



The Making of Remembering Shakespeare

by Cecilia Rubino

“SHAKESPEARE – FREE – LIBRARY”: Those were the words that jumped out at me when Frank Collierus, the director of Jefferson Market Library in New York City’s Greenwich Village, called saying he’d heard about my work and asked if I would be interested in offering free university lectures on Shakespeare. I, of course, said yes. In August in 2014, I gave a series of talks on Shakespeare at a branch of the New York Public Library that is a historic landmark and an important West Village community center on Sixth Avenue and Ninth Street. The cross section of New Yorkers who packed in for the lectures on Saturday afternoons amazed me: old people with walkers, teens scribbling notes, a bus driver on his day off and families. On the final afternoon, after giving a talk on “Shakespeare & Forgiveness,” I thanked everyone for being there and, impromptu said, “If any of you have lines of Shakespeare that you have memorized, would you consider sharing them? Here’s the stage.” Many people who had no connection to the theater came up to share lines of Shakespeare that they had learned as schoolchildren. But they also wanted to *tell the story* of why the words were important to them over time. And that’s when the idea of the film *Remembering Shakespeare*¹ began.

I was then invited to teach a series of “Acting Shakespeare classes for seniors” at Jefferson Market Library and with the New York Public Library’s permission, I began filming the documentary *Remembering Shakespeare* with participants in the course. Collaborating with my husband, the filmmaker Peter Lucas, I followed up these classes with interviews of a broad range of people who live with Shakespeare’s words

¹*Remembering Shakespeare*, directed by Cecilia Rubino (forthcoming, New York City), DVD.



embedded in their daily lives, ranging from a retired social worker to Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a Brooklyn native.

Their stories about why certain words and phrases have continued to be important to them over time led me to investigate deeper processes of personal memory. I asked questions such as: *How do you memorize? Do you have memorization techniques? Has your memory changed over time? Why has learning something by heart been important to you? And why did these particular words of Shakespeare stay in your memory?* A recurring theme in the interviews is that people remember the lines and phrases from Shakespeare that are deeply connected to their own personal stories and concerns.

While making the film, I also began researching what scientists actually know about human memory (surprisingly not very much!), as well as the history of acting practice and memorization, particularly in Shakespeare's day. I became so fascinated by the subject of Shakespeare and Memory that when invited to contribute a chapter for a book on new insights about Shakespeare for the 400th anniversary of his death, I chose to write on the topic. "If It Live In Your Memory," was published in *The Whirlwind of Passion: New Critical Perspectives on William Shakespeare* by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2016. The research that I did for the chapter inexorably connected to my ongoing work on the documentary *Remembering Shakespeare*. The film had a "sneak peek" screening of a 65-minute rough-cut version at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August 2016. We learned a lot from the international audiences who took the time to see the draft and speak with us in our talkbacks. We returned to New York to shoot new interviews, reshoot a number of scenes and to, most importantly, shoot more B-roll while we continued to edit. We found that it took multiple interviews with a person to get a fuller story and important visuals for the scene. We are now in the final stages of editing a 70-minute film, which we will send out to film festivals in the fall. We have just completed the edit of a 55-minute broadcast length version (Rubino 2016). I continued working on the "Shakespeare and Memory" project by teaching another "Acting Shakespeare for Seniors" class for the New York Public Library, this time at the Tompkins Square Library, for eight weeks in May and June of 2017.

Discovering the people that we interviewed in the film proved to be an unexpected adventure. Shortly after we began shooting in 2015, a word-of-mouth network spread as people heard about our *Remembering Shakespeare* project and began sharing with us the names of people that they felt we needed to interview. Though we were intent on talking with a broad range of New Yorkers, particularly people with no connection to the professional theater, with input from this network we expanded our interviews to include a few people from outside the city who were particularly passionate about Shakespeare. Locating some of the people we heard about and hoped to interview required months of patient persistence and, in one case, a year of investigative research. The overall process had the sheer chance and unexpected plot twists of an early Shakespeare play.

