



# Shakespeare's LABORATORY FOR LIVING

By Mack Jones

As the discussion of *Romeo and Juliet* began in the advanced Shakespeare course, a student in the back row blurted out, "Juliet shouldn't have kissed a strange man. My mother said if you did, you might get an incurable rash."

"She caught something worse," somebody replied. "She got an incurably rash lover, and it killed her."

These students are approaching the play the way Shakespeare originally approached it. He brought his own experience to a fictional situation that he had set up and used the combination of life experience and fiction to help solve the basic problems of living — who are we and why are we here?

**FROM THE BEGINNING**, the plays have served as laboratories in which Shakespeare and his audience work through experiments that will make emotional survival a reasonable possibility. Shakespeare's fictional situations, shaped out of his experience, stimulate responses from our own knowledge of the world. That combination of then and now provides a clarity of vision that is not obtained by those limited to their own time.

Probably the most persistent question for Shakespeare was one of self-discovery. How can we find out who we are? Is there some way that we can identify ourselves and others to become complete persons? The opening lines of *Hamlet*, a sort of summary of the play, point toward this understanding. A minor character shouts out of the darkness, "Who's there?" And another insignificant person replies, "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself."

This laboratory experiment begins with the hypothesis that we cannot know ourselves or others unless we stand and unfold ourselves. That is what

Hamlet demonstrates in the course of the play, so that he is revealed at last as a model for our realistic, more successful, progress toward self-discovery.

At the beginning of his part in the play, Hamlet is sitting at his uncle's court, filled with disgust and a self-loathing he doesn't understand. He wants to kill himself and have life over with. Then, from beyond the grave, his father returns to tell him a yet unrevealed truth that puts on Hamlet the responsibility for acting in its light to change the world he detests.

To Hamlet's wretchedness we couple our own, memories of those times when the meaninglessness of existence lay heavily upon us until some truth broke through our alienation. Like Hamlet, when we test our central truth and disclose it, we discover ourselves and our reason for existence.

Such a process of self-discovery is a major theme in Shakespeare's tragedies. In trying to find true love Romeo denies his old name and together with Juliet establishes a new identity free of their inherited family hatred. Cleopatra, after Antony's death, arrives at the realization that she is "No more but e'en a woman, and commanded/By such poor passion as the maid that milks/And does the meanest chores" (V.i.73-75).

**OTHELLO'S MOMENT OF SELF-DISCOVERY** comes when he ceases to blame other people for his trouble and cries out in self-condemnation, "O fool! fool! fool!"

Such laboratory experiments reveal much about self-discovery, but identifying ourselves is only the first step in Shakespeare's investigative process. In his history plays he looks at a further complication

of the problem of self-knowledge. What is the relationship of the individual to the society he inhabits?

**IN RICHARD II AND THE HENRY IV** plays Shakespeare sets up a laboratory situation from which we can learn the possibilities for balancing the demands for professional advancement against private emotional needs. Shakespeare assumes that power can be managed in such a way as not to destroy the emotional sensitivity of those who wield it.

The two opposite extremes of the public person and the private one are marked off by the personalities of Richard II and Henry IV. Richard has the sensitive outlook of a poet, a subjective response to the universe that makes him susceptible to flattery, insecure in his official decisions, and the victim of frustrations that result in emotional outbursts of anger and grief. His inability to control this emotionalism cost him his kingdom and his life.

Henry IV, who succeeded Richard, was his exact opposite, the totally professional person. He ignored his emotional life so completely that his son turned to a fat old drunkard named Falstaff to gratify his need for parental understanding.

From this experiment we conclude that some adequate balance between these two extremes needs to be maintained. Although we are not kings, we still have equivalent positions in our professional lives and our private existence. Prince Hal, Henry's son, serves as the ideal example of such balance. Since he has been educated in professional management by his father and in private gratification of emotion by Falstaff, he moves easily in both worlds.

**THE FAVORABLE BALANCE** that Hal maintains results partly from the way he manages time. In his later plays Shakespeare comes to see that experiments in the use of time are crucial to successful living. By struggling against time, Shakespeare theorizes, we waste our energy and harm ourselves. Instead, we must submit to its inevitable passage and accept what we have of it the way we did when we were children. In *The Winter's Tale*, Polixenes describes this childlike immersion in time: "We were. . . Two lads that thought there was no more behind/ But such a day tomorrow as today./And to be a boy eternal" (I.i. 62-65). What Polixenes is saying is that we must treat time the way children do, assuming that we will live forever.

That sense of eternity, though, is combined

### *Jones Uses Applied Shakespeare*



Teaching Shakespeare has a long and honorable tradition at Mizzou — H.N. Fairchild, C.T. Prouty, Hardin Craig, and now William (Mack) Jones and Robert Bender.

