

## Hilltown Story

In April I signed up to be in the community production of Anonymous Shakespeare. Erica, who is a theater person and an incredible human, operates as the producer, director, communications and PR, coach and good witch to everyone involved. She accepts help.

She explains how the Anonymous Shakespeare concept started in Seattle, they've done it here twice before, pre pandemic. We did Twelfth Night and I played The Captain.

Here's how it worked:

A few months before the approximate date of the show she starts putting a word-of-mouth effort out there, a couple Facebook and instagram posts with local groups. No ringers here, this is true community theater. If you sign up, you get in.

[Maybe you've heard mention of Stephen my new friend, we have a terrific connection and we're figuring out a pretty unique way to experience that together. When I'm with him I get to feel a bit of The Couple vibe. (Acouplawhat is the question with us two. We definitely a pair. Anyhoo.)

Stephen and maybe a dozen of his people are the only folks I know in the Hilltowns so far. He asked me to a Helen Gillet concert in late winter. I remember that day, in this lofty dance yoga studio (which he built 25 years ago), the sun streaming in the windows and this charge in the air of being in the room with others like that, for something intimate but still public, for the first time in a long ass time. I felt it as an energy source, and one that I missed.

That winter afternoon three dainty nymphs of young women played delicate and sad bluegrass as opening act for Helen, who played this strange lovely cello music wherein she kept beat by touching her instrument in ways that were so tender and intimate it made me self conscious that I was staring.

Stephen introduced me to Erica that day, which was how I learned about Anonymous Shakespeare.]

After her local media campaign Erica had 30 people sign up. She made the casting decisions and until the moment the show begins, she is the only person who knows that list. She then proceeds to meet with each of us for rehearsals, 30 of us five or six times each so yeah. Approx 150 one-on-one rehearsals in two months.

For each of us she came to our house or hosted at hers, with each of us she played the part(s) opposite ours and, for those of us who are not scholars, explained what the lines meant or for those who had acting experience, how to embody their role ... She helped us by painting the picture of how we will move around the space and on and off stage, based on her own imagination of pulling this off at a venue she's never done it before but to mentally prepare us all in a unified fashion for what the experience might be like.

This whole time mind you, these people do cross each other's paths now and again, they're a loosely knit bunch of artists and farmers and if that's sounds romantic AF, it is. It's also very real with all the toils and troubles of any humans but still, there is an old-fashioned joy present when I'm around folks here.

For two months this cast of 30, these folks who know each other ... some are even married to each other, some are parent and child ... no one knows who else signed up, or if there was a slip, certainly no one knew who was playing which role.

Until the day of, we've all only played our own part multiple times facing Erica.

And me? I was facing a lifetime of stage fright. I have no fear when it comes to the trainer/presenter/speaker stage ... but theatre? Fuhgeddaboutit. And yet here I was, my life opening up for me in this amazing new place, ready to face this fear. Amongst strangers. Like ya do.

When I heard I would be playing a captain, I immediately adjusted my posture, stood taller, put my hands on my hips. I continued for the next weeks, getting to know me as the captain, reciting my lines, following the prompts from my rehearsals with Erica (five hours of her time to direct me on a three minute part).

It took courage to move from reading the lines, "saying" them in my head, and then starting to walk around the hose reciting. At first I was too afraid to even try speaking them aloud to anyone I knew. A few weeks later, I was there. Retta was the first I think, and then Brad. Hannah and Em were visiting and overheard my first outdoor practice. 'This is Illyria, lady!' Beth got the whole reading, and I think I gave mom a tidbit after the fact. I pressed on and practiced well, I practiced steadily, I did not procrastinate until the deadline was upon me.

I felt ready, I think because by design, there was no path to failure. That's not the same as a participation trophy either. It's more like everything about participating and nothing about trophies.

And then... it's show time.

There is only one performance.

Everybody shows up, actors and audience together, a clear summer evening after a really hot day, cooling as the sun sets, a lovely table abundant with beautiful, special handmade with love food by a local friend caterer. People bring blankets and lawn chairs and a bottle of wine. Everyone is sitting on this little hill that faces a stage area. There's about 175 people.

Erica opens brilliantly with an introduction... she's just bright as can be and breaks it all down, Shakespeare in plain and playful English. How everything is going to work and an invitation no one can refuse to find equality across all actors and efforts, I wish I could do her justice, but let's just say, by the time she led us all in taking a few deep breaths, she had us enthralled.

And then, the play begins!

[Remember the actors are sitting amongst the audience and none of us are wearing costumes, we're all just wearing anormal clothes, people are barefoot on stage in shorts and a T-shirt, which lends a casualness to the whole thing, really the most magical quality of all was a feeling of "yeahhh so a bunch of us? we were all just hangin out, having a picnic... and things were feelin real nice between us all, so nice in fact that, POOF! we spontaneously erupted into a Shakespeare production." Which was about to happen.]