The film opens in the Shakespeare Garden in New York's Central Park. A graduate student of my husband's happened to take the train back to Brooklyn with him after a class and upon hearing about the film mentioned that she had a friend named Gabriel



who told a story about Shakespeare and the birds in Central Park. We contacted Gabriel Willow, who turned out to be the most acclaimed environmental educator, birder and wildlife expert in New York City. Gabriel Willow, who runs tours and teaches classes for the New York Audubon Society, has sharp eyes and an even sharper wit. We first filmed him in the Shakespeare Garden next to the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, where the Public Theater hosts free Shakespeare performances. It was an overcast April morning after days of rain. The garden was teeming with an astonishing number of birds, many stopping through New York City on their way north during their spring migration. With an array of warblers flitting behind him, Willow told the story of the German émigré Eugene Schieffelin who had a passion for birds and for the Bard.² Schieffelin was in the pharmaceutical business but also was the president of the American Acclimatization Society, an organization whose mission was to foster international scientific exchange and to bring European species of animals and plants to the United States. Schieffelin hatched the plan to introduce all sixty-four birds ever mentioned in the works of William Shakespeare to New York City's Central Park.



Gabriel Willow talking about Shakespeare and birds in Central Park.

In part of an interview not included in the film, Willow commented that Schieffelin couldn't possibly have introduced all the bird species cited in Shakespeare's work as there is no record of him bringing an ostrich or a pelican to Central Park, though both were mentioned in the plays. However, Schieffelin did apparently release many other birds noted by Shakespeare, including skylarks, nightingales, bullfinches, and thrushes. Willow, an urban ecologist, said that most of these species wouldn't have survived as Central Park wouldn't have had their required diet and, if they were migratory birds, would have been very confused by the dislocation. However, one species that Schieffelin released not only survived, it thrived and that was – the European Starling. Willow repeated that the story hasn't been definitively confirmed but apparently on a cold March morning in 1860, Schieffelin released sixty starlings

²Gabriel Willow, interviewed by the author, New York City, NY, April 23, 2016.



and the following year, he let go an additional forty.³ One can only imagine how many cages full of birds, he transported via steamer from Europe to Central Park or how many birds may have died in transit. But though only mentioned once in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*, the starling or *Sturnus vulgaris* is now the most abundant bird from Northern Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, with reportedly over 200 million in the United States alone. Though their mass flocking called "murmurations" are beautiful to watch, starlings are a menace to local birds and every year cause significant crop damage cross the country (Johnson and Glahn 1995).

The reference to the starling, a black and brown bird with iridescent shades of lime green and purple laced into its wings, is in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*, which was most likely written in 1597 and was part of a cycle of history plays that Shakespeare worked on at the end of the late 1590's. In the play, King Henry IV has overthrown the ineffectual Richard II and is facing ongoing military struggles on his northern and southern borders with both the Scots and the Welsh. In the first act, Henry IV is impatient with the mercurial Harry Percy, aptly named Hotspur, because he won't relinquish the Scottish prisoners that he has captured. Hotspur, in exchange for his prisoners, wants the release of his brother-in-law Edmund Mortimer, who is being held captive by the Welsh. But Henry IV suspects Mortimer of treason, as he was Richard II's choice as successor, and refuses to release him. Henry further infuriates Hotspur by ordering him to never speak the name of Mortimer again.

In Act 1, Scene 3 of the First Part of *King Henry IV*, Hotspur venting his frustration says:

*He (The king) said he would not ransom Mortimer,
Forbade my tongue to speak of Mortimer;
But I will find him when he lies asleep,
And in his ear I'll hollo 'Mortimer!'
Nay, I'll have a starling shall be taught to speak
Nothing but 'Mortimer,' and give it him
To keep his anger still in motion. (Henry IV. Part I.1.3.553-561)*

Willow noted that people in the 16th and 17th century kept starlings as pets, as the birds are adept mimics and like parrots can be taught to 'talk' and that Shakespeare was probably aware of this fact. (Mozart had a pet starling that he was so fond of that he was buried with it in 1787.) But Shakespeare could never have imagined that his one mention of the starling in his play *King Henry IV* would instigate what is arguably the most dramatic inundation of an invasive species in all of history.

The second interview in the film was actually our first in the whole process of shooting the documentary.⁴ We met Mordecai Rosenfeld, a retired lawyer, when he attended my initial lectures at Jefferson Market Library with his wife Paula Rosenfeld, a retired judge. Rosenfeld was required to memorize sonnets when he was a student at P.S. 152 in Brooklyn and he can still, with stunning virtuosity, speak the lines of a

³Gabriel Willow, interviewed by the author, New York City, NY, April 23, 2016.

