

Professor's research allows audience to hear Shakespeare's words in his own accent

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Like an archeologist reconstructing the fossilized skeleton of an ancient species, a University of Kansas theatre professor has pieced together the bones of a form of English that has never been heard in North America in modern times — the original pronunciation of Shakespeare.

Thanks to the work of Paul Meier, audiences can get a sense of what it might have been like to eavesdrop on opening night of “Hamlet” or “Romeo and Juliet” at the Globe Theater in London or to listen in on a shipboard conversation on the Mayflower as it approaches the shores of the New World.

“What did English sound like back then?” Meier said. “Was it posh or down to earth? Was it anything like today’s British or American English? Would we understand it?”

Meier is staging [Shakespeare](#)’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” in November, and it will be the first time in North America that a Shakespeare production is being performed entirely in the original pronunciation.

In his 30-plus years as a teacher, director and dialect coach, Meier has researched dialects of languages from around the world and has been a movie dialect coach for such films as Ang Lee’s “Ride with the Devil,” Tim Robbins’ “Arlington Road” and Billy Baldwin’s “Elmer Gantry.” His love of and experience directing Shakespeare’s plays is the impetus

behind the mounting of one of the greatest of the Bard's comedies.

For the KU production, Meier has been collaborating with David Crystal, one of the greatest living authorities on original pronunciation. Crystal was the scholar tapped by Shakespeare's Globe in London when that theater company mounted the first original pronunciation production in 2004. The author of more than 100 books on a wide range of linguistic topics, including the "Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language" and "Pronouncing Shakespeare," Crystal spent two weeks at KU in September, working with Meier and his cast.

So what will the KU audiences hear when they attend this production?

"American audiences will hear an accent and style surprisingly like their own in its informality and strong r-colored vowels," Meier said. "The original pronunciation performance strongly contrasts with the notions of precise and polished delivery created by John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier and their colleagues from the 20th century British theater."

Meier said audiences will hear word play and rhymes that "haven't worked for several hundred years (love/prove, eyes/qualities, etc.) magically restored, as Bottom, Puck and company wind the language clock back to 1595."

"The audience will hear rough and surprisingly vernacular diction, they will hear echoes of Irish, New England and Cockney that survive to this day as 'dialect fossils.' And they will be delighted by how very understandable the language is, despite the intervening centuries."

Because the KU production will be only the fourth in the world, preceded by the two Globe productions and a production of "Julius Caesar" by John Barton at Cambridge in the 1950s, audiences may wonder why there have been so few original pronunciation productions.

Crystal said it's not because competence on the nature of early modern English is lacking, but that so few of the linguists who can demonstrate it with authority also have theater interests and credentials.

“Theaters might well have a desire to put on original pronunciation productions, but without Crystal and a dialect coach like myself, who has implemented his designs, there is an almost total lack of qualified personnel,” Meier said.

“Original costume, dance, staging and music have been staged repeatedly, but not in the original [pronunciation](#),” he said. “To restore the lost rhymes, the lost wordplay, is exciting. To hear how much more swiftly the actors of 1600 would have delivered the text is another hugely important insight. To hear the words free from the baggage that attaches to contemporary dialects is likewise exciting and illuminating.”

After the stage production closes, the cast will spend several days in the recording studios at Kansas Public Radio, creating a radio drama production, complete with music and sound effects, to ensure that the performance is available to everyone through radio broadcast, netcasts and CD. KPR's Darrell Brogdon, a veteran radio-drama director, will direct the production in collaboration with Meier.

Provided by University of Kansas

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