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BWW Interview: Terra Taylor Knudson Talks WILLY'S LIL VIRGIN QUEEN

by Don Grigware Aug. 26, 2019



Actress/Playwright Terra Taylor Knudson is about to open her award-winning solo show Willy's Lil Virgin Queen at the Garage Theatre in Long Beach after Labor Day. In our conversation she talks about why Shakespeare's work is so important to her and gives welcome advice to our readers on how to fully understand and appreciate him more.

Willy's Lil Virgin Queen sounds delightful. Tell us about how you and Shakespeare first got acquainted.

TTK: I grew up in Boulder, Colorado and one summer in July when I was nine my Dad surprised me with a trip to the Colorado Shakespeare Festival for an evening performance of "The Merry Wives of Windsor". The CSF environment is a magical venue nestled at the foot of the Flat Irons, a unique section of the Rocky

Mountains. It's part of the University of Colorado's campus and the Mary Rippon stage is a wooden stage surrounded by rows of red stone benches. Once the sun goes down, the lights come up on the stage and the rest is magic. It was the first time I'd experienced Shakespeare and, although I didn't know what most of the words meant, I could follow the slap-stick comedy well because the play is essentially an episode of "I Love Lucy", ideal for a first entrée into the language.

Do you have a favorite play by the Bard? Which one? Why this choice?

TTK: I actually have two favorites; "Much Ado About Nothing" and "Hamlet". Much Ado because it's a quintessential romantic comedy with a strong female lead. The banter between Beatrice and Benedick is some of the best uses of word play and wit in any of the comedies. It's on par with the fast-talking films of the 1940s and conjures images of Bogart and Bacall, Hepburn and Tracy. What makes it especially impactful however, is the depth of drama that also exists in the piece. There is a very dark twist of events that completely changes the tone of the show about half-way through and it becomes a serious drama. The drastic change gives Beatrice an opportunity to show her strength in a way that very few of Shakespeare's other female characters can. And the dynamic between Beatrice and Benedick at once becomes much more intense as the stakes are raised to a fever pitch. The confrontation scene between the two, which ultimately ends in a declaration of love and a challenge, is one of the greatest dramatic scenes ever written.

Hamlet is not my favorite because it's the most famous and obvious choice. It's my favorite because it's one of the most human stories in the canon. Setting aside for a moment the incredible language, the play is essentially the story of a family; a grieving son, his co-dependent, heartbroken mother, a controlling and overbearing new stepfather, a young teenage girl with whom he is in love but not committed to. It's



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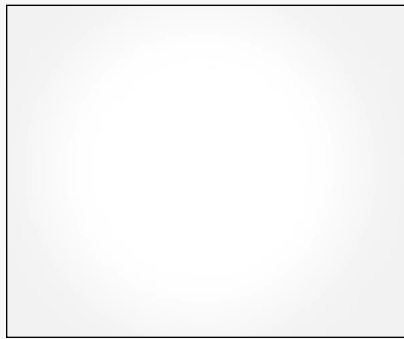
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elemental and everyone who has a family can relate on some level to Hamlet's shock, pain and rage at his mother's flawed character and his step-father/uncle's sudden arrival on the scene. It's the most emotionally complex and yet relatable of Shakespeare's plays because Hamlet's agony over whether to stay alive and endure this hellish situation or end his suffering is something I think everyone has experienced at some point in his or her life. It's fundamentally human to question; "Why am I here?"; "What is my purpose?"; "Why am I in so much pain and when will it end?"; "Is this

all there is?" Hamlet, is a dissertation on the human condition and the search to find release from grief and restore the balance of ones' life following tragedy. All of this couched in the most iconic and extraordinary use of language in history.



In your show do you use a lot of quotes from the plays? If so, do you explain what they mean as you go along?

TTK: There are quite a lot of quotes and references made throughout the show and in each case, I try to explain their meaning through the context of the moment. The show is a coming-of-age narrative and Shakespeare's characters and words are used to inform my personal story. There are parallels with specific plays and I make use of those similarities to help illustrate my journey and challenges at different points in my adolescence and early adulthood. Hopefully, they're a way to demonstrate that Shakespeare is not only Classical, it's contemporary and entirely relatable to our modern lives and circumstances. That's the hope, anyway.

