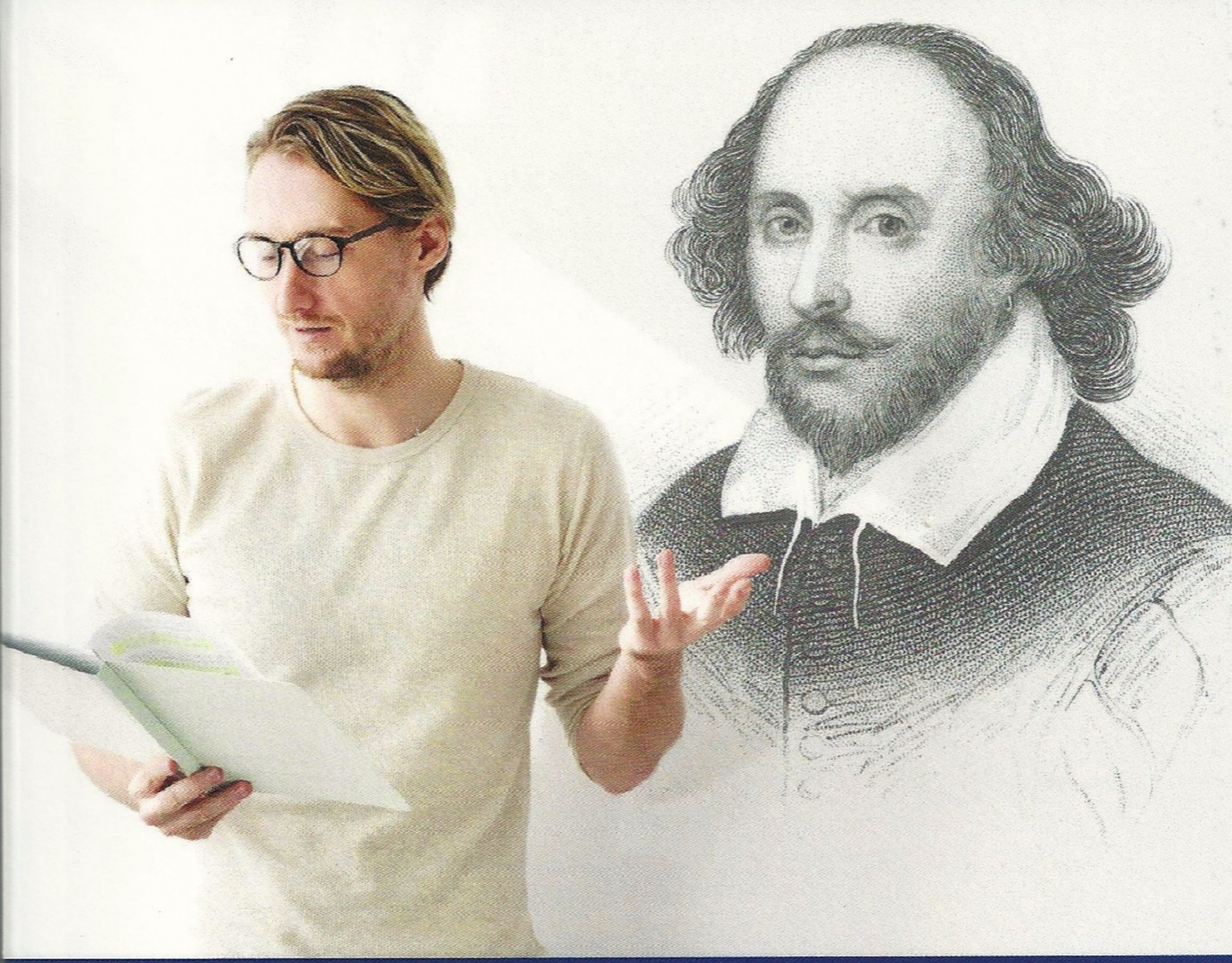
How and Why We Teach Shakespeare

College Teachers and Directors Share How They Explore the Playwright's Works with Their Students



Edited by Sidney Homan

ROUTLEDGE

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"In Practice Let Us Put It Presently": Learning with *Much Ado*

Fran Teague and Kristin Kundert

> And thou shalt see how apt it is to learn
> Any hard lesson that may do thee good.
>
> (1.1.275–276)

In February 2014, the University of Georgia announced that Kristin Kundert would direct *Much Ado about Nothing*. She asked Fran Teague to serve as dramaturg, working on background research and preparing the script. Our work on the show *was* teaching. First, we will discuss a dramaturgy class project—how it succeeded for the students, but failed for Kundert, and why that failure was paradoxically important in making the production succeed. Next, we will talk about Kundert's directorial decision to build music into the production, Teague's skepticism, the students' enthusiasm, and how audiences responded. Finally, we shall discuss how our re-shaping the production in terms of gender helped the audience understand the play and the MFA students produce effective thesis projects.