⁴Mordecai Rosenfeld, interviewed by the author, New York City, NY, January 23, 2015.



number of them at lightning speed. Born in 1930, Rosenfeld said the initial lines of Sonnet 18 *"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day/Thou art more lovely and more temperate"* were a stumbling block for him for years because, though he knew the words, he never understood them. Growing up in the Midwood section of Brooklyn with no air conditioning, summers for Rosenfeld were stiflingly hot and unbearable. He remembers his mother sending him out to play in July and warning him to not to perspire too much, an absolute impossibility, as he would be drenched in sweat after five minutes of playing ball on the wide sidewalk in front of the telephone company next to his apartment building. He said it wasn't until years later that he realized that for Shakespeare, the word "summer" conjured up something positive – perhaps temperate weather, daffodils and songbirds – and that being compared to "summer" was actually a compliment to his beloved, who may have been a young man. But no matter how many years pass, the words of the sonnet stick with him:

*"But thy eternal summer shall not fade ...
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee".*

Rosenfeld memorized sonnets by rote in grade school much as Shakespeare would have learned by rote memorization in his presumed long hours at King Edward VI Grammar School in his native Stratford. In grammar school from the age of 7 to perhaps 13, Shakespeare learned in Latin the texts in Latin of Virgil, Ovid, and Seneca that would later influence his work as a playwright (Callow 2016).

Rosenfeld says in an extended interview, only part of which was included in the film:

I was first exposed to Shakespeare in the fifth and sixth grade when I was ten and eleven. We were going to learn Shakespeare from plays but it was decided that we would learn sonnets, which took no explanation, no context, just learning the poem. Well, learning a sonnet at ten is kind of mind boggling and there were 35-38 in every class. It got dull hearing so many students recite the same poem so the boys created a contest to see who could say them the fastest. I would read the assigned sonnet the night before, over and over and then start to say it to myself out loud as fast as I could. And my father would ask me what I was doing and I would say I was just memorizing Shakespeare and he would ask what does it mean and I would say I didn't know. I didn't know it was supposed to mean anything, but my father thought well he's doing his homework and that's good enough. And in class the next day all of the students would be called on and the boys would be in fierce competition with one another. We only had Mickey Mouse watches back then with no second hands but you could tell who was the fastest. The goal was to say the sonnet in less than 14 seconds, a second a line. I was often the fastest but sometimes you would miss a line or cough or sneeze and lose a second. And the poetry teacher Miss Curtis was just thrilled that she had a class of 5th and 6th graders who were in to poetry. And at parent teacher conferences she



would tell my parents that I was the best Shakespearean scholar that she had and my mother would beam for weeks.⁵



Mordecai Rosenfeld in Greenwich Village.

Rosenfeld still has in his village apartment the ten volumes of the *Henley Edition: The Plays of William Shakespeare* edited by William Ernest Henley (1901-1904), which along with the plays, included essays about Shakespeare by Johnson, Coleridge and others. Though he never learned why his family had this set of bound books that they never could have afforded during the depression, Rosenfeld thinks they may have been passed on from his maternal grandfather who died in 1920. He said his father when he was growing up was only interested in religious books about Jewish history and philosophy particularly during the war when Rosenfeld said he was trying like everyone else in the Jewish community in New York to grapple with the horrors of the holocaust and the war overseas. Rosenfeld, who never went to Manhattan as a child and rarely left Brooklyn, even as a teenager before he studied at to Brown University and Yale Law School says: "Memory wasn't a big thing for me, I never memorized things in my law practice, I always came in with written notes. But these sonnets and lines of Shakespeare have stayed with me. My way of thinking, it's the beauty of the language. And in the plays as well, it's the language, some of the speeches are so overwhelming. I re-read Shakespeare plays pretty often – *King Lear*, *Othello* or *Merchant of Venice* – the ones I know. I don't much read plays that I don't know but go back to these old friends that keep speaking to me."⁶

Our next interview in the film is with U. S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg who, like Mordecai Rosenfeld, grew up in the Midwood section of Brooklyn and memorized Shakespeare in grade school. It was a huge privilege to have the chance to speak with Justice Ginsburg at the Supreme Court in Washington D.C., on July 9, 2016, as she took time out from her busy schedule at the end before the court's

⁵Mordecai Rosenfeld interviewed by the author, New York City, NY, June 14, 2016.

⁶Mordecai Rosenfeld, interviewed by the author, New York City, NY, January 23, 2015.



legislative summer recess. We also interviewed her on July 9th, 2016⁷, the day after she had made controversial comments in an interview with the *New York Times* in which she said she couldn't imagine what would happen to the country if Trump were elected and, if he were, she thought her late husband might suggest that it was time to move to New Zealand (Kertschen 2016).

