



SHAKESPEARE WEEK 2023

Oxford

Stratford-upon-Avon

July 2023

**IT ALL STARTED WITH A
DINNER...**

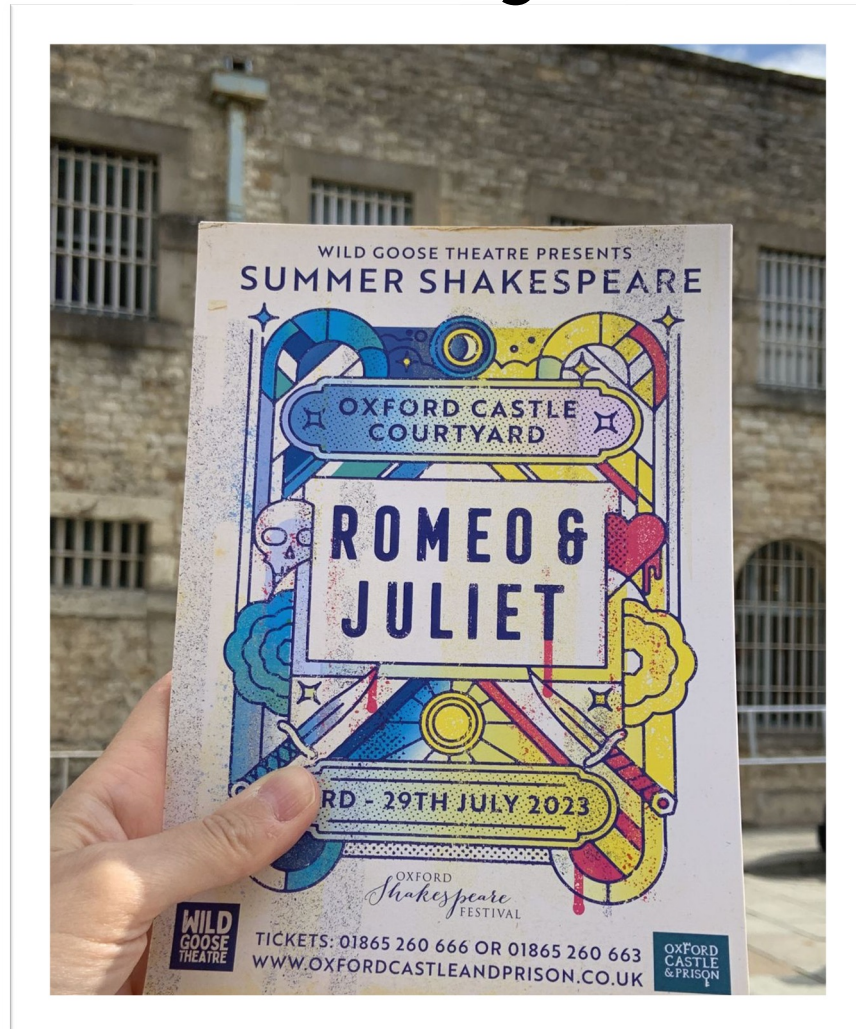


PIZZA IN OXFORD!

THE CITY OFFERED BEAUTIFUL SCENERIES



And in the evening we watched



ROMEO&JULIET – WILD GOOSE THEATRE PRODUCTION

WE GOT CAUGHT IN THE RAIN



So we moved to this alternative location

ROMEO AND JULIET THEATRE REVIEW

In this open-air production of *Romeo and Juliet*, the tragedy opens on a striking note with Craig Finlay delivering the prologue as Tybalt, while a stabbed citizen, played by Natalia Ramli-Davies, staggers onto the stage, visually manifesting the line “civil blood makes civil hands unclean” (Prologue, 4) and foreshadowing the impending fatalities caused by the two families’ rivalry. In fact, the tension is palpable as a fierce exchange of blows and daggers arises between the Montagues and Capulets, highlighting the animosity and drawing the audience into the tragedy in the first moments of its performance.

The character’s affiliations are discernible through distinct costume designs, effectively underscoring the division between the rival families. While Tybalt and Lord Capulet are dressed in red and respectively blue striped blazers, reflecting traditional English attire, the men affiliated with the Montague are uniformly presented wearing plain black coats. The performance deviates from Shakespeare’s original text, as the Prince who intervenes in the conflict between the families is substituted by a Queen in this production, which seems to serve as a counterbalance to the patriarchal power structures presented in the play. The Queen’s dramatic entrance wearing a grey coat and her disruption of the conflict with a gunshot, followed by a long silence, portrays her in a cold and authoritarian manner.