Comedy really started before Shakespeare, in ancient Greece but he seems the master as he was bent on entertaining his audiences, even in very dramatic circumstances. How do you feel about this?

TTK: In fact, Shakespeare's desire to entertain audiences comedically even despite dramatic circumstances, I think is one of the core challenges facing any storyteller. How does one engage the audience and keep their attention long enough to take them through this journey? That's the mission of every artist and comedy is a great unifier. When you have the audience laughing, they will trust you when they're crying.

If you will, tell us a funny story about audience reaction to your play. It can involve someone who loved it ... or someone who reacted negatively...

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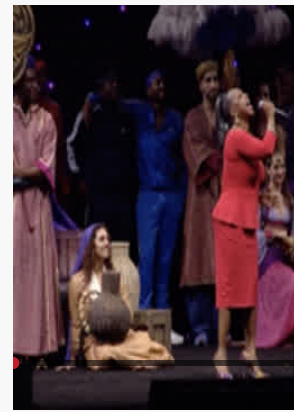
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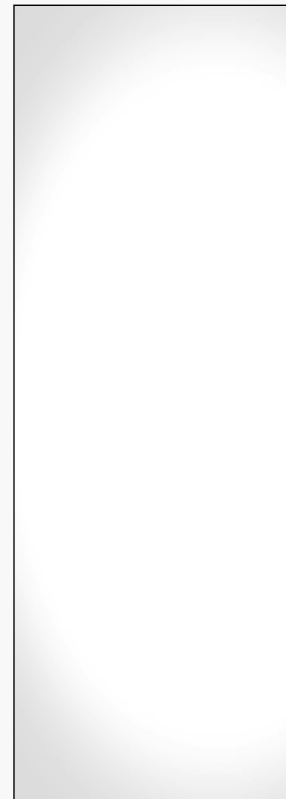
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TTK: One of the things I love about doing this show is the interactive nature of the piece. It's a direct conversation with the audience which can allow for some unexpected spontaneous moments to happen. Every audience has its own character and I never know exactly what that dynamic will be until I'm out on stage. If they're laughing and talking loudly before I start, I know we're in for a great time. But a quiet audience can be misleading. It can feel extremely vulnerable to be on stage and have a quiet audience, but I've learned that silence doesn't mean disengaged. People react and respond to information in very different ways and there is no right or wrong way to experience live theatre.

During one particular performance I was deep into revealing a very personal and vulnerable moment when an audience member laughed. The room had been silent, so the single laugh rang out loud and clear. It caught me off guard and for just a moment I had to steal myself from looking up to see who had laughed. Just for an instant I was angered and hurt because it felt like such an inappropriate reaction but then I realized, laughter isn't always because something is funny. Laughter is also a release of tension and that person had laughed, not because she was judging what I was doing, but because she was being affected by it. It was another reminder to me that I'm not the only one in the room who is experiencing the story. And, in truth, that's exactly how it's supposed to be. Otherwise, it's just therapy in front of a paying audience.

Why do you think some people hate Shakespeare? Most actors, no, because you can be big and bold and the feelings are all there in the lines. I refer to others who refuse to take the time to really listen and learn...

TTK: It's an excellent question and it's one of the things I'm most passionate about changing. I think many people, whether actor or not, are frustrated because they feel that they're stupid or not smart enough to "get" Shakespeare. They may have been introduced to "Romeo & Juliet" as a middle-school student and had to endure the agony of listening to other thirteen-year-olds try to read the language one line at a time. God Bless all middle-school teachers for what they do but unfortunately, it's not the right way to be introduced to the Bard. For one thing, Shakespeare is meant to be seen and heard not read. And, when it's done by people who have learned the techniques and have broken down the language, it's surprisingly easy to understand even without any prior education. An audience shouldn't have to have a degree in Classical literature to enjoy the work. If they don't understand what's being said, that's a failing of the director and actors. If the performers do their homework the language flows and is as easy to follow as anything contemporary. Sadly, most people who fear or hate Shakespeare don't realize this because in all likelihood, they haven't been exposed to it being done well. There is no great mystery to the language, although it does take skill, dedication and training to learn how to break it down and perform it successfully.



