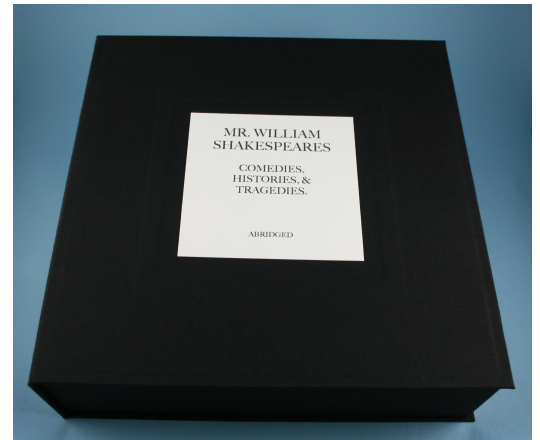


# ISALOS FINE ART



OPERA HOUSE ARTS 10TH ANNIVERSARY EXHIBITION



# Shake Stonington

*A decade of arts at the Stonington Opera House proves that all the world's a stage.*

By Alicia Anstead

Galen Koch had her first Shakespeare moment the summer she was 14. She and two young friends were cast in *Romeo and Juliet* for the annual Shakespeare production at the Stonington Opera House in August of 2004, and their excitement was uncontainable.

*“We were totally in love with the love and the poetry of Romeo and Juliet,” says Galen, who grew up on Deer Isle. “And that was when I fell in love with Shakespeare, that was the ‘aha’ moment.”*

Galen, now 20 and studying government and theater at Skidmore College, has clear childhood memories of seeing Shakespeare. Once in Montauk, N.Y. when she was 6. Once in junior high when she was in a school production. And then the inaugural *Shakespeare in Stonington* production of *The Tempest* in 2001. With that last one, Galen saw “that Shakespeare can be done in such a brilliantly creative way, that it doesn’t have to be boxed in. It allowed Shakespeare to be something more than Elizabethan, boring and drab, which was the Shakespeare I saw as a 6-year old.”

If you have had an “aha” moment with Shakespeare in your past, then you know how lucky Galen is to have had such a revelation at 14. People who remember their first enchanting encounter with Shakespeare do so the way others recall where they were when President Kennedy was shot or when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon.

In high school! In New York City!  
At a summer festival!

I have no such memory of when Shakespeare entered my inner Rolodex. At home, we did not discuss Shakespeare at the dinner table. I was never in a school play. My parents took us to musicals rather than to the national Shakespeare theater five miles from our home. Of course, Shakespeare was on the curriculum in high school, but my most vivid memory about Shakespeare is not even about Shakespeare.



*Galen Koch on stage at the Opera House in 2006*

I was also 14, in a Catholic girls high school in Washington, D.C. where I had been chosen with one of my classmates to read aloud from the same *Romeo and Juliet* that lit a fire in Galen. Rendering a male role written in an intimidating form of my own native tongue was terrifying in that setting, particularly because I was far more awkward and insecure than many of the other students. At one point, I bungled the pronunciation. No one seemed to notice except Sister Maria John, who shot a terse and, it seemed to me, unnecessarily loud correction in my direction. I paused, tried again, failed again and ended up stammering to the next line. The performance continued without further interruption. But the damage was done. I never wanted to speak Shakespeare's words again.

This memory suggests that if you don't get Shakespeare real and right early in life then you may have to wait as long as I did – graduate school – to encounter his work fully and richly, to have the poetry in your thoughts and to have the abandon and discipline Galen achieved when she was but Juliet's age.

The children and adults of Stonington, Maine – rural, coastal, outlying, remote – have a better chance at “getting” Shakespeare than I did with a parochial education in a metropolitan city, home to one of the world's largest Shakespeare libraries. In fact, I would argue that the citizens (large and small) and the residents (year-round and rusticators) on this island have had more advantages than many because, for nearly a decade, the Bard has been in their

summer water supply. *Shakespeare in Stonington* is now an annual event performed by Equity actors and seen by hundreds of audience members each summer.