The opening scene is a court singer, a demure man wearing a cloth cap and playing guitar. Orsino enters -- “a noble duke in nature as in name” as I will describe him in a moment – and as the duke stands up from the audience, she speaks her line:

*If music be the food of love, play on!*

And then Orsino’s servants stand up and respond with their lines. As we each get up and begin to speak our first lines ... as we make our way down to this little stage area and complete our scene... the audience giggles and cheers. Because they know each other. Everyone potentially knows a little sumpin about each person who stands up. Which of course informs the way people connect with the character someone is playing. And the gender is beautifully effortlessly fluid across all the roles. Anonymous *Non-Binary* Shakespeare, for real.

It's not only the revealing of each individual but the surprises of who gets coupled and tripled together, and not only to the audience but to the actors who are just as surprised and delighted to greet each other and yet remain composed and remember our lines all at once.

It was quite simply, like no other thing.

I loved getting to embody the captain. He’s a good soul. Helpful. Knows the locals and the area, so has good intel. On stage I had nerves, and I felt them. I felt self conscious, but also light. I was terrified and broke up once and missed a line but caught myself and had a blast. My partner, playing Viola, was Stella, the 18 year old daughter of Stephen’s friend Amii. She did great too.

A couple of favorites from my lines, that I will remember for the rest of my life:

*I just went from hence  
and then twas fresh in murmur  
for you know what great ones do  
the less will prattle of.*

(in others words, the peasants gossip about the royals)

And:

*Be you his eunuch and I your mute will be  
When my tongue blabs then let mine eyes not see.*

(Which I sang to Susie to the tune of Gilligan’s Island operatic version of Hamlet)

Oh and the sweet interruptions! The dog trotting across the stage. An actor gets teary eyed, and we all give her a moment. Truly, that happened, all 175 of us, just a pause, then she moved on. The toddler looking for his mommy while she’s playing Olivia, the virtuous maid I described in my role, this young mom adorably and so earnestly looks over to Erica questioningly, like “what should I do?” And Erica — ever encouraging Erica — makes this gesture. This inviting, permitting motion tipping her hand palm up, encouraging her to ‘yes pick him up’ and so Olivia does and toddler-on-hip finishes her lines.

The peepers peeping in the pond.

Oh, and Malvolio. Lovely Malvolio. Not the youngest but most definitely the hunkiest of our whole theater nerd production, with his swimmers body, wearing soccer pants and a T-shirt, those dark eyes and square jaw, the luxe black hair ... he had all the girls and all the boys... all the we's and all the they's, the us's and them's, all of us positively swooning in unison.

You might already be familiar with these lines of Malvolio:

*Some are born great  
Some achieve greatness  
And some have greatness thrust upon them*

In one of the evening's crowning moments of theatricality, Malvolio also delivers lines like:

*Daylight and champaign discovers not more.  
This is open. I will be proud*

*I will be point-device the very man.  
I do not now fool myself, to let imagination jade me;  
for every reason excites to this, that my lady loves me.*

...and in the most crowd pleasing move of all -- this next heartthrob of Western Mass, this Disney prince lookin motherfuckah -- having sufficiently warmed the audience up to cheer just about any-damn-thing he wanted ... Malvolio TEARS OFF his \*tear-away\* soccer pants (!) with the flourish of a Chippendale dancer, to reveal his magnificent legs covered in bright yellow tights with black "cross-gartered" ribbons wrapped around like a ballerina.

It was stunning.

There were only maybe five different costume elements like this in the show. A veil on a headband, a ballcap with a moustache for Viola in drag. Any costume had to be something you could conceal and reveal in a moment.

Everyone in the community knows or knows of Stephen Yoshen so there are plenty ahhs and ohhs as Stephen rises wearing miss-matched lemon and lime colored converse, just like he does any other day of the week with jeans or a sarong, and just like he did to his daughter's wedding. Stephen was a dancer for many years and now has a limp recovering from cancer in his leg. This gait allows him to play Andrew charmingly and move like a perfect drunk, which he is not IRL at all.

Watching the performance I saw this community with the aid of his lens, he's already shared so many stories and experiences that involve some of these folks. Conversely, watching him perform, I saw him through their lens. It's impossible not to think about all the different relationships amongst all the people there, imagine all the secrets that are known, all of the good and the bad and the ugly... it's impossible not to think the word 'village' and suddenly one of the villagers just stands up and they are transformed for a moment and we all play along with them

and it's not at all about being a good actor but omfg though there were some extraordinarily good actors.

The entire crowd was all-in. The applause was for everyone, ourselves, all of it. It didn't matter, there was a suspension of judging "good" from "bad" acting; whether you understood Shakespeare or pretended to, or didn't at all. I fell in love with every one of them. There was beauty and truth, age and youth, genderbending with the content of the show and the casting, all of this compassionate, productive, happy human energy funneled into a quirky commitment to share a high quality and meaningful experience.

Being part of that effort, the show of serious respect, the hilarity, the abundance of acceptance, the collective attentiveness... that was some good medicine my friends.

Is all I'm sayin.

And now I know some more people.