



SHAKESPEARE COUNTRY

by PETER WHELAN
World Premiere sponsored by BT
for The Little Theatre Guild of Great Britain
Directed by DAVID FLETCHER
Set Designed by TIM MEACOCK
Lighting designed by LOFT THEATRE TECHNICAL WORKSHOP



Shakespeare Country

by Peter Whelan
• World premiere •
commissioned by BT and Little Theatre Guild

SATURDAY 16th to SATURDAY 23rd OCTOBER, 1993



Rafe Duke	.....	STUART WATERWORTH
Zana Ferris	.....	MARY MacDONALD
Billy Shake	.....	JOHN FENNER
Koichi Bando	.....	JIM WALDEN
Mira Edge	.....	SKYE CUNNINGHAM
Aurelia Ward	.....	MARGARET BRAYSHAW
Gunter Kaufman	.....	TREVOR MURLEY
Dan Howard	.....	RICHARD JONES
Bonny Lee	.....	JACKIE RUSSELL
Webbo	.....	HELEN WALL
Sergeant 405	.....	PHIL REYNOLDS

THE SETTING

The action takes place on mid-summer's eve and mid-summer's day in and around modern day Stratford-upon-Avon. The play is in two acts, with an interval after act one.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Fretton's of Leamington for loan of motorcycle helmet and leathers;
"The Black Swan" (alias the "Dirty Duck") of Stratford for loan of the Stella Artois umbrella.

PRODUCTION STAFF

Stage Manager	.....	Sophie Hamilton
Assistant Stage Managers	.....	Peter Ingham, Chris Sharpe
Wardrobe	.....	Margaret Shepherd, Emma Waterhouse
Property Mistresses	.....	Tricia Spelman, Elspeth Dales
Lighting Operators	.....	Don Sykes, Peter Bartley, Gill Hare
Sound Operators	.....	Nick Welch, Eamon Pickering, Amy Edmunds
Set Construction	.....	CMoore, Richard Moore, Ann Wood,
		Ron Grey, Stan Smith, Richard Pemberton
Theatre Technician	.....	CMoore
Photographs	.....	Christopher Bradbury
Programme Cover	.....	Gus MacDonald

Much ado as Billy Shake goes for broke

MARION McMULLEN

Theatre Reporter

TO BE or not to be, pardner? The Bard of Avon is polking up his six shillars and putting on his spurs to help theatre goers in Coventry and Warwickshire win a place in the record books.

William Shakespeare is transformed into a modern-day Billy the Kid as Stratford-upon-Avon residents call for Billy Shakes, blue grass music and wedding bells in Shakespeare Country.

The comedy by Peter Whelan is being staged this week by the Criterion Theatre in Coventry, the Priory Theatre, Kenilworth, Rugby Theatre and the Loft Theatre in Leamington.

They are among more than 50 amateur groups throughout the country taking part in the world's biggest stage premiere organised as part of the BT Biennial.

Here, our Evening Telegraph reviews give their verdicts.

MARION McMULLEN, at the Priory Theatre, Kenilworth:
I've honestly entered into the Country and Western spirit at the Priory by having his all as Billy Shake - except for a strategically placed flute.

Angela Martin added to the fun as the madcap Wilks and Janet Scott, making her Priory debut as would be actress Mira Edge, showed a nice comedy touch. But the acting honours go to Kenilworth who have to go to Dave Malloy as a struggling playwright trying to persuade the Royal Shakespeare Company to stage his latest work *Zoggy*.

BARBARA GOLDER, at the Criterion Theatre, Coventry:
Director John Firth offers an interesting Stratford production. Helen Withers as Zana and Peter Ingham as John hold the piece together but Pete Wood as Country and Western singer Billy Shake, would probably ring a few more nooses of his inner than the side as the fool.
Amanda Butler as the mystical Webbo holds the attention, but I couldn't help



Going for a record: Helen Withers as Zana and Pete Wood as Billy Shake at The Criterion Theatre

wishing John Marston looked slightly more ostentatious as the Japanese (phantasmagorical) executioner.

HELENE HARRATT, at the Loft Theatre, Leamington:
What a lovely pitch Peter Whelan's play is. Maybe Whelan, whose pedigree of *The Accrington Pals* and *School of Night* promised better than this, should steer clear of comedy.

The cast at the Loft's *Country* seemed in the mid-way of whiny, astute and occasional flashes of genuine wit with performances that veered in and out of focus.

