CHRIS CLARK

Chris Clark is a theatre professor at Utah Valley University who has directed a number of productions, including several with BYU's Young Company Shakespeare Troupe. Website: ***http://uvu.edu/theatre/people/clark.html***

Tell us about about the degrees you've received and what your education has done for you.

My undergraduate degree is a BA in English from BYU. I came to BYU on a theatre scholarship, but sometime during my mission I decided there was no way I could support a family in theatre. So when I came home I switched to English. But I don't regret it, because that's how I met my wife! We were in an English Society play together. It was one of those Biblical pageant plays. I was the devil and she was a chicken on Noah's ark. It was very romantic.

After graduation I worked in retail management for about four years. I made good money but I felt like I wasn't using my talents at all, so I quit. And my wife, thankfully, encouraged me. It was a serious leap of faith for her. We packed up and moved to England. I got my MFA in directing Shakespeare from the University of Exeter.

After I finished at Exeter, we returned back to Utah and a good friend, Clifford Mayes, encouraged me to finish with a PhD. So I was accepted into a PhD program at BYU in educational leadership. And I'm still toiling away there on my dissertation! But I'm close to finishing…I think.

Can you tell us what you gleaned from your time in England and at the Globe, and why you keep going back to England?

I learned a lot from living there. First of all, and oddly the most important thing I learned, was the value of the Church organization in my life. We lived in this tiny little town on the English Channel called Dawlish. There were about 500 people aged 90 and above there, and then us with our two little boys. We were the only members in town. And we had only lived there two days when people from the ward—which was 40 minutes away—starting dropping by, asking if they could help, driving us places. It was the most Christian thing I think I've ever experienced. So Lisa and I both have incredibly warm memories of the ward there.

The program at Exeter is focused on finding ways to make Shakespeare both innovative and accessible. We were trained in original Elizabethan performance, as opposed to contemporary Shakespeare performance, which has actually changed quite a bit. Part of our experience there included an internship at the Globe. We were able to perform there—scenes from various Shakespeare plays, monologues, etc.—all for the tour groups going through the theatre. It was amazing to be able to perform on that stage. We learned the value of the audience in Shakespeare—as actors we should never ignore them or take them for granted. In Shakespeare's day they might throw something at us or beat us up in an alley after the play. Today they just go to sleep or roll their eyes and read the program. Either way, as an actor, you lose. You have to captivate them. We also trained with the Royal Shakespeare Company. I think people would be surprised at the kind of serious training and research that Shakespearean practitioners go through.

As for England, I'm not sure why I'm so drawn to it. It might be ancestral voices! I just love storytelling, and everything over there—particularly in London—has a

story attached to it. Everything has value and age. I love that. I'm proud of American progression, but it bothers me that we destroy and bulldoze so much of our history. We barely acquire history, and then it's gone! Another strip mall. Europeans have a much stronger sense of history and storytelling than we do.

Tell us about your work with *Marrying Man*, *The Tempest*, and *Nosferatu*.

Marrying Man is the only play I've ever written, and I didn't really even write it. I compiled it. It tells the story of William Shakespeare's early marriage to Anne Hathaway when he was 18 and she was 26. I used lines from all 37 plays to comprise the text. I didn't write a word of it; Shakespeare wrote it all. I just scoured the plays, found the scraps, and assembled them into a new, autobiographical story. It was surprisingly easy to do, and it was an incredibly fun project to put on stage.

The idea behind my production of *The Tempest* was that it was a Jacobean Masque. The style of performance under King James was different than the style under Queen Elizabeth. Our actors were all masked, the stage was quite small, and the backdrops were all forced perspective with very little set and props. The cast was entirely male—even the one female role. There was a lot of magic and visual spectacle, which is a very Jacobean idea. The unique element of this production was that I had four "readers" sitting at the four points of the stage, and they read all of the characters lines from a script, like reader's theatre. Each actor had 6 or 7 different voices they had to use for various characters. The actors on the stage didn't speak at all. For me, this was an experiment. It came together very well—I was very proud of it, and it had some national recognition.

My original idea for *Nosferatu* was to project the film on a giant screen and have the actors mime the actions in front of it. It would have been interesting but incredibly difficult to pull off. Then, last summer, I saw some mixed-media work by the English theatre director Katie Mitchell. Mixed-media is where you incorporate elements of film into live performance. She was doing this amazing work with lighting and cameras onstage, and I thought, why not try this kind of thing with *Nosferatu*? Re-imagine the film, live, in front of the audience. What we eventually did with *Nosferatu* is use elements of the 1922 film—exterior scenes and action sequences—and seamlessly integrate them into live actors on a live set being shot in real time with real cameras. And this was all projected on a screen. If we did our job right, the audience wouldn't know where the 1922 version started and ours ended.

What we didn't anticipate was how much of an ensemble piece this would become. The true art of the piece was in the ensemble; in how actors would transform into various characters onstage, and then turn around and move a lighting tree or shift an electrical wire. It was exciting.

What methods or procedures or inspirations do you put yourself through to bring new life to old texts?

