Transcript of
Shakespeare and Politics: An Interview with Oskar Eustis

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David McCandless

Good afternoon, and welcome to today's event, "Shakespeare and Politics: An Interview with Oskar Eustis," sponsored by Shakespeare America. My name is David McCandless. I'm the director of Shakespeare Studies at Southern Oregon University, here. My interview with Oskar Eustis is scheduled to go for an hour and a half. At around an hour into the interview, though, we'll welcome questions from all of you out there who are viewing. At that point, I'll cue you to submit your questions into the chat and our ace Stage Manager, Finley, will read them out at that point, so I look forward to that.

By way of introduction, let's start with a little game of Jeopardy! The answer is: he was instrumental in developing two of the most monumental, transformative theatrical events in American theater history. (Namely: *Angels in America* and *Hamilton*). Who is Oskar Eustis? Exactly, yes.

As Artistic Director of the Eureka Theater in the late 1980s, Oskar commissioned Tony Kushner to write a play about the AIDS epidemic and, thereafter, served as a resolute dramaturg during the play's period of gestation. More recently, in his current job as Artistic Director of the Public Theater in New York City, Oskar successfully convinced *Hamilton's* creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda, to turn a work that Miranda insisted was simply a concept album into a groundbreaking, breathtaking musical.

In between these stints as Artistic Director at the Eureka Theater and leading the Public Theater in New York City, Oskar also served as Artistic Director of the Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island, where he held a professorship as Professor of Theatre at Brown University. He's also held professorships at UCLA and Middlebury College, and is currently a professor at New York University.

Well, since we're here to talk about Shakespeare, fortunately for us, Oskar is also an exuberant Shakespearean scholar and practitioner. At the Public, he's

continued the proud tradition begun by Joseph Papp of offering free Shakespeare in the Park every summer, with casts that reflect the rich diversity and cultural eclecticism of the city itself. Also, he's created two new innovative Shakespeare programs in the last decade: The Mobile Unit (which performs Shakespeare's plays at prisons, halfway houses, homeless shelters) and the Public Works, which produces these huge Shakespearean performances that bring together a small cohort of professional actors and musicians and (sometimes literally) hundreds of amateur performers drawn from throughout the city. In fact, in 2018 Oskar himself co-directed a Public Works production of *Twelfth Night* reconfigured as a ninety-minute musical with a mostly BIPOC cast. He's also directed *Hamlet* at the Public in 2008, and in 2017 staged a production of *Julius Caesar* that turned out to be rather controversial -- we may have occasion to talk about that.

It's a tremendous honor to welcome Oskar Eustis!

Oskar Eustis
Thank you so much, David. I'm delighted to be here.

David McCandless
Thank you so much for being here. I do think this topic of Shakespeare in Politics-- There are a number of angles, honestly, one could take on it. I thought, maybe, the most useful way for us to begin might be for you to share the story, with greater details, of how the Mobile Unit and Public Works evolved into being. I think that would be a good introduction to some of your thoughts about the political utility of Shakespeare.

Oskar Eustis
Yeah, I'd be delighted to do that, David. I agree with you that I think a lot of what the Public tries to do with Shakespeare, and what we believe our mission is *vis a vis* Shakespeare, is revealed by those programs.

First to say that (of course) the Mobile Unit wasn't completely original. It was essentially a reinvention of what Joe Papp began with in 1954 -- the New York Shakespeare Festival, which became The Public Theater and the New York Shakespeare Festival -- began by performing Shakespeare on the backs of flatbed trucks driven around the city to different venues, different parts, all five boroughs, for free. Eventually, (the legend has it) the truck broke down by the side of the turtle pond in Central Park and we took root there and stayed there and built the Delacorte Theater where we perform to this day. (The Delacorte opened in 1962.)

It's important to understand our revival of the Mobile Unit in terms of both the success and the failure of free Shakespeare in the Park. The success is easy to see: every night, we do the highest quality Shakespeare productions, starring some of the greatest actors in the English-speaking world (Meryl Streep, Raúl Juliá, James Earl Jones, Sam Waterston, Anne Hathaway, Audra McDonald) for an audience

of two thousand people who are seeing it for free -- who have paid nothing except sweat equity, for those who wait in line, or entering the lottery for those who get tickets through our new digital lottery. Over a hundred thousand people every summer see these fantastic performances. It's a core civic ritual for the city and, as such, we've managed to put the theater in its place as a kind of building block of the identity of our *polis*, and that's pretty exciting. We've also, by removing the economic barrier, made a case that the theater belongs as a right to people, that people have a right to own the culture -- they don't need to buy the culture. It is their birthright. That's a really important statement, we believe.

So, look -- big success, but here's the contradiction (and, to me, this led right to the creation of the Mobile Unit): I arrived at The Public in 2005, and rapidly realized that this magnificent program that's being imitated all over the world, groundbreaking program -- is now one of the hardest tickets to get in New York City. We completely eliminated the barrier of economic accessibility by making the tickets free, but the cultural barriers were higher than ever. Because if you're going to go to free Shakespeare in the Park, you have to be willing to wait in line for up to twelve hours, you have to camp out in the park. Already, you are narrowing your demographic of who will even consider going to the show, massively. Again, it does produce an incredibly excited audience to be there, but that's a huge problem in terms of accessibility, which is what Shakespeare in the Park was created for.

We did two things about it: one, as I mentioned earlier, we also created digital lotteries. There's an awful lot of people who can't possibly put aside the time to wait in the middle of Central Park, and so now they can enter a lottery and receive the ticket without having waited in line. We've also done a really conscientious job of setting up outer borough distribution sites. For this, we've cooperated and made partners of the public libraries in all five boroughs. With them, our brilliant director of long-term planning, Ciara Murphy, has created a distribution system for those tickets so that people from all five boroughs, people who have the greatest barriers to access, are able to get tickets and come to the park. We know this has succeeded because we can measure it: where the park used to consist of well over eighty-five percent of the audience were Manhattanites, now it's only slightly above sixty percent, and the rest come from the outer boroughs. Where we used to be one of the most diverse theater audiences in New York (which meant we were only seventy-two percent white people), we are now down to sixty-two percent white people. Those are really significant margins, particularly when we consider the size of the audience that gathers there every summer (every summer except last summer).

I'm sorry, I'm going off on a little bit of a tangent, but I think it's important to explain all this, because one of the things we had to then figure out is, "Okay – since this ticket is so hard to get, what are we going to do to achieve the core original impulse of making Shakespeare everybody's property?" That's what

Free Shakespeare started as. Reviving the Mobile Unit seemed the right thing to do, and that meant taking Shakespeare to where the people were.

In this, I was fortunate enough to know an extraordinary pioneer in the theater, Michelle Hensley, who started a company called Ten Thousand Things, which is still going strong in Minneapolis, which tours productions of all kinds to prisons, halfway houses, inaccessible places where the people have been denied culture across the Twin Cities area. Collaborating with Michelle brought her to New York; she directed the first production of the revived Mobile, which was a production of *Measure for Measure* that toured to prisons, and halfway houses, and battered women's shelters, you name it, across the five boroughs. It was a brilliant success, and we've been doing so two or three times a year ever since for the last twelve years I guess.

It's been an astonishing success for us. Part of what happens is the Mobile proves that the appetite for Shakespeare is everywhere -- that Shakespeare is not an author who only appeals to the elite, or only appeals to the educated. All of these cultural barriers to assimilating Shakespeare (we've demonstrated) can be overcome.