Learning through Dramaturgy: Fran Teague

Each spring semester, I teach "Dramaturgy." A major assignment has students work with directors doing real world dramaturgy: directors may ask them to gloss a script for the

actors, to research Victorian medical practices, to provide images of Greek vases, and so forth. The assignment allows students to see their research in action, influencing a production. When the team working on *Much Ado* met with Kristin, she gave them a variety of settings in which women took active roles in civic life and asked for a sense of that culture's music, architecture, clothing, and attitudes toward women. They looked at Hawaii after the Pearl Harbor attacks, Rome under Augustus Caesar, Britain from year 1 BCE to 1 CE, Cyprus in the medieval period, and India today. One student was a doctoral student in English, while two undergraduates were majoring in English and theatre. They compiled a background book of their own summaries, copies of articles and reviews, and images that was 193 pages long. The work was thorough and well done, and I happily gave them an A on the project and passed the material on to Kristin.

Meanwhile Kristin was working with the designers and with the play, figuring out what she wanted the production to accomplish. After going through the students' background book, she decided to go in a different direction. At this point, the background book assignment seemed a failure to me. In retrospect, I realize that it did succeed both for the students and the director. The director needed to see more information to find the setting, and the book helped her reach the decision to set the production in sixteenth-century Italy. The dramaturgy students learned to do hands-on research using a variety of resources: traditional reference books, subject-specific databases, and targeted searching. Furthermore, they learned to use their ingenuity: to find out what people wore in Hawaii after the Pearl Harbor attacks, for example, they found photos in old newspapers. Though the students were familiar with humanities databases, they learned to use social science resources, histories of music, and collections of art in print and digital form. They also learned that they had to work together, and that means they discovered how collaboration serves research. The student who was highly visually oriented concentrated on the images, the English major gathered background essays, and the doctoral student focused on Shakespeare, as well as taking charge of writing

and organizing their report. Putting together an anthology of materials that ran to nearly 200 pages is a daunting task for students, but by working together, the team succeeded.

Thinking back on the assignment, Maria Chappell (then a graduate student leading the team and now a PhD in Shakespeare and digital humanities) says:

> I remember that when we turned it in, I was torn because I wished that Kristin could use all of the settings we researched for the play; from early Britain to WWII Hawaii, I was excited about all of the options for *Much Ado*. Even though I would have loved to have seen a version of the play based on one of the ideas we researched, we knew going into the project that the performance of the play was a full year away and that the director was still in the early stages of deciding how to stage *Much Ado* with a cast where several of the roles of men with power, such as Leonato, would be played by women; she wanted a time period and a place when having women in power would have been more usual. [... The] Renaissance setting works well with the play, particularly visually. I did not view the gender make-up of the cast as a barrier to setting the play in the Renaissance; audiences suspend belief when watching plays anyway, and Shakespeare adaptations, particularly modern ones, frequently have color- and gender-blind casting (including the brilliant casting of Helen Mirren as "Prospera" in Taymor's *The Tempest*). While it would have been interesting to see "Leonata" modeled after Boudica or Livia, she also works well as a Renaissance matriarch (and complicates some of the gender dynamics in scenes such as Hero's ruined wedding).[1]

Dr. Chappell's final comment turned out to be prescient since Kristin decided that the production with its focus on gender needed a setting in Renaissance Italy. Her decision led to the production's glorious set. The importance of students learning research skills is central to me as a teacher, but what may be most valuable to them is the knowledge that

research sometimes does not work out as one expects. The director's decision to set aside the work that the students had done was one that gave the doctoral student greater confidence in her own judgment, an unexpected benefit, and gave the actors a wonderful space in which to perform.