As the play progresses, the ambience immediately shifts towards the jovial and comedic that characterises the first half of the play, as Romeo and Benvolio discuss Romeo’s love for Rosaline. As opposed to Shakespeare’s original play, however, this love is portrayed as superficial love and fleeting lust, with Rosaline represented on the front cover of a revealing magazine, symbolising an unreachable figure. This interpretation of Romeo’s affection for Rosaline as infatuation contrasts with his love for Juliet, which makes Romeo’s ensuing romance with Juliet seem more authentic and profound, and creates a more cogent characterisation of Romeo overall.

In contrast to the original text, this performance focuses on money, in addition to the “dignity” (Prologue, 1) of the families, and the idea that everything, even love, can be bought. The motive is first introduced with Paris handing Lord Capulet a briefcase filled with bills as he asks for Juliet’s hand in marriage. This not only casts doubt on the sincerity of Paris’s affection, leading the audience to feel relief when Juliet falls in love with Romeo instead, but also puts into question Lord Capulet’s paternal priorities, as money seems to be more important to him than his daughter’s happiness. While Romeo contrastingly does not attempt to buy Juliet’s affection, he too uses his wealth to get his way, providing a pragmatic edge to his character as he dangles his flamboyant red pouch when bribing the Capulet servant to get information about the ball or the apothecary to sell him poison to end his life. Wealth is furthermore represented through the luxurious flapper dresses and jewellery worn by Juliet and Lady Capulet, which immediately invokes the affluence of the Roaring Twenties. In addition to reflecting their wealth, the costumes visually tied the two Capulet women together. The nineteen twenties-inspired costumes, however, created a dissonance with the time and place of the performance as well as a lack of aesthetic cohesion, as it clashed with the traditional English clothes and the modern-day references presented in the play. Therefore, the costumes mainly served to indicate affiliation and give a general sense of a historical setting rather than being tied to a specific period or place.

The play’s setting in Verona, Italy, is reinforced through the music during the Capulet ball, where the guests join to dance the Tarantella. While the music in this scene seems to suit the occasion, the auditory experience in this performance often feels disruptive and out of place, as backing tracks are used excessively and often overpower the dialogue. During the renowned balcony scene, however, the subtle music created a fitting atmosphere for the scene complemented by the calls of owls, indicating the nocturnal setting, ensuring the audiences remain deeply embedded within the narrative, despite the wanting light modifications in this open-air production.

Although the setting of the performance in the courtyard of Oxford Castle and Prison offered tremendous potential, the mere relegation of the castle to a backdrop rather than using it as part of the stage constituted a missed opportunity. This would have been particularly effective in the balcony scene had Juliet been placed within the castle looking down at Romeo, who in turn could have called out to her from the courtyard. Instead, in this production, Juliet is positioned on an elevated platform at the top of the stairs behind the audience while Romeo stands on the main stage, facing Juliet and the audience. The positioning adopted by the Wilde Goose Theatre of the audience between the “star-crossed lovers” (Prologue, 6) in this key moment of the play, however, had a powerful effect in its own right: it involved the audience as part of the performance rather than as mere spectators, an effect underlined with Romeo consulting with the members of the audience with the line “Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?” (II, i, 37) to which the unanimous response was an emphatic “hear more”.

While this positioning had the benefit of involving the audience, it also created a physical separation between the lovers. This changed with Juliet’s descent from the ‘balcony’ during the scene, which had a twofold effect that ultimately made the scene more intimate: it brought the lover closer and simultaneously created a distance to the audience, seemingly providing them with some privacy. The transition to their physical proximity is impactful as it makes their affection seem more organic, allowing them to laugh and hug, which constitutes a convincing display of their love for one another. The harmony between Romeo and Juliet, as they come closer together, is emphasised through mirrored dialogues, which helps the audience grasp the depth of their bond and makes the young couple’s swift decision to marry more understandable. While the wedding itself is said to happen off-stage, as in the original text, the couple comes on stage in their marriage attire in a convincing display of love.

