

In good COMPANY



We mingle in the sunlit classroom like old friends. The choppy static of multiple conversations—spiked with the éclat of festive pockets of laughter—pervades the room. Everyone peels a post-it note from the board with the part they choose to read scribbled on it. Most people clip on plastic tags with their first names announced in bold. The tinny bell rings. Let's begin!

Every Sunday, more than 30 people show up to read Shakespeare together in Santa Fe. Robin Williams—an expansive, spirited woman with an eye-catching pageboy haircut—has been leading Shakespeare groups since 2002. Right now, Robin is guiding a discussion of *Troilus and Cressida*—a love tragedy comparable to *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, except that it's delivered in the same dark, difficult cadence as gloomy *Hamlet*, which was written around the same time in roughly 1601. It is a cynical story about the legendary figures Troilus (a symbol of “fidelity”) and Cressida (a stand-in for “unfaithfulness”) enacted against the backdrop of the Trojan War.

In this play, the puffed-up Greek leader Ulysses delivers many airy, abstract speeches, and each one contains a number of intellectual snarls to pick apart. The following excerpt read aloud from Act III is no exception when it comes to Ulysses' challenging cerebral knots:

“...no man is the lord of anything—
Though in and of him there be much consisting—
Till he communicate his parts to others.”

“I love the slow process of reading and discussion, uncovering insights into human character, motivation and behavior,”

=Mary Lee Karlins



Robin Williams

“Beep,” Robin says, signaling a pause in the reading in order to open up the room for discussion. “Okay, what is Ulysses talking about here?” The answers arrive like a flurry of tennis balls. “I think he’s saying that in public space you must become yourself,” a bearded man begins.

“Don’t hold your light under a bushel,” one woman interjects. “Man’s substance is in relationship to others,” someone else jumps in. “It’s nothing by itself.”

“You don’t get an opinion of yourself unless you let out your sparks,” a fourth person pipes up.

In fact, Ulysses could have been talking about the benefits of fellowship among the Shakespeare Close Readers. The group is a community that prides itself in communication among its many members, and it emphasizes that we are nothing without one another. It doesn’t matter that the majority of those who gather every Sunday have had little background in the Bard—we are a diverse group of people from all walks of life: teachers, artists, mathematicians, lawyers, writers and even some thespians...the list goes on.

“Members of this group have become friends,” longtime participant Rhea Maxwell says. “We have not only our love of reading Shakespeare in common, but many other interests and activities that connect us.”

When Robin founded her first Shakespeare group in 2002, she was a prolific author of computer books by day—a graphic designer who defined her task as “making difficult things accessible.” She translated her skill set from computer software to Shakespeare as she became aware that “people like slowing down and understanding each line.” Eventually, she was bitten by the Bard’s bug so powerfully that she enrolled in Brunel University, London, and wrote her doctoral dissertation on “The History and the Future of Reading Shakespeare Out Loud and in Community.” (Happily, she received her Ph.D. in May 2015.)

In hosting these literary circles, Robin is not so much initiating Shakespeare reading groups as reviving them. Beginning in the late 19th century, Shakespeare clubs for women cropped up all over the United States. Most of the 500 clubs (including at least one in each state) were formed between 1880 and 1900, though they lasted into the 1940s. Women clustered in these groups for the sake of learning, self-improvement, conversation, debate and even social activism. Shakespeare’s strong women characters were articulate role models and served as provocative talking points.

Why did these groups disappear? One reason is that Shakespeare became intellectualized and appropriated by male

story by ALISON OATMAN
photos by STEPHEN LANG

elites who emphasized performance over grassroots reading. Another explanation is generational change, specifically a decline in civic activities as more people have turned to television (and other screens), fled the cities for the suburbs, and dealt with the time-and-money crunch in two-career families. No wonder the Santa Fe Close Readers has been so popular. People these days are hankering for the identity and kinship a clan like this provides.

And the experience is pleasurable. “I love the slow process of reading and discussion, uncovering insights into human character, motivation and behavior,” recent member Mary Lee Karlins asserts. “In performance, the plays proceed so quickly that I always miss a great deal.”

For Cheryl Bartlett, an author who joined the group about three years ago, Shakespeare is “an ongoing source of inspiration” in her own writing. “Humanity hasn’t changed in the past four centuries,” she says. “When we compare notes in a close read and discussion of each play, history begins to unfold in casual conversation about truly ordinary things. We see that Shakespeare’s characters are flawed in the ways we are flawed.”

Another bond we celebrate is a common love of language. According to Barry Hatfield, who deftly runs the afternoon sessions and is wonderfully knowledgeable about English history, people in Shakespeare’s time lived a simpler life at a slower pace. “It was a more oral society and, especially with the sophistication of court manners, this means more precise and subtle conversation was possible than generally we experience today, where we talk in shorthand by comparison,” he points out. Thus Shakespeare’s language is richly nuanced fertile ground—a word-miner’s joy. As reading-enthusiast Kaaren Boullosa writes: “I have always loved and revered [Shakespeare] but I feel closer to him now, and, also, closer to my native tongue—and I am more than ever now so proud and grateful that it *is* my native tongue!”

Many members report finally being able to understand Shakespeare as one understands a second language. They eagerly feast on his many neologisms. “I totally enjoy reading the plays and really knowing what is being said,” Rhea Maxwell says. “It makes seeing the plays more fun and I can definitely tell when the actors are just saying words and do not understand what they are saying.”

Why is Santa Fe Shakespeare Close Readers, with its 235 members, the most active Shakespeare Close Readers group in the country? Caryl Farkas, who has been directing Shakespeare and producing outreach with young people in Santa Fe and Madison, Wisconsin, for the past 12 years, gave this some thought. “There must be something about Santa Fe that produces this level of interest and commitment,” she says. “I do know that the community in general is perhaps more enthusiastic about Shakespeare than any place I’ve ever been.”

Eddie Murphy—the backbone of the group who does all the behind-the-scenes work, like collecting dues and posting juicy materials on the website—explained the phenomenon this way: “It is a town of many smart, smart retirees, who are still very alive and Wild West renegades. We meet, we read, we conquer!”

It’s time to pack up and leave. The show is over. All the players put away their dog-eared parts, unfasten their nametags, screw together their water bottles. Until we meet again! And, yes, until we read again...



Close Readers meet from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. every Sunday morning; Close-Enough Readers meet from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. Sunday afternoons. \$2. Santa Fe University of Art and Design, Benildus Hall, Room 100. Meetup.com/SFSCloseReaders