A professional dramaturg's task involves coming to rehearsals and answering any questions that might arise, but I am an amateur. During the weeks of rehearsal, I simply could not teach my courses, go to meetings, and handle other professional responsibilities while sitting in a rehearsal hall for four hours a night on five days a week and six hours on Sundays. Instead, I arranged for a rehearsal dramaturg, doctoral theatre student Jennifer Marks, to assist Kristin. I did work with Kristin on preparing the script and I gave a short presentation to the cast on the play and its language and answered any questions Jennifer had, but my work as dramaturg was largely done.

The dramaturgy students learned by doing, Kristin learned by seeing their results, and I learned that I needed to have more faith in my students' good sense: they were glad that Kristin set the play in the Italian Renaissance. I also learned to have more faith in the director: when Kristin first told me what she had planned for music, I thought that the Italian Renaissance setting wouldn't work with contemporary folk music. As the show turned out, the music was not just successful with audiences, but it also helped the cast tell the story.

Learning through Performance: Kristin Kundert

It has to mean something. That is my mantra for directing. When I was assigned *Much Ado*, I knew immediately that the production would include live music, so vital to college students. Shakespeare's play actually contains four musical moments: a dance, a love song, a funeral mass, and another closing dance. That was my hook for this production—the power of music. Several years earlier, I had heard a song whose lyrics startled me. I recognized them as from *Much Ado About Nothing*. In 2009, Mumford and Sons released the album *Sigh No More*.

The title song for that album has lyrics that are pieces of text pulled directly from *Much Ado*: "Serve God, love me and mend" (5.2.87), "live unbruised" (5.4.109), "I am sorry" (used five times in the play, contracted to "I'm sorry" in the song: 2.3.163, 2.3.193, 4.1.87, 4.1.98, 4.1.271), "We are friends" (5.4.116), "Sigh no more" (2.3.62), "One foot in sea, one on shore" (2.3.64), "You know me" (2.1.153, possibly echoing "I know you of old", 1.1.139), and "man is a giddy thing" (5.4.107).[2]

Thinking about the production, I had known I wanted music, and the song gave me an answer. While Mumford and Sons was a hugely popular band at the time, virtually none of the listeners realized that they were hearing a Shakespearean tale. The music, with an almost Celtic sound of banjos and bass, is made for dancing, crying, and loving.

So I began my directing journey knowing one thing I wanted—live performances of Mumford and Sons' songs—yet there was so much more to decide. The next large challenge for me to address was performing the music. I engaged an undergraduate theatre major who played multiple instruments, wrote his own music, and played in several bands to serve as musical director. We culled Mumford and Sons songs and found seven to use in the production. In additional to the four songs Shakespeare called for, we played one under a prologue of action setting up the show, one at the end of the first act, and one at the beginning of the second act.

In university productions, most actors in a theatre department identify as female. Meanwhile, the cast of *Much Ado* calls for 17 men and 4 women. Casting our production as Shakespeare intended would be challenging, as we simply didn't have enough men audition. Additionally, as a professor of acting, I see our productions as laboratories for our teaching, and since the majority of students in acting classrooms are female, it doesn't seem fair or prudent to cast Shakespearean productions traditionally. So I had two choices to accommodate our acting pool: change men's roles to women's roles or have women play men. As I am not a fan of women playing men when there isn't a concept or logical reason, I was going to need to create a matriarchal world where women were leaders both in the home and in

the community. I was lucky that I could cast the production before designs were complete. I was working with a wonderful MFA candidate costume designer who was willing to be flexible for a while as I determined the genders of some of the roles. In the end, I cast 11 women and 9 men. Conrad, Don John, Leonato, Antonio, Dogberry, and two members of the watch became women.