For me, the prototypical example of this, the paradigmatic example is, we'll go to a men's prison, and the men's prison (unlike the women's prison) is a very restrictive emotional space. Expressing emotion, certainly expressing enthusiasm, is viewed as a sign of weakness. So, we go into the prison. We set up rows of chairs in a square, so about a hundred people are watching the show. The prisoners come in and both literally and metaphorically fold their arms across the chest and just be like this [*demonstrates*]. Then we start the production. Within a few minutes, you can see melting starting to happen. The first melting is coming because people realize they can understand Shakespeare. We don't translate these works – this is the original Elizabethan language. We don't do any of this No Fear Shakespeare stuff. This is Shakespeare (admittedly, cut to ninety-minutes—which is fine) but of course, when they're played on stage, you can understand them, always. Frankly, it's even true of you and me, David, that if you take one of the plays that you haven't seen very often, like *Henry VI Part 3*, for the first few minutes, you're not getting every word. But then, you start to follow the actions and the intentions of the characters, and you're right back inside it.

I can see the prisoners realize that they can understand it, and that starts to open them up. Then they realize that they're caring about what happens to the characters. That's an extraordinary second transformation. Then -- I can't prove this, but I have talked to a lot of people, and I've felt it, and it's been reported to me – that then there's a third reaction, which is the sense of pride that they understand Shakespeare, pride that Shakespeare belongs to them. Because Shakespeare is kind of a key to the cultural table in the United States. It means the peak of the mountain, it's the pinnacle of our culture. If they can understand

it, and if they can identify with it, if they can care about it, that is actually saying to people who society has done its worst to, "There's a place for you at the heart of our culture. You belong here." I think that is so powerful. Of course, I'm sure before we're done with this conversation, we'll get to the question of should Shakespeare continue to be central to our culture and this is an exhibit.

I want to just-- I can't help it. I'm not really an academic, despite all my university titles. I'm really just a jumped-up storyteller, so: I've got to tell you a story. That first production (*Measure for Measure*) one of my favorite actresses—a wonderful actress named Nicole Watson (who was actually in our revival of *Hair* just before she did this) was playing Isabella. If you remember, the first big scene (the second scene, actually) that Isabella has with Angelo – Isabella's going to plead for the life of her brother and Angelo says, "He'll live if you will sleep with me," and she says, "Good god, no" – "Dearer than a brother's life is a sister's chastity" which, in the men's prison, makes her really an unlikable character for a long time. You can just feel the men go, "What?"

But in any case: we're doing this on this particular day in a women's prison, which, at that time, was on the west side of Manhattan. Angelo leaves the stage, and Nicole is left alone and she turns to the audience in soliloquy style and says Shakespeare's line: "To whom should I complain?" and immediately, somebody in the audience shouts out, "The police!" and Nicole is a little bit startled, but then she simply says the next line in the soliloquy: "If I did report this, who would believe me?" and the woman says, "No one, girl." It's like, suddenly-- Of course, it's a very moving moment, but it's also an incredibly geeky moment for us Shakespeare folks. Because, of course, do we think the groundlings were hushing each other when those soliloquies happened? There's a call and response built in here! That's actually part of the way that this language in this theatrical time was created and we're rediscovering it by going to an audience who hasn't been trained in twenty-first century social niceties. I love the program. We are expanding the program. We're bringing it back this summer in outdoor spaces because we can't go indoors.

Maybe in closing, but the Mobile Theater-- we know it is the only program we do where the demographics of the audience exactly match the demographics of New York City. We've done this. We have diverse audiences in a number of our programs – we do better by far than most other theaters. But the only place where we actually meet the exact people of New York City is in the Mobile Unit, because we go to where they are. We don't ask them to come to us. That, for me, was a huge lesson of what we have to do if we're going to make the theater as central to the culture as I think it should be.

Sorry, David! You asked a simple question and I talked for twenty minutes.

David McCandless

No, I was hoping and planning on that. Did you want to talk about the evolution of The Public Works?

Oskar Eustis
Sure! I'm happy to. Your audience can, of course, take a break any time they want! They don't have to listen to me talk.

Public Works was the next stage, really, in our development of our interaction with our audience. Public Works was really the brainchild of the brilliant, brilliant theater director Lear deBessonet. Lear and I got to know each other--introduced by my Associate Artistic Director Maria Goyanes, who's now Artistic Director of Woolly Mammoth in Washington, D.C. Lear and I embarked on about a year-long conversation about how we could make the theater even more important in the life of the city – even more central to those who didn't have access to the theater.

One of the keys, I think, to this program is that Lear and I came to it from very different directions. I was raised by Communists – members of the Communist Party, really serious folks – three generations. Although I never joined the party, although I have strayed from the orthodoxy in which I was raised, nonetheless many of the values that were in that mode of thought have stayed with me and I cherish.

Lear was raised in an extreme Christian…I don't want to say "cult," but let's say a particularly extreme form of Christianity. She was a bride of Jesus when she was a young woman. She, too, strayed from the orthodoxy of Christianity, but has retained many of those core beliefs and values that are central to her. Where I am likely to talk about the class struggle and the necessity of changing the property relationships and the importance of fundamental equality of all people, Lear will just talk about the divine spark in every human soul. She was the first person who would talk that language to me that I would get chills. It's because of her; she is an amazing woman and I understood that.

That combination of a spiritual sense of the value of individual people and a social sense of the necessity of changing the owners of the culture came together after a year of conversations. We don't publicize this, but we created sort of a slogan that our goal was to change theater from being a commodity back into what it actually is, which is a set of relationships among human beings – to lose the "thingness" of theater. What Lear did was find five community-based organizations (one in each of the five boroughs) – She talked to and got to know dozens in order to pick those five. We formed a year-long relationship, which has now turned into a ten-year relationship, with those organizations.

Part of her brilliance was the starting point of the relationship, which was that we went to those organizations and said "Here's who we are. Here's what we do. Here's our skill set. What would you like from us? What would be good for you?

What would serve your mission?" The one that was the biggest wrench, for me, is the Senior Program at the Brownsville Recreation Center – it's the poorest zip code in New York -- where the female seniors at the Brownsville Center, the thing they wanted from us was a jazzercise class. And, you know, we did it! We started doing a jazzercise class! As the relationship developed, they got interested in dance in a broader sense. The first year that we did a big Public Works show, they ended up doing a dance in the show. Indeed, that became their thing, which is the choreography for our senior citizens, some as old as ninety, from the Brownsville Senior Center. As the years have gone by, they've gotten more and more interested in all of the different things we do until two years ago I sat and I got to watch an all-female senior production of *Fences* that they put on and it was fantastic! Again, but the relationship began not by saying, "We have this thing we want to give you. We have this thing we want you to do." We began by saying, "We're a resource for you, and then as we develop a real relationship, then we'll start to talk about other places it can go."

The climax of the year's worth of work in the Public Works with these different community-based organizations is a large-scale participatory pageant that includes the best actors in New York City, Tony Award-winners side by side with people who've never been onstage or who've just come out of prison after twenty years – the whole gamut of humanity.

The first time, ten years ago, we did three nights at the Delacorte (which is a two-thousand seat theater in Central Park where we do Shakespeare in the Park) with a two-hundred person cast. It was an original musical version of *The Tempest,* cut to ninety minutes and adding songs by great songwriter Todd Almond, performed by over two hundred citizens of New York, five of whom were professional actors, five of whom were professional musicians and all the rest of them were not professionals.