Unlike my memory of Shakespeare, I remember precisely the first time I visited the Stonington Opera House. It was July 2001, a full two years after founding partners Linda Nelson, Judith Jerome, Carol Estey and Linda Pattie purchased the dilapidated historic building, an old vaudeville house, hoping to rejuvenate both the structure and its cultural legacy to the community. The event was not Shakespeare but an art equally unlikely in such a far-off setting: jazz. At the time, I was chief arts reporter on assignment for the *Bangor Daily News*. Through the years I had attended many performances in rustic settings – barns, garages, abandoned storefronts. This is not unusual for Maine or any rural setting. And yet, something provocative happened that night, and it began as I rounded the corner of Main Street, with the churning harbor on one side of me and the craggy rise of earth on the other. There, in a space between, wedged into a steep wall of granite as if teetering precariously on a cliff was the Opera House, corporeal and incontrovertible. What happened inside the hall was even more notable:

While relaxation may be what many summer visitors seek in Stonington, the first North Atlantic Jazz Festival was far more exciting than calming. Far out on the town dock, the music coming from the Opera House slipped and slid through the air. Even a few fishermen stopped by

the concert hall to listen. The hope, say festival supporters, is to have it be an annual event, one that grows and gains followers - local and far-afield - each year on the last weekend of July. That may mean more blues in Stonington, which, after all, can only be a good thing.

In the old-fangled newspaper business, we tend to stay away from language such as “first annual” anything. If it happens more than once, it earns the word annual. And the Jazz Festival was in its inaugural year. So of course I resisted the language. But after covering the arts throughout the state for more than a decade, I knew that first night that the Opera House had a vibe I had rarely seen in other performing arts centers in Maine. The closest was the now defunct Left Bank Café in Blue Hill, which was solidly and raucously on the national folk map for more than a decade.

But the Opera House was more ambitious. A month later came *The Tempest*, directed by Julia Whitworth and featuring professional theater artists from New York City and musicians from Deer Isle. Whitworth combined a nuanced understanding of local life and imagery – including a lobster – with exacting performances capturing the windswept life of a far-off fantasy island or of an active fishing island like Deer Isle. The night offered an “almost miraculous drama” as Samuel Coleridge called the play in his day. It had the “grace of a schooner at full sail,” I wrote later in the *Bangor Daily*. But more important, I noted: “The result is a stirring production that transports the audience to a brave new world

and, strangely enough, to the world in its own back yard, too ... Whitworth, like Prospero, has not only created an ‘art to enchant,’ she has tasted the ‘subtleties o’ the isle.’”

Years earlier, more slowly, I had fallen in love with Shakespeare in print and was unswervingly devoted to the written word as superior to any work onstage. But this *Tempest* changed me. It was my “aha” moment. And this is where Galen’s story, and my story, and the stories of countless others intersect within the walls of the Opera House.

As it turns out, the Jazz Festival continued, and eventually additional programming expanded to original, commissioned and touring works, public dialogues, first-run and independent films, leadership training for young people, national awards and partnerships with local arts organizations including the Reach Performing Arts Center and Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle as well as the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.

Renovations continued, too, with a vital winterization that allowed round-the-calendar events. Linda Nelson, who cut her techie teeth on new media at the *Village Voice*, spearheaded the Imagination Project, a public access digital media studio donated to the organization. Predictably, young media artists got to work, and, earlier this year, the Maine Film Center recognized the Opera House’s original local filmmaking and curating with an award for “Best Artistic Direction” for significant contributions to the field.

And Shakespeare continued, of course – nine shows so far: *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *As You Like It*, *Taming of the Shrew*, *Macbeth* and, this summer, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

### “What’s in a name”

The mission statement of Opera House Arts, the umbrella organization for all this activity, is a simple yet powerful endorsement of the role the arts can play in everyday life when fostered consciously and purposefully. It is: “Opera House Arts employs the performing arts to foster and promote excellence in all the ways we perform our lives: *Incite Art, Create Community*.”