Trump called on Ginsburg to resign and the story was front-page news around the country. Ginsburg later apologized for her remarks, but when we met with her, she was clearly pleased to be talking about Shakespeare and not about politics. We were able to make contact with the Associate Justice through my brother-in-law, Richard Schneider, a professor and dean at Wake Forest University Law School, who had arranged for Ginsburg to preside over a mock re-trial of the character of Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice* later that month in Venice. The event, which included a production of *The Merchant of Venice* performed by the New York-based Compagnia de' Colombari in downtown Venice was held in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death and the 500th anniversary of the Jewish Ghetto. In our interview, Ginsburg mentioned that she had memorized Shakespeare in school at PS 238 – not only in her English classes, but in music class as well, where she learned a popular musical version of "Who is Sylvia" from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. She said that she also learned Portia's 'Quality of Mercy' speech from *The Merchant of Venice* (4.1.179-200).

Ginsburg said the passage was a favorite of hers until she actually read the play and realized that Portia in fact showed Shylock no mercy. Portia, in disguise as a lawyer adjudicating the case, "is full of tricks," Ginsburg said, she turns on Shylock saying he can have his pound of flesh but not a drop of blood to go with it or he will be guilty of murder and that he not only must convert to Christianity but also give up half his property. Ginsburg went on to specify saying that "in no court of law in Venice or in Elizabethan England would the creditor be allowed to kill the debtor for non-payment, maybe in the mafia court but not in any court governed by the rule of law." When ruling on Shylock's appeal in Venice in 2016, Ginsburg, along with a panel of four other lawyers, decided that not only would Shylock get his property back (though with no interest after 400 years) but that his conversion to Christianity would be nullified (Donadio 2016).

Ginsburg commented that Portia was not her favorite female character in Shakespeare. However, Ginsburg, a veritable media star, fondly called by her supporters the "Notorious RBG," and known for being a champion of the rights of women, did have a different favorite female character in Shakespeare's works: Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing*. "Beatrice is clever," she said. "She is loved as much for her intelligence as for her appearance, – not typical of Shakespeare's women."⁸

Our next interview was also in Washington D.C. but this time at the Folger Shakespeare Library, thanks to an introduction by the Shakespeare scholar James Shapiro, a long-time champion of the film. At the Folger, we had the chance to speak

⁷Ruth Bader Ginsburg, interviewed by the author, Washington D.C., July 9, 2016.

⁸Ruth Bader Ginsburg, interviewed by the author, Washington D.C., July 9, 2016.



with curator Caroline Duroselle-Melish, and with NYU Professor Nicholas Birns while looking at copy number #38 of the Shakespeare's First Folio open to the first pages of *Hamlet* (Shakespeare 1623). Birns talked about how Shakespeare's fellow actors and collaborators, John Heminge and Henry Condell, after working with him for their entire careers, heroically compiled the *First Folio*, a large print edition of 36 of Shakespeare's plays (18 of which there exist no other sources for) in 1623, seven years after their friend died, "so that he would accurately be remembered."⁹ In their introduction, they write that they wished their friend could have overseen the printing of the collection but that they were compelled: "To keep the memory of so worthy a Friend, and Fellow, alive, as was our Shakespeare." They insisted that he live on through his written words as they remembered them, so that everyone "from the most able, to him that can but spell" would be able to "Reade him [...] againe, and againe." Birns noted that Heminge and Condell had similar backgrounds to Shakespeare. They also were originally from the country, but came down to London to forge careers in the theater. And Shakespeare, along with having these deep friendships, also clearly kept in touch with his elemental childhood roots – the sources of his imagination and intensity. Birns then mentioned the witches in *Macbeth* as evidence of Shakespeare's abiding interest in the supernatural and forces beyond our control.



Nicholas Birns at the Folger Shakespeare Library.

The theme of *Macbeth* is picked up in our next interview with Margaret Holloway, who hauntingly intones a medley of the witches' incantations and shares her own important insights about the play.¹⁰ The story of our interviews with Holloway are the most improbable and, for me, the most extraordinary in the film. My husband had initially suggested her as an intriguing person to interview. He had heard about Holloway from one of his graduate students at The New School, Pete Di Gennaro. This student, a social worker in New Haven for a decade, said we needed to interview the

⁹Nicholas Birn and Caroline Duroselle-Melish interviewed by the author, Washington D.C., April 8, 2016.