The light-hearted and humorous tone which is present in most of the first part of the play makes the two deaths in the minutes before the interval - Mercutio's untimely demise at the hands of Tybalt, followed by Tybalt's death in Romeo's act of vengeance - seem somewhat abrupt, even to those familiar with the story. The first half of the play ends with the Queen's announcement of Romeo's banishment from Verona for having killed Tybalt, with a threat of death if he ever returned. This interval was very well placed as it created a sense of suspense and left the audience pondering over Romeo's fate and its implications for his marriage to Juliet.

The second half of the performance adopted a grave tone marked by grief and gloom and stood in stark contrast with the first and more light-hearted half, not only due to its sombre atmosphere but also because it felt more extended in its duration. It was, therefore, pleasant that the Wilde Goose Theatre made several judicious cuts in this part, as it effectively shortened the perceived length while maintaining a coherent, well-paced narrative that kept the audience engaged. The relentless downpour following the interval seemed to amplify the serious tone surrounding Mercutio and Tybalt's death and Rome's subsequent exile, setting the stage for the approaching tragedy. Standing in the rain, Benvolio dedicates a love song to Mercutio, an addition to this production, revealing a further layer to their relationship. As the rainfall intensified, the performance was moved to the New Baptist Church on Bonn Square, a five-minute walk from Oxford Castle and Prison. The scenography of the dimly lit church seemed to reflect the grief that the characters were experiencing and anticipated the ensuing tragedy.

Especially in the approach of the tragic ending, the unsatisfactory use of stage props took away from the experience. A few scenes were particularly disappointing: it was clearly visible that Romeo's veil of poison was empty; Juliet's self-stabbing, upon awaking to Romeo dead on the alter, was unconvincing as the dagger visibly slides beneath her arm; moreover, throughout the performance, there was an absence of blood and any indications of wounds which was particularly noticeable during Tybalt and Mercutio's death. While the performance presented by the Wilde Goose Theatre was very enjoyable and entertaining as a whole, such key moments in the play would have greatly benefited from an improved prop management, as the lack thereof drew the audience out of the play and hindered it from truly empathising with the tragic fate of Romeo and Juliet.

Tamasha Marina Lucia Pascali

OUR FAVOURITE EXTRACTS FROM *ROMEO AND JULIET*

On Identity

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet.”
(2.2)

On Fate

“I fear too early, for my mind misgives;
Some consequence, yet hanging in the stars,
Shall bitterly begin.” (1.4)

“I defy you, stars!” (5.1)

On Greed

“There is thy gold, worse poison to men’s souls, doing more murder in this loathsome world than these poor compounds that thou mayst not not sell. I sell thee poison; thou hast sold me none.” (5.1)

On Books

“This precious book of love, this unbound lover.” (1.3)

On Love

“Alas, that love, whose view is muffled still,
Should without eyes see pathways to his will” (1.1)

“O teach me how I should forget to think!” (1.1)

“Parting is such sweet sorrow.” (2.1)

THE NEXT DAY WE GOT TO STRATFORD-UPON-AVON





**AND WE TOOK A
GROUP PHOTO WITH
OUR BFF WILL**

**...SOME OF US GOT REALLY PERSONAL
WITH HIM...**



WE WERE GREETED BY JOLLY WEATHER!