I was scheduled to be there the first night and the third night, because that was a lot, I had other things to do. After the first night, I was so bowled over I cancelled my Saturday night plans and I've never missed a Public Works performance since. Because I knew that what we were doing was going to be good social work. I knew it was going to be good for the people because I know the power that Shakespeare's language has, I know the power of working in the theater – I knew all that. What I didn't realize and was a wonderful, delightful shock to me, was that I was seeing the best theater I was going to see all year, and that has been true every year since.

The fundamental proposition underneath Public Works is that artistic talent is not a binary. It's not: some people are artists, and other people aren't; some people have talent, and other people don't. It's saying: actually, artistry is a core component of what it means to be human. Everybody has artistic talent. Everybody has the desire and the need to express that artistic talent. Everybody has something to offer. Some of us, like Malcolm Gladwell teaches us, get to

practice it ten thousand hours in a few years and some of us get to do it eighty hours a week in our professional lives. Other people have far less opportunities. But it's not: one is an artist, and one isn't. It's just: we're on a scale. We're just on a continuum.

That proposition, manifested by those productions, has turned out to be one of the things I'm proudest of in my whole career. It has absolutely transformed the Public Theater. It has transformed the relationship we have to our community. It has been picked up across the country. There are now eighteen affiliate theaters scattered across the country, all of whom do Public Works programs. And it's gone overseas! The National Theater of Great Britain has formed a program as an off-shoot of our Public Works. They don't call it Public Works -- they call it Public Acts, because apparently Public Works there is too much about electricity. But it's an off-shoot of our program, and it's magnificently successful over there, too.

What I'm so proud of it is that it's changing, again, not just who gets to come to the theater, it's changing who gets to make the theater. And, therefore, how do we define the theater's role in our lives. There's much more to say about the program; that's an introduction. Just to get us back to the topic at hand: both of those programs have firmly rested on the shoulders of William Shakespeare. I think that the fact that they work with the works of William Shakespeare is part of what has made them so successful.

David McCandless
I have to ask, since you alluded earlier – when you were talking about the Mobile Unit and the evolution of that, you paused one moment and said, "Of course, there's the question of whether or not Shakespeare should be so central in our culture" and that is something I've been meaning to ask you. I am a true believer, so when you talked about Shakespeare, that everybody should have access, everybody can understand it, that everybody owns the culture -- that's all so inspiring to me.

Is that ultimately the answer to those who might say, as some have said, particularly in the last year, that "classics" as something that are focused on in college curricula are too elitist, maybe even racist? I think people have said that Classicism is actually inherently racist and therefore Shakespeare, as the epitome of Classicism, may come under particular scrutiny. I wonder…would your answer be, in a sense, what you've already said, or is there some other more pointed way you could defend Shakespeare, if I can put you on the spot a little bit.

Oskar Eustis
Sure, I'm delighted to be put on the spot by you, David, but I got to tell you this is mild compared to the spot my own staff has put me on over the last year. Because I've had people on my own staff saying, "Why are we focused so much

on Shakespeare?" The discussions have been rich and deep and lively. The fundamental thing I want to say is that loving Shakespeare and believing in Shakespeare exempts none of us from having to cope with the genuine inequities in our society.

One of the first principles is, you have to examine how you're using Shakespeare. Shakespeare can be used to share the wealth of society, or Shakespeare can be used as a way of putting up a barrier to separate the educated and the elite from the uneducated and from the masses. Shakespeare has been used both ways, historically.

It is why I have such a violent reaction to what is called the Shakespeare controversy, the authorship controversy. Because Shakespeare was, of course, one of the best-known people in London, which was a relatively small community at the time. He spent his entire working life not in any kind of hermitage or alone, but being an actor, working with the company. During his entire lifetime and for two hundred years afterwards, no one ever suggested that he didn't write his own works. There's not a hint of it anywhere.

The whole idea started in the early nineteenth century, and the intent of the controversy was clear: to suggest that England's greatest author and the English language's greatest practitioner, could not be an uneducated commoner from Stratford who had an eighth-grade education and was a commoner's son. We needed to reconstruct the class barrier to prove either A) that he was actually an aristocrat or B) that he was an Oxford-Cambridge grad, or, ideally, both. That has been the root of the authorship controversy ever since: the attempt to re-enlist Shakespeare as a defender, as a bulwark, of class society.

We see how art forms get used like this all the time. We see how the opera has been used this way. We see how the ballet has been used this way. The United States is the only country on the planet where operas are routinely performed in their original languages and not translated. Why? Because the people who first started creating these great operatic institutions in the United States wanted to form a barrier between them and the unwashed. They wanted to have their own form of art that, by appreciating it, they could prove who was in the club and who was outside the club.

That's the first thing. You have to commit yourself, whether you're working with Shakespeare or anybody else, that you will not let him be used as a way to exclude people. You also – and at the Public Theater we take this very seriously-- you will also not let him suck up all the air in the room. You will not let our commitment to Shakespeare reduce or slacken our commitment to new voices, to Black voices, to Asian-American voices, to Latinx voices, to Native voices. We will make sure that Shakespeare is sitting side by side with the people who are creating the canon of our day, who eventually (we hope) a hundred years from

now will be performed with the regularity that Shakespeare is being performed. That's part of it.

Third thing: you have to commit to using Shakespeare, not glorifying him or validating him. In other words, I'll give you an example of this: *Hair (*a great rock musical which also premiered at the Public Theater, I'm happy to say, and which we very successfully revived about eleven or twelve years ago) is modeled on *Hamlet*. We did one summer in the park which was both *Hair* and *Hamlet* and my publicity department asked me for a synopsis of the plays, so they could put it in the program, and I sent them a synopsis and they wrote back and said, "Well, thank you for the synopsis of *Hamlet*, but where's the synopsis of *Hair*?" and I said, "Read it more closely – that's the synopsis of both plays."

In other words: Shakespeare is not some kind of holy scripture that is there to be studied and reified and venerated – he's there for our use. He's there for us to take him and use him for our purposes in our time, which is why we can do ninety minute versions in prisons, why we can do musical pageants in the park, or why we can do a play like *Fat Ham* that's in our upcoming season, where James Ijames, a fantastic young playwright, has taken *Hamlet* and set it at a Black barbecue in contemporary America. He is there to be used by us for the artistic purposes of our time. Sometimes those artistic purposes mean that we leave the text unchanged and uncut, sometimes we cut it – that's a practical aesthetic decision based on what the production is trying to do, not based on what the "rules" are.

Finally, we get to the question of Shakespeare's unique qualities. I would say that there's two things that we have to pay attention to. I have never found another author -- and as near as I can tell nor has anybody else -- whose works have this kind of magic ability to take on the tenor of their times – to actually be reinterpreted and to feel completely fresh in hundreds of different cultures, in four different centuries. That permeability, that chameleon-like quality, is absolutely extraordinary in Shakespeare. I've never found another writer who can match that.

A huge part of that (I think) is that Shakespeare is genuinely a colossally great writer – not only language-wise, but in the characters and situations that he dramatizes. He's incapable of writing a character who isn't fully human (with, in my experience, the sole exception of Saint Joan – Saint Joan is a witch and literally a demon in the *Henry VI* plays. His hatred of the French was so great, even he couldn't make Saint Joan-- but he was young.) But every other character, whether he intends it or not, becomes human as soon as they start to speak. He cannot—and it's an extraordinary quality.

