

The Bard whets UT's appetite for residence week

By Adrian Dickerson

Beneath a waning sun and rising moon, tucked away in a corner on campus, the faint strum can be heard of a strolling minstrel. Where else would the spirit of William Shakespeare be than at the University's own treasure chest, the Harry Ransom Center?

As the Shakespeare Under the Stars Gala kicked off Wednesday night, a host of enthused admirers of the Bard showed for the support of the renowned British theater troupe, Actors From The London Stage.

AFTLS, once known as the "Bard Squad," began in 1975 and has included major British actors such as Patrick Stewart and Ben Kingsley. Now the program does a nine-week tour each semester, expanding to approximately 350 residencies on 150 U.S. campuses.

It premiered on the UT campus in 1979, returned in 1983 and has been a part of the University of Texas every year since 1999. The program, now housed and funded by the University of Notre Dame, brings not only a theatrical experience to the University of Texas, but an extremely educational one as well.

The Shakespeare Under the Stars Gala benefited the AFTLS endowment, not only with the grace of its donors, but through the gala's silent auction. Somewhere between the stuffed quail and the free bar, everything from get-away tickets, first edition novels and even a real glazed pig (minimum bid \$500) were sold to lucky individuals.

"I have my eye on the one-hour spa treatment," joked Judy Maggio, anchor of KEYE news and Mistress of Ceremonies.

Although the gala benefited the AFTLS endowment, the true benefit appeared to be for UT and its community. "The AFTLS program is great for students," said UT President Larry Faulkner. "It enriches their educational experience in a valuable way and you can't expect students of Texas to pay for it. That's why we get private donors."

Actors From The London Stage gives incredible breadth to UT's educational undertaking, completely changing the way Shakespeare is taught in the U.S.

"It is a five-handed (five actors) performance playing all 20 to 30 roles with minimal props, minimal costumes and minimal space," said Matt Radford, British actor and AFTLS board member. "We rely on characters and voices - and that is the essence," Radford stresses.

During the week in residency at the UT campus, the actors teach up to 35 classes and workshops. The consideration is that Shakespeare is a unique text that transcends the boundaries of theater and English. The program gives students the opportunity to read Shakespeare out loud and use the script as a functional acting tool, something foreign to conventional literature classes.

Students take on scenes and work closely with talented, experienced actors who show them how they approach a literary text. Eventually students perform a one-person show and three or four minimalist productions of a full-length Shakespeare play, without a director.

Undoubtedly, students get the greater benefit of this program. Even across the spectrum of majors, students Christin Kahlich, a Plan II psychology major, and Sarah Bayne, a Plan II government and English major, all get to partake in the performance program.

"I find that [performance] makes learning it simple, with more depth and to a greater degree," said Kahlich.

Perhaps responsible for the current success of AFTLS is professor of English at UT, Coordinator of Residency for AFTLS and faculty advisor for "Spirit of Shakespeare," Alan Friedman.

"We're whetting the community's appetite for residence week," Friedman whispered while his students performed scenes from "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Every year he ambitiously looks forward to taking students under his wing. "Stick with Shakespeare, and you stick with me," he said. "New people come in with greater energy, excitement and enthusiasm."

In a collaborative effort, the benefit also proved to support the Harry Ransom Center to a great extent. In a seemingly new, but beautifully renovated building, the HRC is the best place on campus to host such an event. Not only with the digitization of many of its treasures, including the rare Gutenberg Bible, the gallery has opened its archives to a sizeable amount of Shakespeare's work and early portfolios.

"The HRC has hosted AFTLS for years," said Tom Galyean, Assistant Director for Development at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center. "We help with logistics of the event and work with the College of Liberal Arts, making us more accessible and establishing a presence in the University's community."

All in all, AFTLS receives a handsome endowment and the HRC establishes itself as a part of the community, but it's the students that walk away with the most invaluable benefit.

"For students, this is as good as it gets in Shakespeare studies," gleaned Sheldon Ekland-Olson, UT Provost. "It is a strong program in academic studies with the twin element of AFTLS and Shakespeare at Winedale. They encourage each other, sort of hand in glove."

Meanwhile, UT looks ahead to the events of AFTLS week in residence.

Beginning Sept. 13, everything from Shakespeare screenings in the Flawn Academic Center to "A Midsummer Night's Dream" occur around campus.

The Actors From The London Stage simply insist that you play with them, in the magic of Shakespeare and the combined gift of creative imaginations. It's a wonderful experience, literally creating the play along with its actors - an Elizabethan style that is not to be missed. The audience takes away the gift of Shakespeare, the benefit, and lives where you live, in your hearts and imaginations. That is something you can't bid on.