¹⁰Margaret Holloway interviewed by the author, New Haven, CT, March 21, 2016.



"Shakespeare Lady," a woman named Margaret Holloway who recited lines of Shakespeare on the streets of New Haven for many years. When my husband came home that night and mentioned the name Margaret Holloway, I was really taken aback. I had been at Yale Drama School with a Margaret Holloway 35 years before. Could it possibly be the same person? After searching for information online, it clearly was. But then when we tried repeatedly to contact Holloway through the shelter system and through Di Gennaro's social work contacts in New Haven, we couldn't locate her. Nine months later, Di Gennaro got a call from a social work friend saying that Holloway had been hospitalized but was back at a New Haven shelter ten blocks from the Drama School. We were able to contact Holloway through the shelter and her state conservator. She not only remembered me but very much wanted to be interviewed for the film, which the conservator agreed to.

I had known part of Holloway's improbable story when I was at the Drama School. My first semester, I had acted in a small role in her thesis production with a classmate, the actress Kate Burton. It was a play called *God's Smoke* by the writer John Gardner, a teacher and mentor of Holloway's at Bennington who was tragically killed in a motorcycle accident in 1982, two years after the production. I knew that Holloway had grown up in Georgia in a religious family, was sent north to a high school boarding school by a patron, got her degree at Bennington College and then came to Yale Drama School as an actress in the 1970s during the Meryl Streep years. But apparently she ran into issues with Bobby Lewis, who was running the Acting Program at the time, and was asked to withdraw. Holloway returned a decade later, which is when I knew her, and was the first African-American woman to graduate from the Drama School's Directing program. I didn't remember much about being in Holloway's show as my first year at the Drama School was so packed that it's now a blur. But I remember, of course, being impressed by Holloway who was both brilliant and mercurial. And I knew that after she graduated she had struggled with health and substance issues. But I had no idea that Holloway then battled schizophrenia and had lived on the streets of New Haven for more than 25 years.



Margaret Holloway, New Haven, Connecticut.



In my online searches, I found that in the early 2000's a short documentary had been made about Margaret Holloway, *God Didn't Give Me a Weeks Notice* by a fellow Bennington graduate, Richard Dailey, who said that she had chose the title (Dayley 2016). The fifteen minute film, with a jazz underscore, shows an emaciated Holloway clearly appearing to be in the throws of a crack addiction, but passionately speaking the texts of Shakespeare and Euripides. Dailey has printed words from Holloway's Yale Drama thesis dissertation overlaying often tortured and angry still images of her, including the words:

Many artists have aspired to a theater of hunger [...] many were imprisoned, driven insane. These artists know that there is no separation between the quest toward a theater of hunger and a quest toward a way of life. We continue in this quest.

Apparently the mayor of New Haven helped sponsor the film's opening and the event raised thousands of dollars for Holloway in 2001. But three years later, in December 2004, the *New York Times: New Haven Journal* printed published a story entitled "A Resurgent Downtown Wearies of a Street Poet's Antic Disposition." In the article the reporter William Yardley (2004) recounts that the "Shakespeare Lady," Margaret Holloway, had been jailed for 53 days for failing to attend a court date, and upon her release, performed a soliloquy of Hamlet's – a monologue, which she would also perform during one of our interviews more than a decade later.

*O that this too too solid flesh would melt,
T'waw, and resolve itself into a dew.
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God, o God,
How weary, stale, flat and Unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
(Hamlet. 1.2.129-134).*

The final article I found online had more promising news. In the *New Haven Register* in 2009, Randall Beach, a reporter who said he'd known Holloway for a decade wrote:

She had seemed headed for a fulfilling career in theater when she graduated from the Yale School of Drama in 1980. But then, she said, "My life got nipped in the bud.

She said it was in 1983 that the hallucinations began. "I'm still very sick. I still hear voices; I smell things. I see insects in my food. I hear people knocking on the door when there's nobody there. I feel myself being raped by voices on the TV. That's why I keep the sound down." "I have no peace," she said, "unless I'm sleeping. It's a horrible disease." She said she suffers from paranoid schizophrenia.