But there's another quality that I don't think is talked about anywhere near as often, and that is that Shakespeare was writing for an audience that had never existed before. Because the nature of the Tudor Compromise and, therefore, the

banning of religious subject matter onstage, he was faced (for the first time) with not only not needing to follow religious prescriptions for what the play was, but actually being told he couldn't follow religious prescriptions.

We're at the beginnings of modern capitalism. The King's Men, of course, are a joint-stock company and Shakespeare is a part-owner. He needs to get people to pay to fill those seats every night. Because of the nature of the times and the beginning of capitalism, the people who are going to fill that audience is everybody – from illiterate groundlings to the Queen of England to Oxford grads. The whole range of British society is going to gather together at the same time in one place and he's got to entertain all of them at the same time.

When I was young (occasionally, I know not with you or anybody in the audience, David, but academics don't always understand exactly how Shakespeare works in performance) and I was told that in Shakespeare's plays, you could actually divide up the sections: that there was the clown stuff that was in prose, and that was meant to please the groundlings, and then there was the high literary stuff, the soliloquies, that were meant to please the educated people. As a teenager, I bought it.

Then, as I started producing Shakespeare, I realized this is just nonsense. Of course, it doesn't work in any play on earth, because you can't do a play that's entertaining sections of your audience at different times and not being received by the rest of the audience. The whole point of a play is to try to turn the audience into one audience sharing a common experience. If you don't do that, the play doesn't work. We viscerally know this. You sit in an auditorium and if everybody's coughing, because they can't bring themselves to pay full attention, you got a flop on your hands. If you've got a success on your hands, it's because everybody's quiet at the same moments, because they know they are equally invested in what happens next.

Shakespeare was writing for the most democratic audience that any theater had had since the Greeks. There had not been a moment in the past two thousand years with that many diverse people gathered together and asking to be entertained at the same time. Shakespeare had to figure out how to do that.

Of course, by being asked to be entertained, on a deeper level they're also needing to be shown what they all have in common. Because if you can't do that, you can't forge them into one audience and get that standing ovation at the end. So, his plays have to reflect back to that audience what all of them share about their humanity. It's why the history plays, better than anything else, define what it means to be British. You see those history plays—Because he's actually creating Britain's idea of themself in the theater every night.

That means those plays were written to be democratic. They were written to be diverse. They were written to show a widely divergent group of people what

they all had in common with one another. That power (I think) – He was always a great poet, but it was that audience that made him a great playwright.

I'm going to make one final point, and then I promise I'll be quiet, David. Jonathan Bate, in his book *The Genius of Shakespeare*, I think articulated this best. He said, "If there had not been a storm in the English Channel in the summer of 1588, this book would be called *The Genius of Lope de Vega.*" The triumph of Shakespeare around the world is inseparable from the triumph of the English-speaking people around the world. That because the English-speaking peoples have become the dominant economic, political, and military force around the world, an English-speaking writer has become the common touchstone for the entire planet. You can judge that. You can say that's too bad, or that was wrong, but you can't dispute it. It's the truth.

What I've experienced is that for better or for worse, feeling like you can own Shakespeare, feeling like you can understand Shakespeare, feeling like Shakespeare belongs to you, is a key to feeling like you're a full citizen of the culture and of the world. It's not the only thing we need to give people, but it's a really important thing we need to give people to let them know that— I'm not sure who said this, but famously, Bellow once said: who's the Shakespeare of the Zulus? And his answer was, Shakespeare is the Shakespeare of the Zulus. To try and divide him up as the property of a bunch of pallid people on a Northern rainy island is insane. He's all of our property.

That's the argument that I make. Really, I'm just trying to articulate something that I actually see in practice as I run a theater and make Shakespeare. I'm not speaking theoretically; I'm speaking from what I see works. It's what I believe in continuing to do it.

David McCandless

Great! Thank you for all that. Please, don't ever doubt yourself. You're an inspiring and voluble speaker.

Oskar Eustis

Thank you.

David McCandless

I was thinking of your use of the word "use" – that Shakespeare—his plays are material for use and how we use them will determine whether or not it's elitist and Eurocentric or whether or not it's empowering everyone to own the culture.

I wonder how you feel about—There's a particular Shakespearean performance scholar who said, "Today, to direct Shakespeare is to fix Shakespeare" in particular as regards political relevance. I'm wondering how you feel about that idea that-- When you talk about using Shakespeare in a way that's empowering and addresses diversity are you talking about "fixing Shakespeare" in the manner this critic is referring to?

Oskar Eustis
I had a little acoustic problem there, David. He said that "to direct Shakespeare is to fix Shakespeare"?

David McCandless
I think the idea is that if you just leave the plays alone, they're not going to achieve the kind of breakthrough that you're describing in which they reach everyone – you have to recontextualize, reconfigure…well, here's a specific example, maybe, or you tell me: you were quoted a few years ago, when you were discussing an upcoming production, an all-female production at the Public of *The Taming of the Shrew*. You were quoted as having said, "this is a play that for forty years I could never imagine doing. I couldn't find a way to stand behind it, but I saw through this brilliant production that there is a way to make the play a critique or deconstruction of misogyny and wife-beating instead of a play about it."

Now, assuming for a moment that that was an accurate quote, would that be an example of fixing a problem that otherwise would be provocative?

Oskar Eustis
All right, this is a subject I have strong feelings about, but perhaps—I think they're kind of nuanced…we'll see.

The first is: performing Shakespeare is never fixing Shakespeare – it's creating a performance of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's plays as written material are not the art form he was creating – they are the score for the art form he was creating. The plays on the page have the same relationship to what he was doing as the score of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony has to a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The writing is not the artistic expression – the performance is. We know this. Shakespeare never oversaw the publication of a single one of his plays. He didn't care about his plays. The Folio wasn't until years after he was dead. He didn't care about books; he cared about performance.

That's the wonderful nature of our art form: no matter how you try, you can't "leave the plays alone." You can't "do them as they were done," because you're always in a specific place, at a specific moment, when you produce Shakespeare. Not-- Whatever concept, whatever you're trying to do, the art form requires you to be in the moment. That means, whether you like it or not, you are bringing the moment to Shakespeare. You are bringing your place, your time, to Shakespeare. The question is: how conscious are you of it, and what choices are you making about it?

As someone who's run theaters that do Shakespeare for forty years—It doesn't happen as much anymore, but in the early part of my career, people would say, "Are you doing real Shakespeare? Are you doing regular Shakespeare? Are you

doing Shakespeare as it was written?" Always, when they asked those questions…they don't mean what they're asking, because they have no idea how Shakespeare— they have no idea how it was costumed. They're referring to the style that they saw Shakespeare in when they were growing up, which had a lot of tights and doublets in it and a lot of—

I grew up literally next door to the Guthrie theater, and at that point, all the actors – wonderful theater, but when the actors did Shakespeare, they all, because they came from Julliard, spoke in something called Mid-Atlantic, which is an artificial dialect that was created that was supposed to be half English and half American, but a way to—But I tell you, to my little Minnesota ears, they were talking with English accents. They weren't talking like me. The first time I saw actors not putting on an accent, but talking in their original native tones--first time I saw Raúl Juliá performing Shakespeare, sounding every bit the Puerto Rican he was, that's when Shakespeare became alive for me.

Because Shakespeare "as he wrote it", as it was done originally – all that is just a way of saying, "We're dressing him up in a way that makes him feel comfortably academic, comfortably foreign, comfortably removed from most of the people around us, so that we can celebrate our own academic truth, our own class truth, it doesn't actually mean doing Shakespeare. Again, as I say, you always are bringing stuff to it.