In his 20 years of teaching at the University, Jones has adopted a pedagogical creed of "applied Shakespeare" in making his courses interesting and relevant for his students. What one decade of students finds relevant, the next group challenges. Jones, therefore, continually reassesses the plays in terms of the needs and interests of the current generation.

"In my first classes here I found members of 'the Silent Generation' who had been taught not to talk back to their elders. With them I had to break through their superficial politeness." Jones required his students to prepare a scene from one of the plays and present it to the class. "Besides having fun, the students saw Shakespeare rise from the printed page to become a vibrant part of their own lives."

In the sixties, students became skeptical of traditional mores. For them Jones devised "Cocktail Shakespeare." He assumed that "when students grew up they would go to cocktail parties where snobbery would force them to hold forth on intellectual matters." In small groups, therefore, Jones had his students visit on such subjects as "Was Romeo fortune's fool, or was he responsible for his own actions?"

In the seventies, he sensed a growing practicality on the part of his students. In the history plays he came up with "a realistic examination of the interaction of the individual with the society time forced him to inhabit."

Jones' fifth book, *Survival: A Manual on Manipulating*, is based on this conflict between personal morality and professional necessity. It has just been published by Prentice-Hall.

with a sense of personal responsibility in most people. In Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*, Antonio, having, from his point of view, escaped miraculously from a shipwreck, assumes that he is alive for some great purpose: "We all were sea-swallow'd, though some cast again,/And by that destiny to perform an act/Whereof what's past is prologue, what to come/In yours and my discharge" (II.i.251-254).

Here Shakespeare arrives at a complex conclusion to his investigation of who we are and why we are here. Antonio believes he has been spared to become a participant in some great act and acts accordingly. Actually, the storm was only an illusion. His life was never in danger, and someone else is playing with him even as he believes that he is in charge. From this example, we conclude that we have to act as if time is limitless, even when we know it is not. And we must move as if we were free to make our own choices even when we suspect that many of our choices are predetermined by external circumstance over which we have no control.

In spite of these dark undercurrents that sometimes pull Shakespeare's experiments to depths beyond our understanding, the plays always assert one unchanging truth: Life is good, and what we do in it is worthwhile.

**THOSE WHO KNOW SHAKESPEARE BEST** find in all his experiments a conviction that continued experimentation verifies life's value. Romeo and Hamlet and Antonio are part of a great plan that exists in Shakespeare's mind, even as we exist in the mind of some cosmic playwright who has at least as much creativity as Shakespeare had. By putting our faith in a loving response to life, we will succeed in our experiments. The song in *Twelfth Night* says it best:

"What is love? 'Tis not hereafter./Present mirth hath present laughter;/What's to come is still unsure./In delay there lies no plenty;/Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty,/Youth's a stuff will not endure." (II.iii.48-53)

Here Shakespeare's laboratory report concludes with the single certainty that we, and time, power and youth, must have a stop someday; but that while we live we should love and enjoy as innocently and as thoroughly as we can those joys that come with each age. At forty we shouldn't bemoan our dead youth but simply rewrite the song to fit the time — "Come kiss me, sweet and forty, life's a stuff will not endure." □

## Chautauqua Brings Bard To Missouri

**C**hautauqua. The word evokes mental pictures of turn-of-the-century Americana, a time when Midwesterners gathered for a day or two of entertainment and educational enrichment.

Mizzou and other state universities in Missouri and Kansas hope "A Mid-America Shakespearean Chautauqua" will bring that same enrichment to the people of the nation's heartland. "We want to create the excitement of the Chautauqua atmosphere by bringing the people an awareness of Shakespeare as 'a man for all time.'" says project director Robert Bender. The associate professor of English at Mizzou says the central theme is how the romance, history, art, culture and humanistic values associated with the works of England's greatest playwright relate to the lives of Midwesterners.

The Columbia, Kansas City and Rolla campuses of the University system, University of Kansas, Kansas State and Kansas City's Nelson Gallery of Art formed a consortium to present the chautauqua. Major funding is provided by a \$160,000 grant to Mizzou from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Lectures, films, theatrical and musical productions are planned for each participating campus. All events are designed to prepare viewers for an exhibition, "Shakespeare: The Globe and the World," at the Nelson Gallery February 9 through May 4.

The traveling exhibition coming to Kansas City this spring is the first for its owner, the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. The unique collection illustrates Shakespeare's England through original books, manuscripts, costumes, theater models and film/sound clips from his plays.

Videotapes of six plays produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation as an ongoing project, will be shown at Mizzou starting January 24.

Other major presentations at Mizzou start February 12 and continue through April. They include Samuel Schoenbaum from the University of Maryland, Michael Langham from the Juilliard School in New York, C. Walter Hodges, author and theater reconstructionist from London, and Cedric Messina, producer of the BBC play series. All events are free.

For a complete schedule of events, write Project Coordinator, 606 Kuhlman Court, Columbia, Missouri 65211, or call 314/882-7857 or 7750.