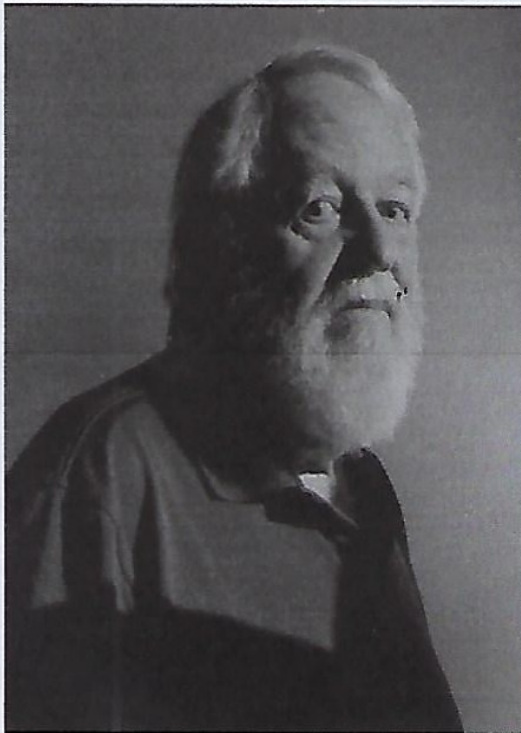


Transmitting Shakespeare to the Next Generation

Dakin Matthews, one of the stars of “Camelot” on Broadway, helps younger castmates hone their craft with Shakespeare lessons between shows

By Christopher Kuo

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On a recent Wednesday, a dozen members of the cast of “Camelot” gathered in a circle in a rehearsal room in the basement of Lincoln Center Theater. Fergie Philippe, who plays Sir Sagamore and understudies as King Arthur, sat on a chair in the middle, staring quizzically at a sheet of paper with a monologue from Act V, Scene 1 of Shakespeare’s “Titus Andronicus.”

Next to him stood Dakin Matthews, who plays both Merlyn and Pellinore, dressed in cargo shorts and a purple polo. As Philippe began speaking, Matthews squinted his eyes shut and silently mouthed the words.

“Even now I curse the day——” Philippe said before he was quickly cut off by Matthews, who jabbed a finger in the air.

“You went down on ‘day,’” Matthews said, referring to Philippe’s incorrect inflection.

Over the next two hours, Matthews paced the room coaching the group through monologues from “Julius Caesar,” “Henry IV” and “Macbeth,” interrupting a performer to correct the pronunciation of “doth,” or to help find the “internal shape” in a text.

Matthews, an 82-year-old veteran of the theater, has performed in over 200 shows around the world — from Broadway to the Teatro Español in Madrid. His life has become inseparable from the stage: In addition to acting, he has directed, translated and written numerous plays of his own, many of which have been performed on the West Coast.

But his colleagues know Matthews best as a maestro of the intricate world of Shakespearean drama, the man who can tell you exactly how to untangle a thorny text from “Henry IV.” And when he appears in shows, he often hosts workshops where younger members can learn Shakespeare.

“There’s this complete understanding that there’s somebody in this room who has way more experience than us, who has put the work in, and on a different level performs at a caliber different than us,” Philippe said, “and we all agree and know and decide, ‘Yes, please teach us.’”

Born in Oakland, Calif., in 1940, Matthews grew up surrounded by an extended Irish family. He was a sophomore at a Catholic high school when he was introduced to Shakespeare's "Henry IV."

Wanting to enter the priesthood, he moved to Rome to continue his religious education.

One summer in 1962, he traveled from Rome to Stratford, England, where he saw his first professional Shakespeare production. It was Peter Hall's "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Matthews, 21 at the time, was transfixed.

"I was like, 'Oh my God,'" he recalled. "It was really like entering a portal, like entering a different world."

A seed was planted. "This is something one could actually do," he realized.

Back in Rome, he rallied the other priests-in-training, purchased costumes from a theater shop and directed two student plays, "Julius Caesar" and "Henry IV."

Matthews returned to the Bay Area and later earned a master's in English from California State University, East Bay, where he became a professor. While in graduate school, he won the role of Falstaff in "Henry IV" at the Marin Shakespeare Festival in 1965.

For the next two decades, Matthews taught and rehearsed during the day, and starred in shows around the Bay Area at night, darting around in his green Volkswagen beetle. (He met his wife, Anne McNaughton, in 1967 at the Santa Clara Shakespeare Festival.)

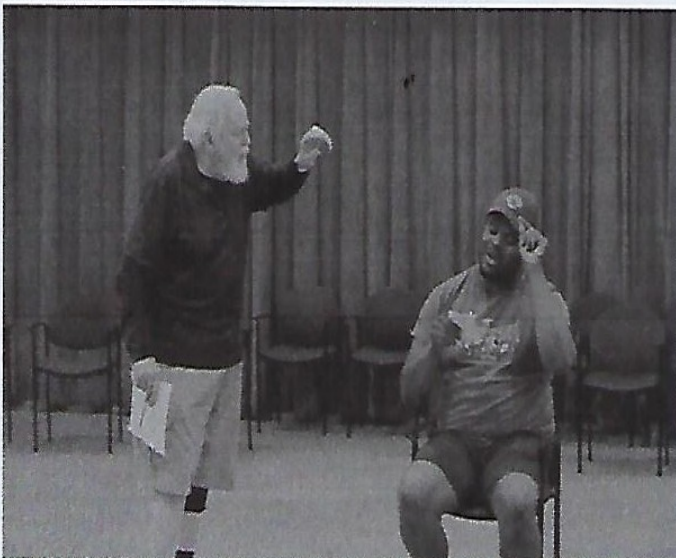
In 1990, he retired from teaching and moved to Los Angeles, where he continued working in theater and began performing in movies and TV, including "Down Home," "Soul Man" and "The Jeff Foxworthy Show."

Matthews made his Broadway debut in 2003 in "Henry IV." Ethan Hawke, who played Hotspur, remembered watching in awe as Matthews argued with Kevin Kline, who played Falstaff, over minutiae in the text.

"It's like listening to Thoreau and Emerson bicker about the state of mankind," Hawke said. "It was life and death for them."

The earliest of Matthews's Shakespeare workshops for fellow cast members was in 2001, for the actors in Peter Hall's "Romeo and Juliet" in Los Angeles. He also held classes for the Broadway production of "To Kill a Mockingbird" and has led them for the Actors Center in New York. As the July 23 closing night of "Camelot" approached, Matthews resumed the workshops.

Philippe said learning from Matthews has made his "Camelot" performances more versatile.



"It gave me the opportunity to play a bit more. I was able to find some new things in the character every night," he said. "It just makes you a smarter actor."

Matthews has no plans to stop acting, but he said he has lost 20 pounds while performing in "Camelot" and has started to feel his age. His knees creak, and his voice can't project as it once did.

"For the first time it felt like work," he said. "That's the first time I've ever seriously thought about retiring."

For now, he plans to keep performing and to continue mentoring a younger generation of actors.

"We're bridging a gap, a chasm," he said. "And someone's got to keep something going somehow."