The only question is: are you going to do that in a way that is powerful and smart and evocative, or are you going to do it in an un-thought-through, boring way? Are you going to have a good production or are you going to have a bad production? What we've seen with Shakespeare is he will carry an enormous number of different points of view as long as they are points of view that really rest within the action of the text, that aren't trying to contradict the action of the text.

This is why, for me (and I know this is not true for my friend and colleague Ayanna Thompson), but why *Taming of the Shrew* holds a unique place in the canon. Because *Taming of the Shrew*, the central action of the play is the taming of the shrew. The action of the play requires a man to break a woman's spirit and make her subservient. That means that you either do that and set out to get laughs with that and stand behind that, or you somehow try to subvert the play while you're doing the play and make it not so bad, and make Katherine grin a little at the end when she does the speech and try to soften the edges of it, which I hate.

I never found a way to just do a production of *Shrew* that I felt comfortable with. Back in the seventies and eighties, I used to get asked to direct *Shrew* all the time, because everybody knew I was a lefty and they thought, "Well, if he does it, then we'll be immune to criticism" and I always said no.

What Phyllida Lloyd did, in her brilliant production of *Taming of the Shrew* in the park, was exactly as I said, she actually didn't do *Shrew*, she deconstructed *Shrew*. It was a commentary on *Shrew*. It was a brilliant and wonderful theatrical commentary, but I actually ended up feeling ambivalent about doing it in the park. Because of the very fact that it was deconstructing *Shrew*, it actually required the audience to have some knowledge of *Shrew* in order to appreciate the deconstruction. Actually, it turned out to be more limited in its appeal (although we had a full theater every night -- when we give the tickets away, that helps) But it didn't really land, because the populist tradition of the park, that rule of thumb we always say is: somebody should be walking in when they've never seen a play before and be able to enjoy and appreciate what they're watching onstage.

So, I ended up feeling a little bit like we kind of produced what was a commentary on *Shrew* more than *Shrew,* and it was brilliant and spectacular, and I would do it downtown in a heartbeat, because we have a different mission downtown. But I didn't quite consider it hitting the center of the mark in the park.

I do not have that problem with any other of Shakespeare's plays, and that includes *Othello*, that includes *The Merchant of Venice*. With *Merchant*, which I can speak of because I think we did a fantastically successful production of *Merchant* about ten years ago with Al Pacino as Shylock (Dan Sullivan directed it).

Merchant is not an anti-Semitic play; it is a play that takes place in an anti-Semitic world. That distinction is enormously important. Shakespeare makes Shylock completely human and understandable. He probably did it against his own conscious desires, because (as near as we can tell) Shylock, in Shakespeare's time, would have worn a red wig and a hooked nose and looked like something that would shock us in the theater today. But then, you read what Shakespeare wrote for him and oh my god is he human, oh my god is he three-dimensional, oh my god.

When Dan produced the play, he set it in Edwardian England and it was powerful and we felt for Shylock, we felt for the contradictions of Shylock, we felt for everybody in the play. The one thing that really changed is what Dan referred to as the play's "slipped categories" -- the play was no longer, actually, a comedy.

The particular genius of Dan's production is that the fifth act, after the trial, was unbelievably melancholy. What one felt is the destruction that had happened in all those relationships, with Bassanio, with Portia, with all of them, because they'd revealed themselves to be less than fully human, less than fully compassionate, and they'd all seen each other do that. It had this wonderful melancholy of it.

Then, Dan created an image -- and I love this, because he did exactly what a great director should do: he took something that was in Shakespeare, but it was only spoken of in Shakespeare, but then he put it onstage, which was Shylock's baptism. He just did what Shakespeare-- Shylock had been condemned to be baptized. So, we saw Shylock be manhandled to the center of the stage, his *kippah* thrown away, and he was dumped under the water – it looked more like waterboarding than baptizing. It was just excruciating. Then Pacino -- frail, soaking wet, humiliated -- gets out of this water, picks up his skullcap, puts it back on, and walks into the crowd of thugs who had just baptized him, and the lights come up. It was brilliant, but it wasn't imposed on *The Merchant of Venice* – it's there in *The Merchant of Venice*! Shakespeare says it! Dan just said, "What does a forced baptism look like?" and now, we have to show that and show the violent side if we're actually going to tell the story of *The Merchant of Venice*.

We're always of our moment; we are never out of time; we are never out of history. That is the prison-house of our art form, but it is the huge liberation of our art form -- that we are forced to be in the moment, whether we're doing a new play or Shakespeare. Our job is to try and make something that will land in our moment -- in our place -- as powerfully as possible.

David McCandless
Well, that seems maybe a good entree into asking the question (perhaps, the inevitable question) about *Julius Caesar* and why *Julius Caesar* -- I think I read somewhere that it's actually your favorite Shakespearean tragedy (I don't know if that's an accurate quote or not). But, besides that personal fondness, and hearing, of course, your quite accurate and inevitable affirmation that theater has to speak to the moment. What was it about *Julius Caesar*, then, in that particular moment that lent itself?

Oskar Eustis
Yeah, well, usually what I experience is we do a Shakespeare production for all sorts of reasons, and then I have countless people saying "Oh my god, that was just the right show to do at this moment." Usually, whatever Shakespeare you've done, if you do it well enough, it feels like just the right show.

But this is the one show that was different, which is: I was planning, in November of 2016, to do *Richard II* as my opening show in the park that summer. Then, the election happened. The election of the forty-fifth president came as a colossal blow, not only to me, not only to America, but very much to my staff. The next day, we had a Quaker meeting, the whole staff, just to talk about what was in our hearts. The sense of betrayal, the amount of weeping... I discovered -- it's something I…maybe I'd known this intellectually, but I hadn't experienced it viscerally: that the staff of the Public Theater is-- we're pretty big by this point -- we have two hundred and fifty full-time, year-round staff.

What I saw in that Quaker meeting was that about half of them were young people (under or just over thirty) who had been born somewhere in the country where they felt oppressed, even violated, out of place, persecuted...and they had fled, first to the theater, then to the New York theater as a way of finding a home. These kids were gay, these kids were trans, these kids were BIPOC--there were a million reasons that they had-- But all of them had fled.

[*Voice breaking with emotion*] One of my staff members said at that meeting…I will never forget it. He said, "Yesterday, my father voted for his wallet over his son" and it was just devastating to hear that, to realize, at that moment: I can't put on *Richard II*, I have to put on *Julius Caesar*. Because (and I will say this now) I wanted to kill that guy. I need to do a play about people who set out to kill their dictatorial leader.

I don't know if *Julius Caesar* is my favorite Shakespeare, but it's the Shakespeare I know the best -- I've done it four times now. I love this play; I know it very, very well. What I realized was that -- again, not just the characters or the story, but the core action of *Julius Caesar* was exactly the story I wanted to tell right now: where a group of progressive people who believed in their democracy see their democracy threatened by a populist demagogue and decide to try to preserve their democracy through assassination and end up bringing about not only the end of the Roman republic, and the rise of the Roman empire, but the vanishing of democracy from the face of the globe for almost two thousand years. They bring about the exact opposite of what they set out to do. I went: that's a story that we could tell.