Beach struck a hopeful note saying that Holloway was no longer using drugs and, seemed to finally be on the right medication. He concluded, "Performing is her lifeline, her therapy." (Beach 2009)

When I caught up with Holloway almost a decade later, I learned that performing texts she loved was clearly still deeply important to her – maybe what kept her alive. When we first met in 2016, she was wearing a blond wig and worn, disheveled clothing. After 35 years I almost didn't recognize her, but quickly found that her unmistakable laugh, incisive intelligence and acerbic wit were unchanged. She indicated she was struggling with her health. She had recently been diagnosed as a diabetic and said nurses where she was staying had to give her daily shots of anti-psychotic and anti-depressant medications. She said she no longer performed on the street, as she couldn't stand for long periods because of pain in her legs. And she could no longer read because her sight was going, but the staff at the shelter had printed out in large letters an outline of texts that she was eager to perform for us. In our two interviews with Holloway, nine months apart, we wanted to share her unique performance style and her brilliant commentaries. Both times we met, Holloway intoned renditions of the witches in *Macbeth* that were unforgettable. In her performances, she combined salient lines from the play.

*When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lightning, or in rain.
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
(The Tragedy of Macbeth. 1.1.1-2)*

*Double, double toil and trouble,
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.
(Macbeth. 4.1.10-11)*

*When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.
That will be ere the set of sun.*

...
*There to meet with Macbeth.
(Macbeth. 1.1.4-9)*

Later in *Remembering Shakespeare*, Holloway talks about her struggles on the streets as a busker reciting Shakespeare. She recounted how the ACLU stepped in to litigate on behalf of homeless performers in New Haven and won a class action lawsuit that benefited her. She then shared her tribute and spoof on the First Amendment, in which she samples from an array of Shakespeare plays, the text of her beloved First Amendment and commentary on contemporary events.¹¹

¹¹Margaret Holloway interviewed by the author, New Haven, CT, November 9, 2016.



Donna Robin Lippman, New York City.

Our next interview was with Donna Robin Lippman, a practicing psychotherapist who was in my first “Acting Shakespeare for Seniors” course at Jefferson Market library just months after the death of her husband. Lippman, who was the primary caretaker for 11 years for her ill husband, Robert, told us she felt it was important to keep him connected to things that he loved. One love they particularly shared was Shakespeare. Near the end of his life, her husband was constantly reading *Hamlet*. So when I invited the seniors in the class to choose a sonnet or piece of text to memorize, the only speech she wanted to work on was “To be or not to be,” even though it was “the” famous speech and *Hamlet* wasn’t one of the plays we were reading. She felt that learning this astonishing text by heart gave her insights that she never had when she just read or heard the words. In the film, she says:

Since Robert’s death, I am coming to terms with mortality. Well, I don’t know I’ll never come to terms with mortality, but I’m holding on to Shakespeare. “The thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to” [...] And so with this situation, which we’re all faced with but I have it in my face. I’m next. I’m next and what I learned was an event can happen on a dime that you don’t anticipate and where ever you were to that moment is gone and you’re on to the next, and that’s what happened to Hamlet.¹²

She goes on to say:

In my work with sexual abuse survivors, one of the things I learned over and over was that all human beings are alive on a spectrum. Some people are fully vitalized and engaged and open and able to risk and delight, and most of us are in this sort of middle, and then there are people who are barely alive, who keep themselves physically alive but are all but dead, angry, resentful, confused, and have a victim mentality and stuck there. And so Hamlet is victimized, but he doesn’t accept that, – that’s not his mentality. He has a very proactive, healthy mentality [...] and in ‘to

¹²*Remembering Shakespeare*, directed by Cecilia Rubino (forthcoming, New York City), DVD.



be or not to be' he rolls it into a snowball, you know what are the choices here
...¹³

Donna Robin Lippman says she recites Hamlet's words almost every day, and finds that the words are "prismatic, they are on an axel that keeps turning, the light keeps coming through them and reflecting ..."¹⁴

Our next interview in the film was with David Richmond, a professor of theater at the University of New Hampshire, someone who has more Shakespeare committed to memory than anyone we had ever met.¹⁵ We heard about Richmond from one of his former students, filmmaker Liam Billingham, who had worked as his directing assistant and who insisted that *Remembering Shakespeare* wouldn't be complete without an interview with Richmond. He was right. Richmond's life story is as inspiring as it is astonishing. He has been completely blind since he was a child, but forged his own brilliant career as a professor, scholar and director. He creates his own braille versions of texts that he's working on and recently has acted the roles of Lear and Prospero. When we contacted Richmond, he and his wife, Susan, welcomed us to their home in Durham, New Hampshire. In our first interview in the fall of 2015, we only had my husband's black magic camera with us and for some reason it was having issues, so we held our breath through the interview. (We promised ourselves never to do a single camera shoot again!) Our conversation began with Richmond discussing how his way into Shakespeare was always through sound. The words connected with him almost as music, and the first speech that he vibrantly remembered falling in love with was from Henry VI:

*"Hung be the heavens with black, yield day to night!
Comets, importing change of times and states,
Brandish your crystal tresses in the sky,
And with them scourge the bad revolting stars"*
(Henry VI, Part I. 1.1.5-8).