Stephanie Murphy, who played Beatrice, wrote about the effect of that casting:

> Leonata and Antonia ... represent a completely female-run household bustling with lively maternal energy. Don Pedro's arrival with a party of men became all the more jarring in light of this adjustment.
>
> Beatrice, as a product of this household, became more of a product of her environment than a rebel against it. Leonata and Antonia banter with her, and while she outshines them, their dialogue is now firmly within a homosocial female sphere. As opposed to a woman who could "hold her own with the boys" (a tomboyish cliché that I was happy to cast aside), Beatrice became reminiscent of *Little Women*'s Jo March or *Pride and Prejudice*'s Elizabeth Bennett. Surrounded by outspoken, intelligent female authority figures, Beatrice was able to simultaneously embrace her wit and her femininity because she had no example to suggest that they were mutually exclusive. In fact, it now seemed that Hero, in her silent position of responsibility, became the outlier. While I still viewed her as a moral authority, I now felt an even greater imperative to protect and help her fit in with the rest of the family.[3]

The shift to more women's roles helped the performers and led to other changes as well. I had to find a world filled with strong women, yet felt that I couldn't bring our production too far forward in time, as the slandered lady story wouldn't ring true. I also needed a world that was large and dramatic, containing the possibility for big emotions, design, and music. That was the basis of the wonderful

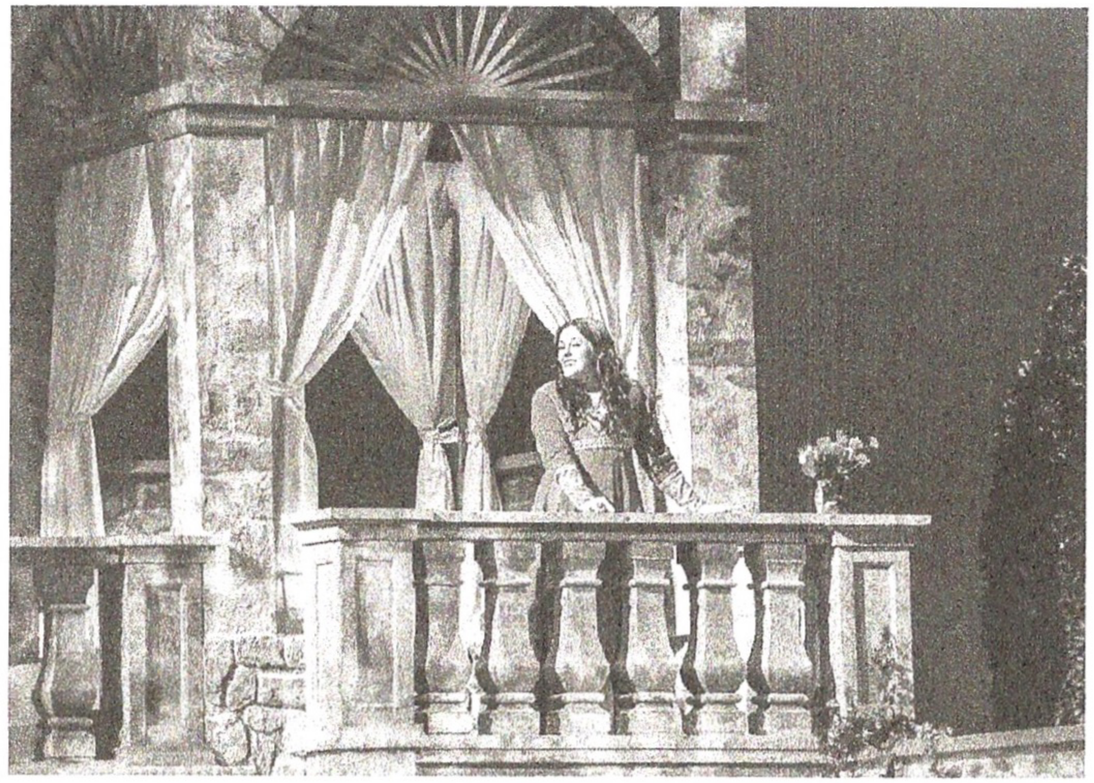

Figure 9.1 **Beatrice (Stephanie Murphy) on the Balcony, by permission of the University of Georgia Department of Theatre and Film Studies**

dramaturgical book that Fran's students created for me. I read it, studied it, and threw it all away. While any of these worlds could have met the needs of our production of *Much Ado*, none of them would unite with the sound of Mumford and Sons' music. Ironically, the historical time and location of Shakespeare's text resounded most fully in the music of Mumford and Sons. Finding and creating a solid concept for a production involves trying on many different worlds before encountering the best option. Their dramaturgy work had saved me countless hours of research so that I could find our production's setting: Renaissance Italy.