By far the most successful in building together the bits and pieces was Ann Withers as the Kenilworth, the Japanese answer to Puck.
ALISON McCONEY, at Rugby Theatre:
Much Ado About Nothing would have been a more fitting title for the production at Rugby Theatre.
The cast struggled and drained any atmosphere from the play with their often wooden performances.



In the hot seat: Angela Martin and Selwyn Booth of the Priory Theatre

Not Shakespeare at its most classic, but a whole lot of fun

THIS week I've had the unusual experience of seeing the same play twice in three days, at two of our local theatres, with a totally different cast in each case.

The play is Peter Whelan's *Shakespeare Country*, the reason for my double vision the ST Biennial, during which a brand new historical piece is re-created simultaneously in some 60 theatres worldwide.

In truth, *Shakespeare Country* is not a classic, but then it doesn't really set out to be. Rather, it's a lightweight piece of whimsy which provides plenty of chuckles for the audience and fun for the cast.

Rafe Duke and Zana Ferris are two actors, playing the parts of Oberon and Titania in an RSC production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, they're due to start the following day, but Zana is having second thoughts.

Meanwhile various other characters appear on the scene: an American Country and Western singer, Billy Shake, who claims to be a direct descendant of the bard himself, and his manager Bonny Lee, an elderly pair of Shakespearean experts, Dame Aurelia Ward and Professor Gunter Kaufman; a young couple, left-wing playwright Dan and his garage-styled girlfriend Mira. Then there's the mysterious

Japanese tourist Koichi, who may or may not have mystical powers, and the new-age traveller Webbo, who most definitely does!

The action takes place around Stratford-upon-Avon - at first in the woods outside the town, where the legendary Shakespeare oak is supposedly situated. As in a *Midsummer Night's Dream*, a love potion is brought forth in an attempt to bring the supposedly happy couple together on the eve of their wedding.

Although as befits a contemporary version of the tale, it's administered in polystyrene coffee cups. Needless to say, things don't quite go according to plan.

The Priory: It seems I've chosen a good night to watch The Priory's production. It's Sunday, and the audience includes no fewer than three Shakespeare Country casts having a night off from their own productions. By joining in with the songs and laughter throughout, they've managed to generate a wonderful atmosphere.

This has undoubtedly helped the cast, none more so than Jim Denny as Billy Shake. Here is a cheery, chirpy country boy who positively milks the crowd during his musical numbers. He also displays a commendable lack of inhibition during Act 2, when he appears on stage wearing nothing but his straws - I'll

leave you to guess where!

He's well supported by the rest of the cast, particularly like the performance of Pauline Low and John Kelley as Aurelia and Gunter, as they share their Shakespearean "in-jokes". Dave Malloy as the beer-swilling Dan, and Angela Martin as a sprightly yet insecure Webbo. And there are good debuts from Ron Austin as Rafe and Janet Scott as Mira.

Full marks too for an imaginative and versatile set which transforms with minimum effort from Stratford town centre to a mysterious, enchanted wood.

The Loft: Two days later and I'm at the Loft. It's fascinating to see how differently some of

the roles are portrayed. The Loft's Koichi, played by Jim Walden, is a more mischievous but less imposing character than the Priory's version, played by Selwyn Booth. And Webbo (Helen Wall) is considerably more downbeat, although it's an equally likable performance.

Billy and Bonny, played by John Fenner and Jackie Russell, are older, more worldly-wise and a little less wit - as epitomised by the fact that Billy remains at least partially clad throughout.

There are other roles which are played almost identically, yet equally well - notably Aurelia and Gunter, portrayed by Margaret Brayshaw and



The Loft Theatre, Leamington, is one of more than 60 theatres countrywide, including the Priory Theatre, Kenilworth, performing Shakespeare Country this week. Playwright Peter Whelan will attend the gala production at The Loft tonight (Fri), and the play continues tomorrow at both venues.

The Loft production features, from the left, Richard Jones (Glen), John Fenner as Billy, Jackie Russell as Bonnie. Seated are Margaret Brayshaw (Aurelia) and Trevor Murvey (Gunter).

Trevor Murley. For me, the star of the Loft's production is Mary MacDonald as Zana. She looks wonderful, exudes elegance, and captures Zana's moods perfectly.

In conclusion: I'm not about to go awarding marks out of ten - suffice to say that whichever production you choose to watch you can look forward to an enjoyable night out in Shakespeare's country. - Phil Appleby.

Both productions run till this Saturday, October 23. For information about ticket availability, contact The Priory box office on 0926 58768, or The Loft box office on 0926 426341