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For someone who is interested in approaching the language for the first time, I offer the following suggestions on how to get started:

- See a really good film version. There are many out there that are very accessible and visually stimulating. The added advantage is that the music will help to inform the situation and the camera will tell you exactly where to focus your attention. Oftentimes, films will be slightly - or greatly - edited down to the main storyline and eliminate erroneous references or plot points that don't serve the main through line. While you're not getting the whole experience yet, it's a great way to become familiar with the main plots without too much distraction.
- See a high school or university production. I know it seems like the last place to go to see "good Shakespeare" but actually, some of the best shows I've seen were in high schools, colleges or summer stock, which is typically made up of twenty-something actors on summer vacation. My reason for this is that oftentimes younger actors will approach things more simply.

Not always, of course. There are many examples that immediately contradict this, but there are also examples of young actors portraying Juliet or the lovers in A Midsummer Nights' Dream sweetly unadorned simply by virtue of the fact that the performers weren't yet aware of how to get bogged down by the weight of "Shakespeare". I offer this with the caveat that I think comedies are better for this than histories or dramas.

- Lastly, see a production during the summer under the stars. No matter what show you see, when you see Shakespeare under the stars, it's magic. While his works were performed outdoors, they were performed during the day, so the concept of "under the stars" isn't historically accurate but it's one of the most magical ways to experience the words. And, if you can, bring a folding chair, a picnic blanket, snacks, friends and just let go and enjoy the experience. Anything you don't "get" will get lost in the beauty of that summer night. And, after you have a taste of that magic, your ear will want more. It's not about "getting" Shakespeare. It's about experiencing it.

How long have you been performing this play? Are there plans to take it to off Broadway maybe?

TTK: I've been performing this version of the play since June of 2017 but the show has been developing since 2012. It began as an hour-long lecture about the historical women featured in Shakespeare's plays that I toured California and parts of Colorado with for two years. Then, in late 2015 I began developing it into a seventy-five minute piece that incorporated some of my personal stories and anecdotes but still focused primarily on the women and the ways in which they were presented in the plays. I produced that in early 2016 and in July of that year I began working with my director, [Jessica Lynn Johnson](#) to flesh out the story and adjust the focus from the plays to my personal journey with Shakespeare and how his words and characters helped to inform my life. That's the piece that I perform now and that's what you'll see if you come to the run at The Garage Theatre the first week of September.

As for taking it to off Broadway, I'm currently starting plans for a U.S. tour in several states during 2020 and would love to take it off Broadway. Or heck, on Broadway!

Is this your only play or are there others? If so, tell us about them and how they evolved from your life.

TTK: I've had an opportunity to write a number of plays and small musicals over the years. Many have been for education outreach programs while others were specifically

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commissioned or created for a regular run. Among them is a musical; Old Black Magic: A Haunted Musical which has been produced locally multiple times since 2002, and Intimately Wilde, my period drama about the last hours of Oscar Wilde's imprisonment in the late 19th century, England. That was workshopped in Orange County and produced in Los Angeles in 2009 and later in Long Beach in 2013. In both cases, as well as in several others, the shows came out of a desire to write for the people in my life; actors who I felt were incredibly talented and I wanted to give them something to celebrate their talent. I can't cook so I wrote instead.

Anything else you care to add?

TTK: Thank you for the very thought-provoking questions. It was fun to think about the show in different ways because of them. And, thank you so much for the opportunity to talk about the show and about Shakespeare with your readers. It's a passion of mine to help demystify the plays and bring the lofty reputation of the works back down to the ground. They weren't legendary when they were written. The plays were his work. And now they're my play, which is really the best kind of work there is.

Willy's Lil Virgin Queen

Written & Performed by Terra Taylor Knudson

Developed with & Directed by Jessica Lynn Johnson

Produced by Olio Theatre Works & The Garage Theatre

Performances:

Thursday, September 5th at 8:00pm

Friday, September 6th at 8:00pm

Saturday, September 7th at 8:00pm

Ticket Price: \$20

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