¹³*Remembering Shakespeare*, directed by Cecilia Rubino (forthcoming, New York City), DVD.

¹⁴Donna Robin Lippman interviewed by the author, New York City, NY, March 4, 2016.

¹⁵David Richmond interviewed by the author, New York City, NY, October 29, 2015.



David Richman, Durham, New Hampshire.

He said he didn't know what the words meant when he first heard them but he just loved the sound. And then he told a funny story about working to memorize his lines as King Lear. He was out in his backyard walking and gesturing to himself when his doorbell rang. It was two members of the Durham police department, apparently summoned by a neighbor. They questioned why he was outside gesticulating. He replied he was learning his lines for King Lear. "And what is King Lear?" they asked. He told them it was a play by Shakespeare about a mad old king and that he would be in his backyard during the next weeks rehearsing his lines. Then they asked him if he was employed – and what the day of the week was. This encounter, Richmond said, gave him insight into Lear's precarious state and how the world perceived him as mad.

We interviewed Richmond a second time nine months later, this time with a larger crew and he began our conversation by discussing his ideas about Shakespeare and memory at length.¹⁶ He mentioned Steven Greenblatt's book *Hamlet and Purgatory* (2013). In the film, Richmond says that in the text, Greenblatt was obsessing on the idea of the dead and memory because his father had recently died and he was saying Kaddish, the Hebrew prayer for the dead over his father. One of the most sacred services of the Jewish year during Yom Kippur, the time of atonement, was the Jewish service of "Yizkor." The word "Yizkor," Richmond says, is a form of the root word "zakhor" which is the Hebrew word for "remembering." He goes on to say that maybe his thoughts were in some way connected to Greenblatt's book, but he had always believed "That what the dead most want and need and our most important duty to the dead is to remember them." He hadn't memorized the prayer but it went something like:

*In the rising of the sun and its setting we remember them
In the heat of summer and in the cold of winter we remember them
In joy and in sorrow we remember them ...*

¹⁶David Richmond interviewed by the author, New York City, NY, March 10, 2016.



But he was sure that the final line of the prayer was: "Now they are a part of us as we remember them." And he said that in *Hamlet* the Ghost is pleading with his son to remember him. And Hamlet replies:

*Remember thee?
Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember Thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures Past,
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain
Unmixed with baser matter.
(Hamlet. 1.5.97-104).*

Hamlet, Richmond says, then forgets his father's injunction to let his mother be and is soon off castigating her with "Oh pernicious woman." But, Richmond adds, one can also imagine Shakespeare pleading with his actors, "Do not forget. Remember these words."¹⁷

In another interview in the film, Marcia Johnston recounts her memories of Clara Claiborne Park, a beloved professor of ours at Williams College who asked all of her students to memorize selections of texts they were studying in her literature classes.¹⁸ In an essay called "The Mother of the Muses: In Praise of Memory," Clara wrote that Dante apparently knew "the whole of the *Aeneid*, 'tutta quanta' by heart." Park goes on to say that memory "is not such a feat if you love the words and value their meaning [...] To get a passage by heart [...] requires the aid of tongue, mouth, and ear, a full [...] response to meaning and sound and feel and rhythm, the gifts of the muses." (Park 1991: 32) Johnston also talks about her brother Duncan who was killed just before his 17th birthday in a terrible accident. He was climbing a tree on a dark night when he touched a live electric wire and died instantly. Johnston wrote a letter to Clara Park shortly after his death and, a few days later, received a reply, dated July 19, 1978. Park wrote:

Dearest Marcia, What can I say to you? I feel I have been living lucky in a bubble. Yours has been pierced and I have no earned words to give you. I look for words to borrow but not the great lovely 17th Century lyric statements with their messages of pain, resignation and hope. That's freeloading, that's. That's something I have no right to transmit, I can say nothing to you who have been broken in from without, whose grief is for Duncan and not for yourself. Art seems a monstrous irrelevancy. You need to share it raw, unprocessed.