This is the one time I have specifically picked a Shakespeare production to do because of a specific political situation around us. As I was rehearsing it, I kept trying to see if I could find it in my heart to be more subtle. We started to work with it and by god, Gregg Henry, who played Julius Caesar started doing the gestures and started doing the voice and then eventually, of course, wore the hair and got the extra long tie. Tina Benko, this wonderful, wonderful actress playing Calpurnia started to use the Slovakian accent. I kept sitting back and I would say: at some point I'm going to think this is too much, aren't I? And I kept thinking, you know, it's not too much. It's what I want it to be. I want the hammer to be this blunt right now. I want to make this unmistakable, what we're talking about. So, we did, against the instincts of some of our actors, who thought I was being too crude, but that's what we did.

When we put it up, we had the experience of the production working better than I could have hoped. Why is that? Not because we managed to make it relevant to the assassination of Trump, but because we did what the theater does, which is play out dreams, fantasies, unconscious urges. When Aristotle says that protagonists in tragedies are better than normal people, he doesn't mean they're a better class. That's what the French neoclassicists thought he meant. What he meant was that they are more willing to follow through on their objectives than

we are. They are more willing to actually do what they feel like doing. The fascination, for us, is watching what happens when a character actually does the thing that I've fantasized about.

That was exactly what was happening in Central Park in the middle of summer of 2017. This group of characters were acting out the fantasy of assassinating Donald Trump through the story of *Julius Caesar*. In acting that fantasy, we then saw what happened as a result, which is the complete and utter destruction of democracy. It may be the only time that I've directed a production that I felt absolutely had political catharsis at the center of it.

You could tell from the audience reaction to it, because the first couple acts, the audience laughed every time Gregg was onstage. Every time he did something as Trump -- gales of laughter. I have to admit, I played to it a little bit: in Act 3, Scene 2, I brought him up from the trap naked in a gold bathtub. I went for it, like I said -- it was not nuanced. The audience went crazy laughing, and it kept doing that all the way until we got to the center, at the assassination scene. (I'm sorry, I mean Act 2, Scene 3, of course, before.)

In the assassination scene, you could feel the audience getting quieter and quieter. Then, the first preview, when Caesar got stabbed by the conspirators and fell down dead, I remember there was one audience member who didn't get the memo, and who started to clap, and then realized nobody else was clapping and the clap died away. That was the last time that anybody celebrated the death of Caesar in the park. It was a horror show in there. We'd taken the audience of (admittedly) mostly liberal New Yorkers on that journey of: here's the fantasy that you can have killed Donald Trump and it's going to liberate you. The reality is, you're going to do that and it's going to destroy us. This is an anti-assassination play, and always was.

What I was ignorant about is the way our culture had changed. Because I expected that this would be controversial. But what I was imagining was there would be raging controversial debates about *Julius Caesar*. What I didn't realize is there were raging debates about six seconds of iPhone footage that somebody had illegally shot in the audience that played on "Hannity," -and a couple of photographs of a bloody Trump-like looking figure that got spun into a narrative of: liberals in New York are cheering as President Trump is stabbed to death onstage. Hannity talked about us every day for two weeks. It was on Fox, it was on Breitbart, it was scattered all over. It became a worldwide firestorm about this play.

Then I had what I thought was a stroke of genius, which is: on opening night of the play, I got out onstage and I said "Everybody, take your iPhones out. Everybody, you can film me. I want to make my statement." I made this wonderful, nuanced, compassionate speech about the catharsis and how this is anti-assassination, buh buh buh buh. Everybody filmed it, and it went out, and it

was seen by dozens of NPR subscribers. A lot of people saw it, but everybody who saw it-- I got tons of approval from all the people inside the blue bubble. The people who watched Hannity didn't know I'd made a speech. The people who watch Fox News had no idea that I'd ever spoken. I should have insisted that Hannity take me on the air. He would've made mincemeat out of me, if he'd had me on there -- I don't care. I would have been having a chance to talk directly to that audience. Instead, I was just so, so satisfied with my little public television, public radio, Public Theater good guy credentials that I let it sit at that.

As a result, about a week later, I got a call from the Secret Service, who actually first called my daughter's cell phone. My daughter called me and said, "Hey, Dad, the Secret Service just called and I gave them your cell phone." I went, "Kyle, how do you know it was the Secret Service?" "Well, they said they were the Secret Service." I said, "Kyle, don't--" But sure enough, my cell phone rang and they said, "This is the Secret Service" and I said "Fine, what's your name?" and he told me, and I said, "I'm hanging up the phone, and I'm dialing the number in the phone book for the New York branch of the Secret Service, and I'm going to ask for you, and I hope you're there." Turns out, he was there; it was real.

He said, "Mr. Eustis, we're coming to your office at one o'clock this afternoon to interview you." He didn't ask; he told me. A couple hours later, I'm in my office, and these two guys who look like they're straight out of *Men in Black* -- black suits, skinny black ties, white shirts – come in, sit down, turn on a tape recorder, and say, "This interview is with Oskar Eustis in July of 2017" and they start asking me questions. They ask me questions for about an hour. Have I ever contemplated violence against the President? Have I incited anybody else to commit violence against the President? A lot of… really serious, and I answered seriously. I didn't feel guilty, but still, it's a little intimidating.

We get to the end of the interview after about an hour, and the agent says, "The interview with Mr. Eustis is now closed," and he turned off the tape recorder. He says, "Mr. Eustis, I just want to tell you that we have to do this interview because we received thousands of complaints at offices across the United States about this production, and we're legally required to respond to those concerns," because Fox News had told people to call their offices. He said, "So, we have done this interview, and I'm going to tell you now that our investigation is now concluded. There will be no further action from our office. And, by the way, I love Shakespeare in the Park." [*He and McCandless laugh*] Totally broke his demographic profile! It was fantastic.

But the not-so-fantastic part of it… I received death threats. My wife received death threats. My daughter received death threats, threats of sexual violence. My wife reported one of the threats that was left on our home answering machine to the local police. They came and they took down all of them and filed a complaint.

The next day, we flew to England for a few days, literally to get away from this. By the time the plane landed, there was a full-page photograph in the *Daily Mirror* of my wife and I at the opening of Shakespeare in the Park with the complete account of the phone call. Somehow, the police station had leaked the story, first to *The New York Post* and then it went to *The Daily Mirror*. When Lauren, my wife, called up the police station, furious that this had happened, the officer who she talked to said, "I wasn't the one who did it." He didn't even pretend that it hadn't happened.

What wasn't funny about all of this is that Shakespeare festivals across the country received threats, because people (apparently) can't distinguish between the New York Shakespeare Festival and the Utah Shakespeare Festival. Many, many Shakespeare festivals were caught up in this nonsense.

Again, I think I was really ineffective about using the moment to try to really speak across the divide. The learning I had from it is just: I am, like everybody else I know, capable of being smug and self-righteous and self-centered and not realize that if I don't reach the people who think they hate me, I'm not doing any good at all. If I don't reach the people who oppose, resist the things I stand for, I'm not in dialogue with anybody but my little club.

That's the real challenge that's in front of us, David, and still is: are we somehow going to actually be in dialogue with a significant number of the people who feel like the economy has turned its back on them, the educational system has turned its back on them, and the culture has turned its back on them. Because we have turned our back on them. We have (essentially) said to half the country, "We don't have anything for you, and you don't have anything for us. We're going to go to the blue counties, where we have audience." The nonprofit theaters across the country, stunningly, are in blue counties. Some of them are in red states, but they're in blue counties in red states. Nonprofit theater has abandoned half this country, and they wreaked a terrible vengeance on us in 2016, and they tried to do it on January 6 [2021]. We just have to take seriously our responsibility to speak to more than our own folks.

Sorry! Again, a long speech, but there you go.