Creating a matriarchal world for this production by changing some of the male roles to women had several unintended yet helpful consequences surrounding the slandered lady story within the text. Modern audiences often have difficulty with this element of the plot. They don't understand Hero's inability to defend herself, nor her forgiveness of Claudio in the resolution of the play. In our production,

the actor playing Hero stood up for herself more than in any other production that I have seen. Of course her text doesn't allow her to do so, but her body language and physicality fought the accusation of her infidelity. She constantly shook her head and quietly said "No" under her breath. She tried to cling to Claudio and comfort or pacify him, overstepping the period boundaries of modesty. The fact that there were strong women surrounding her made this conceivable and even expected. She was not merely a passive observer. Additionally, in the scene where Claudio goes to "Hero's grave" to lament his sin, I staged the whole household of women watching from the balcony. It was only when Hero was satisfied that Claudio was sufficiently penitent that the plot moved forward and they were reunited. Hero was able to have the agency in her forgiveness of and reunion with Claudio. The audience observed a tribe of women who stood together and protected each other, which is far easier to embrace than a father "propertying" his daughter.

I set to work with the designers to create probably the most beautiful playground I have ever worked in. The scenic designer was faculty member Julie Ray, the costume designer Matt Mallard, an MFA completing his thesis, and the lighting designer Mark Stater, another MFA student working on his qualifying project. Surprisingly to me I found all my central images for our design residing in the music videos of Mumford and Sons. Perhaps that seems logical to some, but I have never before found a contemporary band telling a Shakespearean tale so completely. The designers, like Fran, were a bit skeptical of marrying Mumford with a Renaissance design, but I spoke of the work of Baz Luhrmann, who often mashed up contemporary music with period pieces, and they jumped on board.

Now the ultimate hurdle: casting. I wanted the musicians to be characters in the production and not a band that sat in the corner. Thus, I needed actor–musicians. We put out a casting call that asked students to sing and to bring to auditions whatever instrument they played. Mumford and Sons uses guitars, banjos, keyboard, bass, and percussion. Knowing that a banjo would be a long shot, I was hoping