With Shakespeare I have two rules: it has to be easy to understand, and the audience has to feel involved. If it's innovative and creative on top of that, then that's a plus! Shakespeare just gets a bad rap. I hate it. People think he's boring, or incomprehensible, or long-winded and pointless. And that's a reflection of some of the performances they might have seen, or the dull

introduction they may have had in their high school English class. (This is changing, by the way. Teachers are learning that if they introduce Shakespeare through performance rather than reading, they get much better comprehension. I've seen some incredible work being done in classrooms!)

My approach is to look at the story, decide which elements I love about it, and then let that be the springboard. I'm never afraid to cut text. I don't want the audience to get lost. Then I develop a directorial concept that propels the story—for example, if I change the time period there should be a reason for it in the text and it has to work with the story we're telling. And then I try to cast playful, intelligent actors who aren't afraid to look ridiculous or work hard with the piece. And they can't be afraid to look at the audience—to touch them and involve them. It makes such a difference in performance when you kill the fourth wall and draw everybody in. I think it's exciting.

Shakespeare stole all of his stories. He didn't create any of them; they were previous plays, or poems, or historical stories. But he knew which stories to steal, because he knew which ones were worth telling. I love Shakespeare because I love the plots, and I love the language he uses to convey them. And I love the variety of his canon. Each play has its own personality. To me it's incredibly fun to dig at each play and find a new way of telling the story.

What new projects are you most drawn to? Why?

I'm drawn to any project that allows me to be creative and to put my stamp on it. I love working with designers and producers, but at the end of the day I need to feel like the piece is my vision. That's my job as a director. I love doing pre-production work—deciding how I want to tell the story and make it new. And then bringing that to fruition is the most exciting thing I can think of. I can't do paint-by-numbers theatre, where everything is already spelled out for you in the text. And I'm anxious about doing what Peter Brook calls "dead theatre," which is where you do the same plays in the

same ways over and over again, and nothing new is ever achieved. That happens a lot, unfortunately. I want to see a play in a fresh way, and then bring that to the stage.

Your plays have a lot of beautiful visual imagery and appeal to them. What part does the visual element play in a production?

It's everything. I've learned that, I think, from film directors. If you can't say it visually, without words, then you aren't truly expressing it yet.

I remember doing an exercise with *The Tempest.* The actors in this show, except for the four readers, did not speak at all. They expressed everything through movement while the readers read the text and spoke their lines. One day I asked them to perform the entire show without the readers. Just the movement. And this is a Shakespeare play—the plots can be tricky without the words! But we just turned on music and let everyone go through the motions. And I could tell when we were being clear visually, and when we were not. It was amazing. I learned so much about the value of seeing and understanding imagery and pictures on stage.

With the Young Shakespeare Company at BYU, you toured one-hour versions of Shakespeare to elementary schools. What did you learn and enjoy in working with children's theatre so directly?

Well, we grow up with these terrible misconceptions about Shakespeare. We think he's boring, or difficult to understand. And a lot of that has to do with the way we were exposed to the works. Children need to see Shakespeare performed, and they need to see it early. It never ceases to amaze me that we can do fifty-minute cuttings of these plays, and school children will sit there, on the floor, and watch the entire thing. They don't get restless or rude. They sit there fascinated with it. And they understand it! Probably because nobody has told them yet that they can't understand it. We've done some tricky shows—*Pericles, King Lear,* and

Hamlet among them—and the kids have no problem staying with what's happening on stage. Children are such a giving audience. They are so appreciative. But they are also honest. They don't pull punches. You know immediately if something is working or not.

Theatre in general can be so exciting and even therapeutic for children. It's more than just pretending—it's expressing yourself in a safe environment. It's a way of dealing with obstacles and emotions in a creative way. You learn so much about yourself by being someone else for a few minutes. That's why children naturally do it. It helps them understand their role, their age, and their environment. I wish more adults would act. Somehow people think it's silly and pointless or intimidating and scary. It's neither. It's a lot of fun, and incredibly insightful.

How has being a Mormon artist affected your plays? What significance have spirituality and religion had on your work?

I don't think I've ever set out to add religion to a particular project. I think it's all intuitive. When I was directing *Richard II* for my MFA in England, I was working with a cast of all non-Mormons. And they kept remarking on the elements of Christianity I was bringing to the play—not in a disparaging way (they were very supportive), but I had no idea I was doing it.

I think part of the notion of having a testimony is that you are expressing it all the time, not just at the pulpit. It comes out in your interactions, your conversations, your choices, and your work. Being an LDS artist means that I am going to inevitably be bringing my testimony to the stage, and I'm great with that.

Theatre's a hard career to make a living at. What advice would you give to struggling artists who are trying to make ends meet?

There's no career path. You will never get a booth at the college career fair with someone recruiting plucky young theatre practitioners. That's the deal. You have to be aware of that. And there's no template for making it work. But it's all about work. It's about your ethic. It's your willingness to make something happen, instead of hoping it will.

But LDS artists can take comfort in knowing that Heavenly Father is guiding their career. He knows where we all fit, and what we do best. If we are willing to do the work and take the chances, He will make it happen in some way.

I also think you can support a family. I have five kids and we're doing okay. But you have to marry someone that is going to be supportive of your choice to be in theatre. I'm so lucky to be married to my wife, Lisa. She's excited for me and is constantly encouraging me to try new things with my work and to put my neck out for opportunities. She loves that I do what I love. ▪