AND BEAUTIFUL EVENINGS



ANNE'S AND SHAKESPEARE'S CHILDHOOD HOMES NEVER LOOKED BETTER



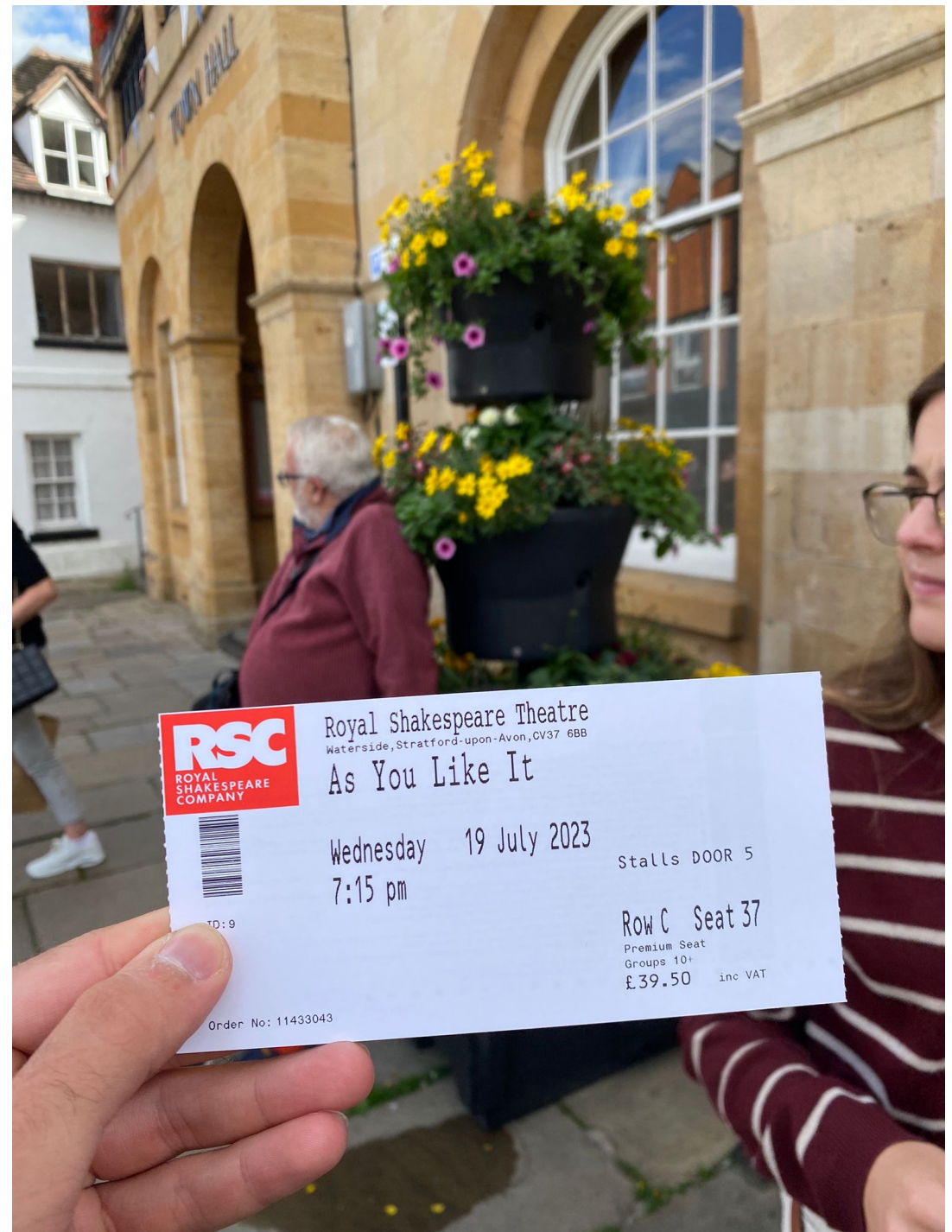
WE TOOK SOME GARDEN WALKS



WE GOT SPIRITUAL



And went to the theatre





THE STAGE

Front row selfie



AS YOU LIKE IT THEATRE REVIEW

As You Like It is one of Shakespeare's most well-known plays; with its vibrant characters and the magical Forest of Arden, it is suitable for many different re-interpretations. In his production, director Omar Elerian used this versatility in order to show the themes of nostalgia and memory, as well as the young-old opposition. In fact, the production revolves around the idea of the same cast re-performing a play after more than 40 years; this unusual but nonetheless intentional age-blind casting enables *As You Like It* to be seen through a different lens by conveying the message that such play can live on through generations, in a continuous dialogue between the older and the younger actors.

The production begins with a prologue, which is as effective as it is deceptive: as though to give the audience a heads up, Michael Bertenshaw (Oliver) comes forward to explain that the audience will only be witnessing the actors' reunion in an attempt to recreate the production performed in 1978, without any costumes or stage effects of any kind. The audience is thus left with no expectations—maybe even disappointment—as the stage takes the form of a rehearsal room: the lights are cold and still, and the actors wear their everyday clothes in similar blue and green colours, all seated in the back of the stage. Three actors stand out from the whole: they are remarkably younger and the only ones holding a script. The opposition between older, experienced actors and still-learning younger ones is made clear right from the start. The performance comes across as informal, as the actors struggle to remember their lines and clear their throats in comedic slip-ups that constantly remind the audience of their age. However, it is an opportunity to show how strong and believable the actors' hold on their characters is, as they can break character and go back in smoothly and without any difficulty. The emphasis on age is also achieved through the deliberately comical fight scene between Charles and Orlando, which is transformed into a riveting arm wrestling, while the other characters incite the opponents through noises and screams.