David McCandless
No, I can't think of a better example of Shakespeare and politics than the chaos that ensued after--

Oskar Eustis
It's crazy.

David McCandless
--your production. I feel I read accounts of things erupting right in the middle of the show…

Oskar Eustis
For the last week of the show, there were right-wing trolls online (who I am only not going to mention by name because they don't deserve the airspace, but they're famous right-wing trolls) who were offering rewards -- money rewards! -- to anybody who interrupted the show. The last four performances, every one was interrupted by somebody charging onstage and trying to stop the show.

The first time was by a right-wing nut who is now sitting in the U.S. Congress in Florida. Literally, afterwards -- she was escorted offstage, the show continued -- and afterwards, we found out that she had put up a plea for her legal defense fund online before she had gone to the theater and that by ten o'clock that night, she had raised $25,000 for her legal defense fund, which were...I guess she was planning to defend herself against a charge of misdemeanor trespassing, which we dropped by eleven o'clock that night. It's just-- the cynicism was just unbelievable. Anyway.

David McCandless
All about the money, right? I think we should get some questions from our viewers at this point. If any of you have a question for Oskar to address, put it in the chat. Finlay is standing by to help facilitate this process. Should we think in terms of a couple minutes, Finlay, for this?

Finlay Kuester
Yes, just about that.

Oskar Eustis
Also, feel free to put in the chat that you want me to just stop talking. That is an acceptable response. Finlay will pass that on, too.

David McCandless
Your modesty becomes you. Well, I was thinking, too, about the-- this is a little bit of vamping, I guess, because I do want to give the audience a chance to ask questions, but since we have a couple minutes: your production of *Twelfth Night* (co-production, I realize) received such ecstatic reviews and so much of a focus in those reviews on how joyous and affirming…how much it was an affirmation of empathy. I wonder: do you (sorry, I'm kind of back to the text in performance question, which is always fascinating to me) do you feel the play, as you read it, is about that, or does it enable (again) a kind of reframing for a contemporary moment?

Oskar Eustis
Well, that was a Public Works production and I had the great joy of producing and dramaturging it. I wasn't directing it. Then, when Kwame Kwei-Armah, the original director, had a schedule conflict when we expanded it the following year

to a full six-week run, he asked me to step in and actually do the on-the-ground directing, so I got it from both angles.

The actual creation of it-- This was an adaptation of *Twelfth Night* (a musical adaptation) that was by Kwame and by Shaina Taub, the brilliant musician/composer/performer who wrote the score for that and later for our Public Works production of *As You Like It*. In working on it, the dramaturgical question constantly was: what is it in the text that you can then bring out and musicalize (make the theme of the songs) and will actually touch our audience.

We talked about this a lot. One of the key questions, or one of the key things that Shaina was fascinated by in *Twelfth Night* was that somehow Viola by denying her identity, by dressing as a boy, is actually able to discover something about herself and about the world that she can't discover just by being herself. That this pretending – faking – is a form of self-knowledge and a voyage of self-discovery. I thought that was such a beautiful response to it that we began to shape the arc of the whole show around that perception. That perception (I think) is really drawn from the text; it wasn't something that Shaina made up. But then, of course, we used Shakespeare. We used that story, and we used much of his language.

Shaina proved herself on that show. I want to say she was ten years old – she was twenty-five, maybe, when she wrote this, she's just an astonishing talent: to be not only a wonderful composer, and not only a great performer, but a fantastic lyricist. So much so that I experienced that her lyrics stood side by side with Shakespeare and she did just fine. It wasn't just me that thought so! Rufus Norris, the Artistic Director of the National Theater in Great Britain saw the production and said the same thing and not only picked up the show to do it at the National, but actually invited Shaina to come write other musicals at the National. Elton John has asked her and she is writing the lyrics with Elton John for the musical adaptation of *The Devil Wears Prada*. In other words, the brilliance of her lyrics and the way that she incorporated that into the story of Sebastian and Viola and Olivia and Orsino was just extraordinary.

I hope everybody in the audience will seek out the cast album, which is find-able in Apple Music and you'll know what I'm talking about. I feel like that production was really resting on the back of Shaina's genius. In a way, it's a cheat to say: the way you can adapt Shakespeare is you find another genius to adapt it, but it's what we did.

David McCandless
Very cool, very cool. Well, Finlay, do you have some questions for us, or for Oskar?

Finlay Kuester

Yes, I do! Mike Jensen asks: Please expand on the political Shakespeare theme in specific reference to the *Richard II* broadcast.

Oskar Eustis
Right…Thank you, you've clearly listened to this. We were planning to do *Richard II* in the park this past summer of 2020. By the time it came around, things had worked out so that I wasn't available to direct. I asked a wonderful young director who I love and has since become my Associate Artistic Director (Saheem Ali), to take the helm of that production, which was going to star André Holland as Richard II. Then covid hit, and we had to pivot and we had to make it a radio production. Okay, great.

As it was being worked on, as we cast it, it was an almost entirely Black cast. It was an extraordinary group of actors that were assembled and we were ready to do the radio show. We actually started rehearsal a week after George Floyd was murdered. We were all reeling, and Saheem was reeling, and the theater was reeling, and the question we kept asking was: should we go ahead with this? What's the sense of doing *Richard II* at this moment? What Saheem did brilliantly was lead off with that question on the first day of rehearsal, which was eight days after George Floyd's death: why should we do this show? Which led to a passionate, day-long discussion from the cast about whether they wanted to do it, what it meant to them to do it, why most of them thought it was important to do it and it was an incredibly rich conversation. One of the cast left the show at the end of the day – said that she had decided that this was not an appropriate thing for her to do at this moment. Great – bless her.

But what we then decided to do was to take that conversation from that day and use it as the context for the radio production of *Richard II*, which we ended up then doing in four parts, but each of the parts had discussions inspired by this question of: why do Black people do Shakespeare? What does it mean to Black theater artists to be performing Shakespeare? What does it mean to be doing Shakespeare now? What does it mean to be a Black person doing Shakespeare?

Those discussions were incredibly rich. Whether we were successful or not, what we set out to do was to embed the production of *Richard II* in a discussion about the production of *Richard II* that we hoped would make it more accessible to folks.

I have to say, I've been just thrilled by its reception. It's been picked up around the country.

David McCandless
Great, thanks. What else, Finlay?

Finlay Kuester

David Humphrey asks: do you see more political extremism now against the arts than perhaps in years past?

Oskar Eustis
"Against the arts…" Fortunately, I don't feel like (yet) the arts are a major focus of political extremism – individual artists' expressions are (like my production of *Julius Caesar* and others –- *Hamilton* was, which we also produced, but that's another story). But I am not seeing the same level of concentrated attack on the idea of the arts or the idea of the nonprofit arts that I saw during the culture war of the eighties.

That was a period where right-wingers (particularly Jesse Helms and other right-wing folks) discovered that using things like Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ" as a fundraising tool generated huge amounts of dollars from what at that time was direct mail from their supporters. Again, I think completely cynically, they set about to make the NEA a punching bag and to do it so they could raise money.

They raised an awful lot of money. They did some real and lasting damage to the NEA. But they didn't destroy the NEA. Indeed, the NEA has gotten a lot of new support as part of this set of revival bills that Congress has passed.

So, we survived that. There were terrible consequences to it, which I could talk about, but I'm not seeing the arts being a focus in the same way, yet.

David McCandless
Thank you. Yes, Finlay?

Finlay Kuester
Those are all the questions we have right now. Viewers, please feel free to send in any more questions you have in the live chat on the YouTube page.