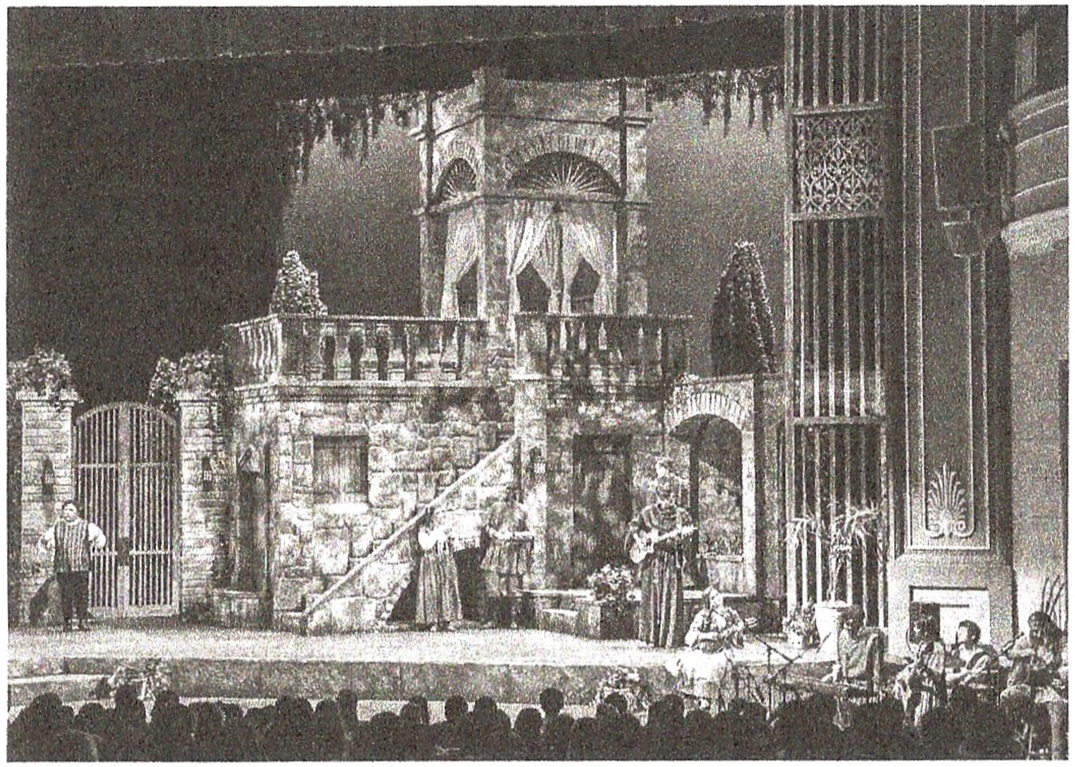

Figure 9.2 Much Ado 2015: the musicians performing during a high school matinee, by permission of the University of Georgia Department of Theatre and Film Studies.

to get all of those instruments plus perhaps some others. My musical director was ready for anything. Ultimately the main "band" included Friar Francis, our musical director, who sang and played guitar and keyboard; Dogberry, the main singer; Verges, who played keyboard and sang backup; and four members of the watch, who played bass, guitar, drums, and mandolin while singing backup. For several numbers, Don Pedro joined in on guitar, Claudio on cojon, and Hero on accordion. Both Hero and Claudio sang. The main band was present throughout the show as their characters or providing the music.

The rehearsals began with much excitement as two members of the company, Stephanie Murphy and Zach Byrd, were working on their MFA thesis roles while other members had never performed Shakespeare before in their lives. The level of knowledge and experience varied greatly. I am not a fan of spending large amounts of time on table work as

I think that actors in smaller roles can feel that their time is being wasted, so after one long day of a read, dramaturgical presentations, and an iambic pentameter intensive, we set to work. I started each rehearsal at the table going over the scene to make sure everyone knew exactly what they were saying, the language structure, and comparisons with folio and quarto. I was very lucky to have Jennifer Marks at the rehearsals to answer questions. Stephanie and Zach also served as leaders among the actors with their knowledge of the language and their research. The musical director had arranged the songs to fit the instrumentation that we had, and I had regularly scheduled music rehearsals throughout the process. I also brought in Lisa Fusillo, head of our Dance department, to choreograph the two dance numbers. These numbers were based mostly on historical dance, but were a bit loose in the period style as the dance was set to contemporary music. We were moving forward.

A Successful Production: Fran and Kristin

In April 2015, the show opened and had a successful run.[4] One reviewer was struck by the production's music, noting that "Many of the characters in this production are also musicians in the band within the play, breaking out into song at various points during the show with a hey-nonny-nonny and a cover song or two."[5] Another spoke of "the phenomenally placed songs" and "the stunning set designed by assistant professor of scenic design, Julie Ray."[6] Both reviewers went on at length about the effective performances.

What the reviewers did not notice was the effective education that took place as well. The variety of places where students learned is worth noting: they worked independently and collaboratively in classrooms, libraries, workshops, and rehearsal rooms, as well as on computers and on stage. In addition, the production was the thesis project for three MFA candidates in theatre (two in acting, one in costume design), served as a design opportunity for an MFA lighting designer, and contributed to the research programs of a doctoral student in English and another

in theatre. Undergraduate actors received course credit for their theatrical work, but they also received a crash course in Shakespeare's text. Those 20 actors were not the only students affected by the production. Around 30 more built sets, constructed costumes, and crewed the show. Two graduate students and 18 undergraduates acted, sang, and danced their way through Shakespeare. In all, about 50 students and faculty worked on the show, which was seen by over 1,500 people.

Notes

1 Maria Chappell, personal email, June 6, 2018.
2 All quotations from *Much Ado* are taken from the *Arden Shakespeare: Complete Works*, ed. Richard Proudfoot et al. (London: Methuen, 2011), 913–940. We give the passages in the order of the song's lyrics, which are widely (though possibly illegally) available on the internet.
3 "'Serve God, love me and mend': Performing the Role of Beatrice in William Shakespeare's 'Much Ado about Nothing,'" MFA thesis, University of Georgia, 2015.
4 According to the department's business manager, Steven Carroll, the production had over 1,000 patrons attend, as well as over 600 high school students at a matinee performance, grossing nearly $15,000.
5 Dina Canup, "Theater Notes," *Flagpole Magazine*, April 8, 2015.
6 Savannah Sturkle, "Much Ado About Nothing," *Red and Black*, April 19, 2015.