As the performance progresses, the stage effects begin to increase: more props are used, costumes become more complex, and lighting and sound effects become more prominent. A careful eye will spot that Celia's clothes, for instance, develop from simple trousers to a plain skirt, to which is then added an under-skirt. The moment the characters enter the Forest of Arden, the lights turn soft and green, and in the background it is possible to hear nature noises such as waterdrops and birds chirpings: this marks the beginning of a gradual build-up of lights and music, which help to perceive the Forest as a place of imagination, where different elements—such as palms, snow, a lioness—collide. An opposition can be easily drawn between the strict and cold court and the Forest of Arden, in which characters undergo a process of utter and deep change.

Scene I in Act II takes a sudden step back from the light-hearted performance, presenting one of the strongest and most intense moments of the production: a realistic deer carcass is brought on the stage and displayed right in front of the audience for everyone to see. The lights are turned off to convey a tragic and serious tone, capturing the audience's attention. One of the young actors, Tyreke Lesle, gives an unsettling speech from which emerges an eco-critique about the human destruction of nature and the passing of this burden to the next, younger generations. The audience is thus forced to reflect on the gravity of the situation, discovering a new layer of meaning in Shakespeare's play. As the lights are suddenly turned on, the narration resumes again its flow as though the audience snapped out of a dream. The pace is quickly restored and the production begins a build-up that peaks right before the break: the stage gains a vertical dimension as a band composed of bass, guitar and drums is lowered from the ceiling in a scaffolding. The performance is transformed into a mesmerizing concert: young and old actors sing together while smoke and colourful lights psychedelically fill the stage. The effect on the whole theatre is immediately noticeable: music is an extraordinary and effective tool used to bring people together—actors and audience, young and old generations. This strategic climax leaves the audience in perfect suspense, inevitably longing for more.

The break constitutes a moment for the audience not only to assimilate what has happened on stage, but also to question the truthfulness of the prologue: as opposed to the simple and modest production that was promised at the beginning, everyone in the audience finds themselves excited and impatient, waiting on the edge of their seats for the performance to start again.

After the break, the pace of the performance slows down in order to give James Hayes (Touchstone) the chance to improvise: the actor has a strong grip on the audience, also thanks to his excellent eye contact. He represents the main source of comedic relief, which he brilliantly achieves without fear of teasing the audience. Although the interactions do not usually break the narrative flow and are very entertaining, there are a few instances that feel excessive: the digression about Christopher Marlowe's death, for example, comes across as too self-conscious and inevitably draws the audience out of the performance. On the other hand, a brilliant improvisation occurred when Touchstone found Orlando's love poems and made fun of them, even though they were Shakespeare's own sonnets. Overall, however, James Hayes shows great confidence and experience, as he is able to guide the audience with his comedy and stop the clapping at his will. An excellent counter-balance to Touchstone's comedy is represented by Jaques's character, whose only presence on stage conveys an effective dark tone that does not need much interaction with the audience. At this point it is evident how Touchstone really engages with the audience, whereas Rosalind and Orlando never do; excessive comedy is in fact not suitable for the two main characters, as it would hinder the main narrative.

Sound effects and lights are used more and more as the production progresses: in particular, music is associated with the character of Audrey, as every time she enters a scene, an ethereal and almost magical sense is conveyed. It is remarkable how the stage is vertically used: as the words "looking for love" are spoken, the music intensifies and lamps are lowered from the ceiling to be used as seats, creating a more intimate atmosphere when the couples Phoebe and Silvius, Orlando and Rosalind, and Audrey and Touchstone are on stage.

Within the second half of the production the themes of mortality and age become evident: especially when Silvius nonchalantly delivers the line “If I live”, the audience is struck with the brutal reality that life is ephemeral. The same message is conveyed by purposely showing the actors’ frailties, such as Touchstone’s knees or the earlier arm wrestling: the fact that the actors are older than expected automatically puts an emphasis on lines about life and death, making the audience reflect on topics that would not be the main focus of Shakespeare’s original play.

