There are days when I feel like he’s me,” Sharon says, when asked who her Shakespeare is. “He knows my thoughts, my feelings. I would venture to say that especially with *Macbeth*, the men would say the same thing.”

### Transforming the City of Angels

Lisa Wolpe presents the works of Shakespeare with equal passion, but in a wholly different setting. The recipient of numerous awards, including a fellowship at the Globe Theatre in London, Lisa founded Los Angeles Women’s Shakespeare Company (LAWSC) in 1993, and today she acts, directs and produces works for the stage.



**REHEARSING THE GREATS** Sharon Lajoie directs inmates at the state prison for men in Concord, N.H., as they rehearse *Macbeth*. Sharon played Lady Macduff in the performance, and Josh (pictured at left) played her son.

She is deeply engaged in examining, transforming and transcending gender roles, and she is eloquent as she talks about opportunities to move beyond social and cultural barriers through Shakespeare.

“Opening up these classic archetypal stories,” she wrote in her MFAIA portfolio, “has allowed me, along with the LAWSC ensemble, to publicly deconstruct both historical and contemporary gender-biased and racially-biased expectations.”

LAWSC has become a significant forum for Lisa to bring meaningful inquiries of politics, power, gender and spiritual transformation into a public realm. She has directed 28 productions of Shakespeare’s plays and performed leading roles in 20 Shakespearean productions. She has probably played more of the Bard’s male leading roles than any woman in history.

Roundly praised as a powerful and engaging teacher, Lisa has taught across the country and privately in her Los Angeles studio, and she has lectured on Shakespeare, Elizabethan cosmology and cross-gender performance. “When I’m teaching,” she says, “windows and doors to my understanding open.” The immediacy of the connection in teaching brings out her lifelong desire to be of service, to introduce students to the power of Shakespearean plays.

“To care, despair, be hope-filled, powerful, willing – Shakespeare gives you the chance to put that in every story,” she says. “I know how to unlock the brilliance and genius encoded in the text, to get to the ‘aha!’ The aha is Shakespeare.”

She also explores this in her “Clown” workshops, which allow the performer to “open up, play and weep,” bringing out an essential humanity through an embodied practice.

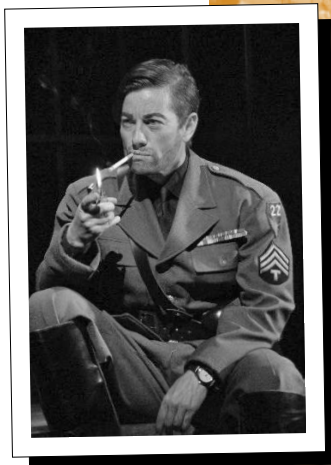
“I love that I can do that for someone,” Lisa says. “Clown is heart-centered. The heart lies between the lungs, and as they fill with breath, there is so much more room for the heart to grow and fill with joy. Clown requires a physical aliveness.”

While she was in the MFAIA program, she integrated her public acting and teaching practice with her more private, personal narrative. At Goddard, she was able to broaden her practice with writing, autobiographical explorations and photography. “I was able to articulate things at Goddard that I would never have otherwise,” she says. “I was in the company of artists, activists and thinkers. It was a good forum, a place for the scholarly mind to meet artistic practice.”

Along with many others in these tough economic times, Lisa is concerned about the future for her company. There are pressures from other theater companies and from those who dismiss Shakespeare as being outdated – a concept Wolpe finds troubling.

“There’s nothing I go through that Shakespeare hasn’t already articulated,” she says. In Shakespeare’s work, she explains, the ideas, syntax, scope and range make more sense than anything she can find in contemporary culture.

“This is my life’s work,” she says. ☺



**A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME** In her desire to transcend gender roles on the stage, Lisa Wolpe has played more of Shakespeare’s male leading roles than possibly any woman in history. Here she performs as Iago in *Othello* (left), as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, and as herself.