David McCandless
Well, while we're waiting for those, another thing I'd love to know, Oskar, is maybe a little more of a personal question, I guess, but: was Shakespeare always a playwright/artist that you gravitated towards, or did you have a conversion experience at some point or…especially given your upbringing, which you described as [*inaudible*] lefty.

Oskar Eustis:
My household was intellectuals – Communist intellectuals. My parents divorced when I was young, both of them remarried and (actually) all four of them were professors at the University of Minnesota. Partly, I didn't go to college as an act of rebellion against them. But it meant Shakespeare was around and I had certainly read Shakespeare and seen Shakespeare, talked about Shakespeare before, as a teenager.

But by the time I left home, I was not only not a fan of Shakespeare, I was not a fan of writing. I was first radicalized by the experimental theater movement of the early 1970s, who believed many different things, much of them self-contradictory, but one of the things that everybody was sure of is that the playwright was a denizen of the past – was a "holdover" from the literary antecedents of theater. That now in our new, modern, experimental age, the playwright was thrown in the dustbin of history, and performance as a pure thing in itself – devised work, nonverbal work, many different forms -- but that performance was going to be leading.

I did that work passionately and with a great deal of almost ideological vigor for several years, until I got a job at the age of nineteen to go to Switzerland and start an experimental second stage for the Schauspielhaus Zurich with my Swiss colleague Stephan Müller. From nineteen to twenty-one I lived in Europe and directed and taught in Switzerland, Austria, West Germany and East Germany (the Germanies were divided at the time). During that time, I was exposed to the German-speaking theater world, which was enormously influential on me.

But I had a huge crisis of conscience, because I realized at a certain point that what I was doing – the theater that I was making in Zurich – was actually designed to intimidate the audience into silence. I didn't consciously know this when I was making it, but when I really began to— A number of things happened that forced me to examine myself and realize that I was actually making a kind of avant-garde art that was doing precisely the kind of function that I was talking about earlier: it was allowing a certain rarified strata of the European bourgeoisie to decide that they understood things that were more experimental and progressive and innovative than the normal audience. That, therefore, by liking the work I was doing (they didn't understand it, but they pretended to understand it) that elevated them into a kind of elite cultural class.

I had no idea who this audience that I was reaching was. I had no idea what I was trying to say to them, if indeed I had anything to say to them. I was becoming a trained circus animal for the bourgeoisie. When I realized that, I had an enormous crisis of conscience and I had kind of a breakdown. I ended up realizing I had to move back to the States. I ended up, as Raymond Chandler said, "They tipped the country and everything with a screw loose fell into California." I found myself falling into San Francisco, where I spent the next decade of my life slowly rebuilding my sense of myself and of my work.

The key components of it were realizing that I had to make work whose ideas and whose politics and who the work was trying to reach in some way reflected my politics. What I'd been doing was a huge alienation from my own politics. That, I quickly discovered, that meant that playwrights had to be at the center of my work, not exiled from my work. Because a playwright was the only way to get that complexity of communication involved in the work.

Because it was the Bay Area, everything was accessible to me. As I was rehabilitating myself, I signed on as, yes, an assistant director for a production of *Julius Caesar* at the Berkeley Shakespeare Festival in 1978. I was twenty-one years old and I was Richard E.T. White's assistant. It was the first time I'd assisted anybody. It was the first show that I hadn't done myself. It was the first time I'd worked on Shakespeare. I didn't know what a stage manager was when I started that rehearsal, I was such an ignorant experimental theater guy.

I fell in love. I fell in love with the play, I fell in love with the communication of the play, I fell in love with what it meant to direct this playwright that people had been producing and writing about for hundreds of years, and how incredibly rich it was to start to enter into that dialogue, and entering into a practice that existed long before I was born, and was going to exist long after I was dead, and where I could start as a novice and grow within it. Being part of that tradition was part of my rebirth. I have been producing, directing, dramaturging, studying Shakespeare ever since 1978.

David McCandless
Very cool. Finlay, did we get any other questions?

Finlay Kuester
There do not seem to be any more audience questions.

Oskar Eustis
Why would any of them want to make me talk more? I should say, just a funny moment: that season at Berkeley Shakespeare Festival, I also got to watch this marvelous young actress play Juliet and it was Annette Bening's first production job coming in from A.C.T. Conservatory. Everybody knew that she was just lightning in a bottle from the moment she started. It was such a joy, many, many years later, to have her come back to the Delacorte and play Regan in our production of *King Lear* in the summer of 2014.

David McCandless
I do remember hearing stories about her when she was young and had "star" written all over her, I guess.

I should tell you: the last event we had for Shakespeare America was a panel discussion – some African-American theater artists. It was a great conversation, and one of the things we got to, just at the very end, a question about: well, where do we go from here? In other words: what are the main things we need to address? Actually, your friend Ayanna Thompson was on the panel and I think she was the one who spoke up and said, "Well, the one way in which all of us are failing – all of us who care about the theater, care about Shakespeare – is when you look at the audience, it's such a narrow demographic, who can afford the

tickets. It's almost exclusively white, it's older people, for the most part. (Not that there's anything wrong with older people – I'd put myself in that category.)

That was interesting then, to think about you as the next artist we wanted to talk to, because that's been such an issue with you. I even—I think I read an interview in the *Times* that your goal was to make all theater free. Is that ultimately the way that we will, in fact, solve this problem that Ayanna identified that we have to-- the demographics, we need young people, we need people of color…

Oskar Eustis
I'm happy to say that Ayanna is now helping me to solve the problem, because she is on staff at the Public and is one of our two Shakespeare scholars in residence, in addition Jim Shapiro, both of whom are just spectacularly useful.

But no, it's not just about making it free. Free is important, but it has shifted from being the most important thing for me (which I thought it would be when I arrived) to being one of the important things. Because I've realized that these other barriers to owning and appreciating and getting yourself connected to Shakespeare are much harder to overcome than that economic one, and if you overcome the economic one, it doesn't mean you've overcome any of the other ones.

It's this process (and, again, Ayanna has been a fantastic help on that) it's when we create the programs, how can we reposition the role that Shakespeare and the role that theater has in the lives of our communities? It's why the Public Works thing is so exciting, because crossing the barrier and saying, this distinction between professional and nonprofessional is actually not that interesting. It's not the most important distinction. Once you throw that out, and once you say that, no, what's important is how the act of making theater animates and connects a community, and it's not just a professional community and it means people aren't either audience or artist but people who are playing all of those roles – there's where I think the change really lies. It's following that particular thread that I'm hoping to do in the very few years remaining to me.

David McCandless:
Thank you. Well, it seems to be 2:30 exactly, so we were able to end right on time. I want to thank you enormously for agreeing to be here, and for speaking so eloquently and sensitively and inspiringly on so many things. Your self-deprecations notwithstanding, you're a fascinating speaker I could listen to all day.

Oskar Eustis
Thanks, David. Well, this was really fun. I'm really grateful for the opportunity to talk about this stuff. I think we also have to thank the pandemic for making it much easier for us to arrange this, once it had to be Zoom…getting me to Southern Oregon was not being so easy up til then.

David McCandless
Well, yeah, it must be admitted at this point that we've been trying for years, for years we wanted to, but he's a very busy man.

Oskar Eustis
You don't know how good it felt to say "yes" to you, David. Thank you.

David McCandless
Thank you, all of you out there. Thank you, Finlay.

Oskar Eustis
Thank you, Finley. Thanks, everybody. Take care.