Scratch the surface of any one of the projects mentioned above – or others not mentioned here – and the Opera House mission streams forth. And yet, my mind is drawn back to Shakespeare as a prism through which to understand both the mission and deepening role of the Opera House in the community.

Of course, it all starts with the word. That is, the brilliance of Shakespeare’s poetry and his insights into the human condition whether “merry or tragical,” as Theseus says in *Midsummer*. Judith Jerome, the Opera House artistic director, has upheld the highest standards. She convenes and collaborates on the auditions in New York City, and scrupulously chooses theater artists – directors, designers,

composers, actors – committed to reinterpreting Shakespeare, to stretching beyond tradition and into the headlines, the daily lives and private spaces of today’s populace. *Taming of the Shrew* set in a women’s prison. *Hamlet* with a silent movie patina. *Midsummer* as an Amazon’s drugged dream.

Similar to the traveling play companies that visited Stratford-upon-Avon during Shakespeare’s childhood, the Opera House troupers arrive in Stonington, where they board in the homes of island residents, eat lobster and fried clams, teach acting at the Opera House summer camp, walk among the citizenry, march in the Fourth of July Parade and put a human face to theater – while also working indoors for 10 long days finalizing preparations for opening night.

As a complement to the stage work in the last two years, the Opera House has held community “reads” at libraries in Blue Hill, Stonington and Deer Isle. During these informal events, as many as 20 people sit around a table and speak the text out loud, occasionally stopping to explicate a line, word or thought. The process is always revelatory, and those who start out shy often end up stars. Or even starry eyed.

Last year, one man volunteered to read Macbeth’s part in the final act of the play, when Macbeth is undone by Lady Macbeth’s death. His voice cracked as he read:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

In the quiet of that room, in the company of neighbors and strangers, he found a secret knowledge, a private recognition in those words. In the rawness, he also tapped into a universal connection for the rest of us.

At another reading, a woman was in tears toward the end, when Macduff slays Macbeth. She understood the flawed humanity behind Macbeth's tyranny – and it made her feel sympathy for, of all people, Saddam Hussein. Was the Iraqi president one of the “rarer monsters” to whom Macduff refers? Yes. But through Macbeth's own rise and fall, she discovered another side of the story. Her ideas were not popular with the group – and wouldn't be during any time of war – and yet she had found a way to look evil in the eye and burrow beyond its machinations to the squeezed heart, the repudiation of love and the overthrowing of one's true self for the false and fatal gains of greed, power and ambition.

Talk about a good deed in a war-weary world.

### “Where we lay our scene”

By the time of *Macbeth* in 2008, I had left the newspaper for a fellowship at Harvard University and, at its completion, my full-time arts reporting position had, much like the Scottish king, been slain by a coup of another kind: technology over print, the news story over in-depth arts coverage. Judith Jerome and Linda Nelson asked me to lead the community gatherings and a post-show talk back with my former professor at the University of Maine Richard Brucher as well as members of the creative team. Both events sparked not only my imagination, but Linda's too. A journalist herself, she saw the possibility for what she calls “embedded journalism.” The term entered the lexicon with reporters in Iraq who boarded tanks with soldiers and went out into the night wearing flak jackets and helmets while carrying notebooks and cameras. The result was an immediate, if controversial, connection to the action. Linda saw that same possibility for the arts. What if a journalist embedded herself in the community, applying her reporting skills and narration to a production of Shakespeare?

Both the Maine Arts Commission, which offered an Artist Visibility Grant, and the *Bangor Daily News*, which distributed our content, saw the value in *Shakespeare and the Journalist in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, the title for our project reinforcing the role for a professional arts journalist while increasing the visibility of the arts and artists involved in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Opera House this summer.