As the performance is reaching its end, Rosalind appears on stage wearing a stunning period gown: the simplicity of the earlier costumes is what makes her final dress reveal emotional and touching, as it looks like the very costume she could have worn during the original production in 1978. Rosalind is soon joined by the rest of the characters, all dressed in intricate costumes, ready for the grand finale. As the actors are giving their backs to the audience, the background of the stage is suddenly lifted to reveal an astonishing Forest of Arden: green and dark lights illuminate the mist, giving the Forest an ethereal and dream-like look. The characters walk into the mist and the audience is forced to deal with that bittersweet feeling of being left behind and longing to enter the Forest with them. Many different meanings characterize this final scene, all of which have a powerful impact on the audience: the Forest of Arden feels like a jump back in time to the original production, as though the actors were physically walking into their own memory; moreover, leaving the stage through this magical background is a meta-theatrical way of letting the play exist through the next generation by giving the stage to the young actors.

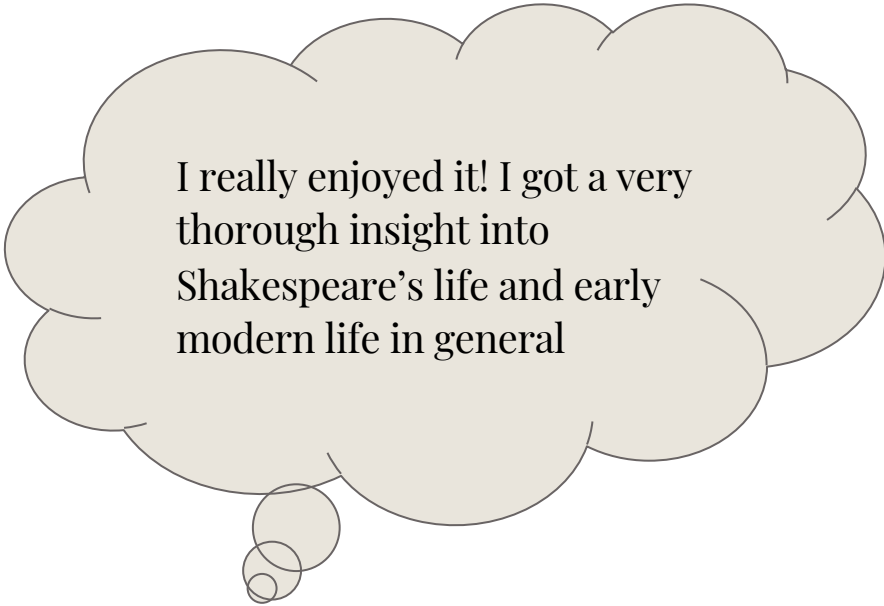
This mesmerizing picture marks the peak of the actors’ transformation into their characters, and of the rehearsal room into the immersive and magical stage. While the other characters exit the scene, Rosalind comes forward and delivers one last speech: shifting from Shakespeare’s original prologue to a personal and emotional speech, these last words convey the message that life does not need to stop when one is old, and that love and all emotions can be felt just as vividly even if one is not young anymore. As Rosalind exits, each and every person within the audience is left with their hearts touched and a tear in their eyes, as they are forced to awake from that enchanting dream that was *As You Like It*.