Park in the letter goes on to quote from *King Lear*:

¹⁷David Richmond interviewed by the author, New York City, NY, March 10, 2016.

¹⁸Marcia Johnston interviewed by the author, Williamstown VA, July 19, 2015.



*Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones.
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever.
I know when one is dead, and when one lives.
She's dead as earth [...]
No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more
Never, never, never, never, never.
(King Lear. 5.3.231-5; 281-3).*

Marcia showed me the letter in Williamstown that summer, and seeing Lear's words scrawled in Park's handwriting seared them into my memory. Johnston mentions in her interview that Park didn't accurately remember the lines from Lear as in the text there weren't five "nevers." She felt that Park got the emotional part right as she remembered the passage, even if the words weren't exact. In checking the text of *King Lear*, I noticed that there are in fact five "nevers". Lear utters them in succession holding his beloved Cordelia in his arms as he grapples with her death before he himself dies with her. It seems that Park was on the same emotional beam as Shakespeare as she remembered the words. When talking about this recently Marcia noted that maybe there are never enough "nevers" when an impossible tragedy occurs.

There are many other wonderful interviews in the film. Vinnie Marie Dambrosio talks about Sonnet 30 and Marcel Proust's *The Remembrance of Things Past* – how every line connected to her personally. Danny Moreno, a bus dispatcher who grew up in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx, talks about being introduced to *Hamlet* by a wonderful teacher at an early age, and how he continues to memorize Shakespeare as he walks to the bus every day. We talked with Fernando Ruis Lorenzo, a visual artist, on Shakespeare Avenue in the Bronx, a winding, dauntingly steep hill where he grew up. Lorenzo reminisced about first learning about the playwright after years of trekking to school up an avenue that bore his name. He felt that because Shakespeare's plays weren't just written for the elite that they continued to be resonate in the tough neighborhood of his childhood.

We also talked with Darrin Person and Tracy Cooke the directors of the *Brooklyn Summer Shakespeare-ience*, a program that connects young people to Shakespeare, at the Brooklyn Children's Museum in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. With their students, they recently shot a mini documentary called *Decoding the Bard*, which asked the students to dialogue about what was it was about Shakespeare that they didn't understand? And they said things like: "What's being said?" and "What does this white guy in Elizabethan England have to do with my life here in New York in Brownsville or East New York?" Cooke and Person went on to create a space for their students to explore the generative themes in Shakespeare that they themselves responded to and found important. They encouraged students to see that much of Shakespeare's language was in fact familiar, everyday speech and to break down his words into their



own. They also asked students to note that Shakespeare invented words – his own form of slang, much as they and their peers were inventing words. Tracy Cooke noted that the students in their Brooklyn program took on Shakespeare as their “activist point,” and created their own productions that toured the borough during the summer. She said that the ability to be heard through Shakespeare was for many of them transformative. “Young people,” she said, “need to be heard and they don’t always have the words they need or the means to say what they want to say. But working with poetry” she says, “helps build those muscles.”

One of our final interviews was with Ashton Crosby, a wonderful actor and teacher who spoke with us three weeks before he passed away. We talked with him both in his apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan as well as at St John the Divine Cathedral, which was less than a block away and was a site that he visited daily.¹⁹ Crosby had recently had a series of strokes and was struggling with his memory. He even wondered if in fact he might have early onset Alzheimer’s or if his struggles were just a natural part of the aging process. But the last time I saw Ashton, we were able – imperfectly – to piece together many of the lines of a sonnet that he loved (Sonnet 27, 1-14).

We end the documentary with young people. In the penultimate scene of the 55-minute broadcast version, students working on my production of *Twelfth Night* at Irondale Theater in downtown Brooklyn eloquently discuss Shakespeare – their own process of challenging themselves with the Bard and memorizing his lines. And the final scene of the film features children from the “I Have a Dream”-Harlem program at PS 7 engaged with students from Lang College at The New School in my after-school theater program. In the final moments of the film, Lang College student Derrick Swasy is beat boxing for Zamir Moore, who speaks in rhythmic fashion in a version of the epilogue from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, when the mischievous Puck bids the audience farewell.

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¹⁹Ashton Crosby interviewed by the author, New York City, NY, August 24, 2015.



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