

NEWS from THE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE

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KU PROFESSOR'S RESEARCH ALLOWS AUDIENCE TO HEAR SHAKESPEARE'S WORDS IN HIS OWN ACCENT

LAWRENCE---- Like an archeologist reconstructing the fossilized skeleton of an ancient species, a University of Kansas theatre professor has pieced together the bones of a form of English that has never been heard in North America in modern times – the original pronunciation of Shakespeare.

Thanks to the work of Professor Paul Meier, audiences can get a sense of what it might have been like to eavesdrop on opening night of “Hamlet” or “Romeo and Juliet” at the Globe Theatre in London or to listen in on a shipboard conversation on the Mayflower as it approaches the shores of the New World.

“What did English sound like back then? Was it posh or down to earth? Was it anything like today’s British or American English? Would we understand it?”

Meier is staging William Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” in November, the first time in North America a Shakespeare production is being performed entirely in the original pronunciation. Performances are at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 11 through 13 and 19 and 20 and at 2:30 p.m. Nov. 14 and 21, all on Stage Too! in the Crafton-Preyer Theatre.

In his 30-plus years as a teacher, director and dialect coach, Meier has

researched dialects of languages from around the world and has been a movie dialect coach for such films as Ang Lee's "Ride with the Devil," Tim Robbins' "Arlington Road," and Billy Baldwin's "Elmer Gantry." His love of and experience directing Shakespeare's plays is the impetus behind the mounting of one of the greatest of the Bard's comedies.

For the KU production, Meier has been collaborating with David Crystal, one of the greatest living authorities on Original Pronunciation. Crystal was the scholar tapped by Shakespeare's Globe in London when that theatre mounted the first OP production in 2004. The author of more than 100 books on a wide range of linguistic topics, including the "Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language" and "Pronouncing Shakespeare" Crystal spent two weeks at KU in September, working with Meier and his cast.

So what will the KU audiences hear when they attend this production?

"American audiences will hear an accent and style surprisingly like their own in its informality and strong r-colored vowels," Meier said. "The OP performance strongly contrasts with the notions of precise and polished delivery created by John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier and their colleagues from the 20th century British theatre."

Meier says audiences will hear word play and rhymes that "haven't worked for several hundred years (love/prove, eyes/qualities, etc) magically restored, as Bottom, Puck and company wind the language clock back to 1595."

"The audience will hear rough and surprisingly vernacular diction, they will hear echoes of Irish, New England, and Cockney that survive to this day as 'dialect fossils.' And they will be delighted by how very understandable the language is, despite the intervening centuries."

Since the KU production will be only the fourth in the world, preceded by

the two Globe productions and a production of “Julius Caesar” by John Barton at Cambridge in the 1950s, one wonders why there have been so few OP productions. Crystal says it's not because competence on the nature of Early Modern English is lacking, but that so few of the linguists who can demonstrate it with authority also have theatre interests and credentials.

“Theatres might well have a desire to put on OP productions, but without Crystal and a dialect coach like myself, who has implemented his designs, there is an almost total lack of qualified personnel,” Meier explained.

“Original costume, dance, staging, and music, have been staged repeatedly, but not in the Original Pronunciation,” he explained. “To restore the lost rhymes, the lost word-play, is exciting. To hear how much more swiftly the actors of 1600 would have delivered the text is another hugely important insight. To hear the words free from the baggage that attaches to contemporary dialects is likewise exciting and illuminating.”

To hear an example of Shakespeare’s text spoken in the OP, visit <http://www.youtube.com/embed/dWe1b9mjjkM> .

Additional information on the KU production of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” is available at:

<http://www.youtube.com/embed/dQvD2Hj-Odc>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Crystal

<http://www.pronouncingshakespeare.com/>

<http://www.paulmeier.com/OP.pdf>

<http://www.paulmeier.com/>

<http://web.ku.edu/~idea/>

<http://www.kansaspublicradio.org/>

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