Notice I wrote “our content” because, while I moderated the blog, facilitated community reads and led two talk-backs for this project, the administrative and artistic staff and even the audience contributed, shaping coverage with new voices and insights. They opened a window to the process, to the lives of artists and arts administrators and to the experience of art. For my part, I hoped to convey perspectives the reader might not find in other places: videos of theatergoers’ impromptu responses to the show, photos from the community reads and production, links to additional material about Shakespeare and audio interviews with leading Shakespeare scholars and theater artists such as the world-class scholar Stephen Greenblatt and Tony Award-winning Broadway director Diane Paulus.

Professional, artist and community voices mashed online. It was an odd and yet fulfilling relationship for me – the embedded journalist. In pre-blog, pre-Facebook, pre-Twitter years, a reporter would never have stepped this close to the flame of art and artists. But this was a test run for all of us, a potential model for arts reporting at a time when an estimated half of all the staff arts reporting jobs in this country have been eliminated.

Frankly, it was more honest on some level: I have always believed the arts critic is more closely connected to the artist, more passionate about the craft than we openly admit. Oscar Wilde saw the critic as artist and while I won’t go that far, I can see the value of giving up the seat on the aisle for a seat at the table. Despite the decisions of newspaper investors and

publishers, we still need arts arbiters in the community to foster dialogue, to debate, to ask the questions, to think along with audiences about what they have seen and how they feel. We need dialogue about the arts because the arts help us understand private moments and global leaders.

And, as the Opera House team might also say: We also need dialogue to secure the next generation of artists, arts consumers, arts patrons and richly prepared members of an activist democracy. The Opera House defies national trends in performing arts organizations which have struggled to find and retain young audiences. That old hall tucked into granite on the hill seems to have found a magic formula, particularly in Shakespeare who, as Ben Jonson said, was “not of an age, but for all time.” And for all ages. At any performance in the Opera House – Shakespeare or otherwise – you are just as likely to hear a child’s voice ask: “Why is he wearing that crown, Mommy?” as you are to hear an adult say, “Wow!”

In the end, that mix is as important and as radical as the mix of our online voices. And every bit as necessary.

### **“As boundless as the sea”**

The founders of Opera House Arts love that old hillside building – its shingles, nails, paint and antique perfume – to such a degree that one might wonder if they, too, have fallen under the spell of the Fairy King’s “love juice.” And yet, as executive director, Linda Nelson is quick to say, the mission



of the place is about so much more than granite and spackling. In a *New York Times* story I wrote about the Stonington venture in 2003, she said: “This is not about money or property for us. It’s about living a good life, doing what you think is important and giving something to the community. That’s how democracy works. Democracy is participation.”

The Puritans of Shakespeare’s time believed theater was the path to immorality. Today we know live theater expands and makes demands of the imagination, and nothing is more important to a democracy than participants who think creatively, *who act*. The Opera House did not create the arts scene in Stonington, but its leaders and volunteers and audience members have acted intentionally to nurture conversation and consciousness about the arts, about performance as a way of life.

Most obviously, the mission of this visionary organization radiates from the stage – and also from other sites such as the Old Settlement Granite Quarry where *Quarryography*, an original choreography commissioned by the Opera House took place last year and will continue as *Q2: Habitat* next summer.

But it also radiates from ekphrasis, the Greek word for a work of visual art based on another work of art in an attempt to describe and illuminate some aspect of the original work’s essence. A glance around Isalos Fine Art, which is hosting this summer’s vibrant *Opera House Arts Ten Year Anniversary*

*Exhibition*, proves the ekphrastic effect of the Opera House: It not only presents art but, after a decade, it inspires it, too.

“The poet’s eye,” says Duke Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven.” He goes on:

And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen  
Turns them to shapes, and gives aery nothing  
A local habitation and a name.

But it is Hippolyta who notes the ultimate step: “It must be your imagination then, and not theirs.”

Your imagination. My imagination. The imagination of artists. Local habitation. To have, as Puck says, “slumb’red here while these visions did appear” at the Opera House is to have dreamed but also to be awakened. Aha.

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