Linda De Spirito

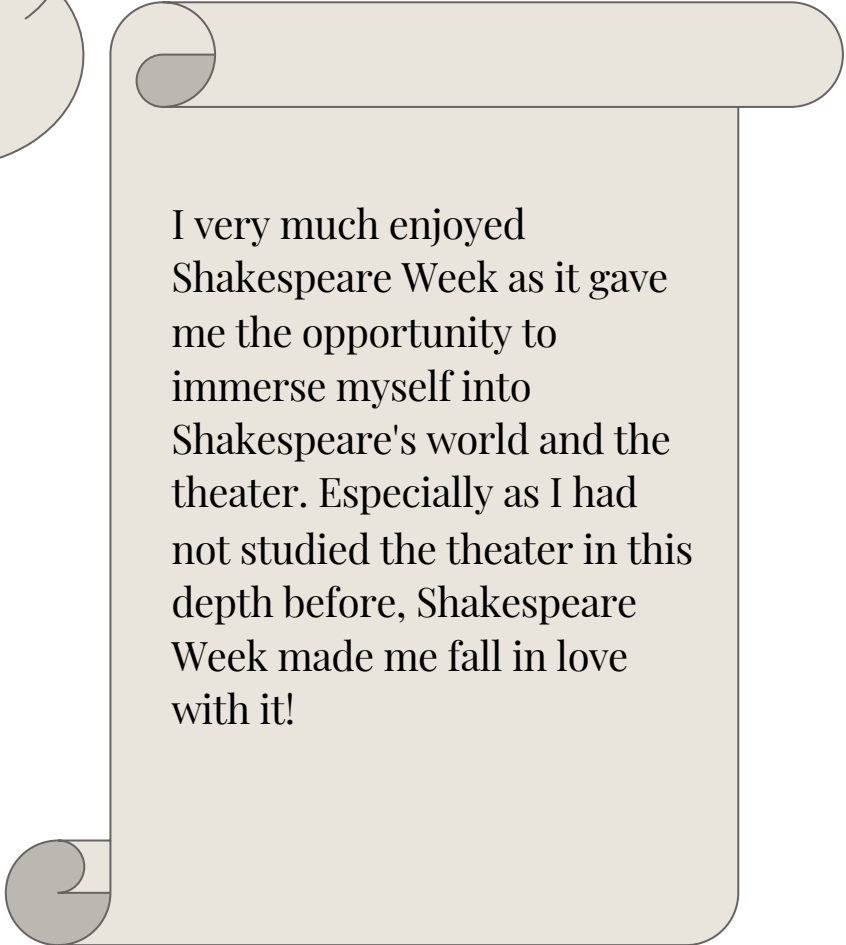
THE END - FIN

A scenic view of a campus at sunset. The sky is a mix of light blue and orange, with scattered clouds. In the foreground, there are large, dark trees on both sides, framing the view. In the background, there are several buildings and a distant mountain range under the setting sun.

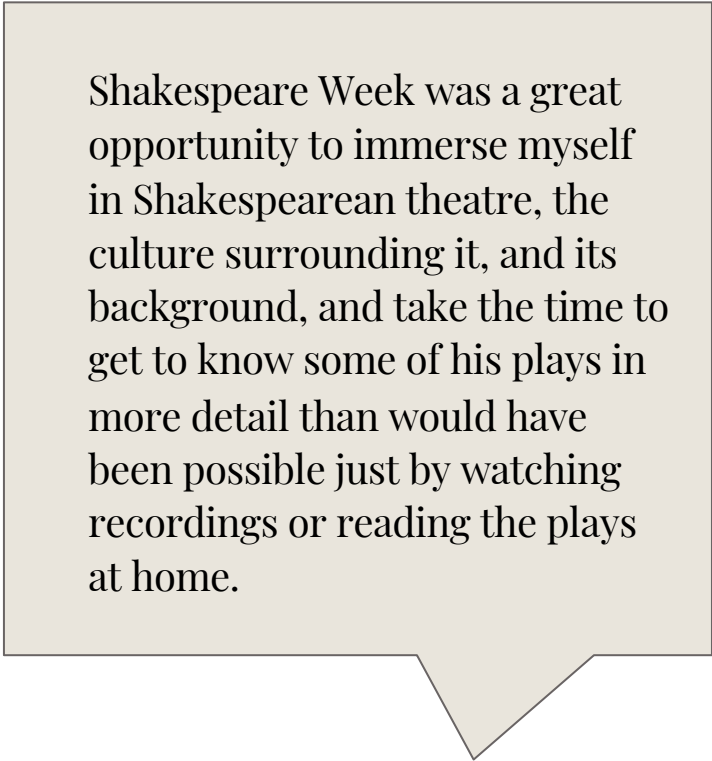
What the students are saying...

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I really enjoyed it! I got a very thorough insight into Shakespeare's life and early modern life in general

A light beige scroll with a black outline, unrolled at the top and bottom.

I very much enjoyed Shakespeare Week as it gave me the opportunity to immerse myself into Shakespeare's world and the theater. Especially as I had not studied the theater in this depth before, Shakespeare Week made me fall in love with it!

A light beige speech bubble with a black outline and a pointed bottom.

Shakespeare Week was a great opportunity to immerse myself in Shakespearean theatre, the culture surrounding it, and its background, and take the time to get to know some of his plays in more detail than would have been possible just by watching recordings or reading the plays at home.

**Photoalbum by
Luca Carzaniga**