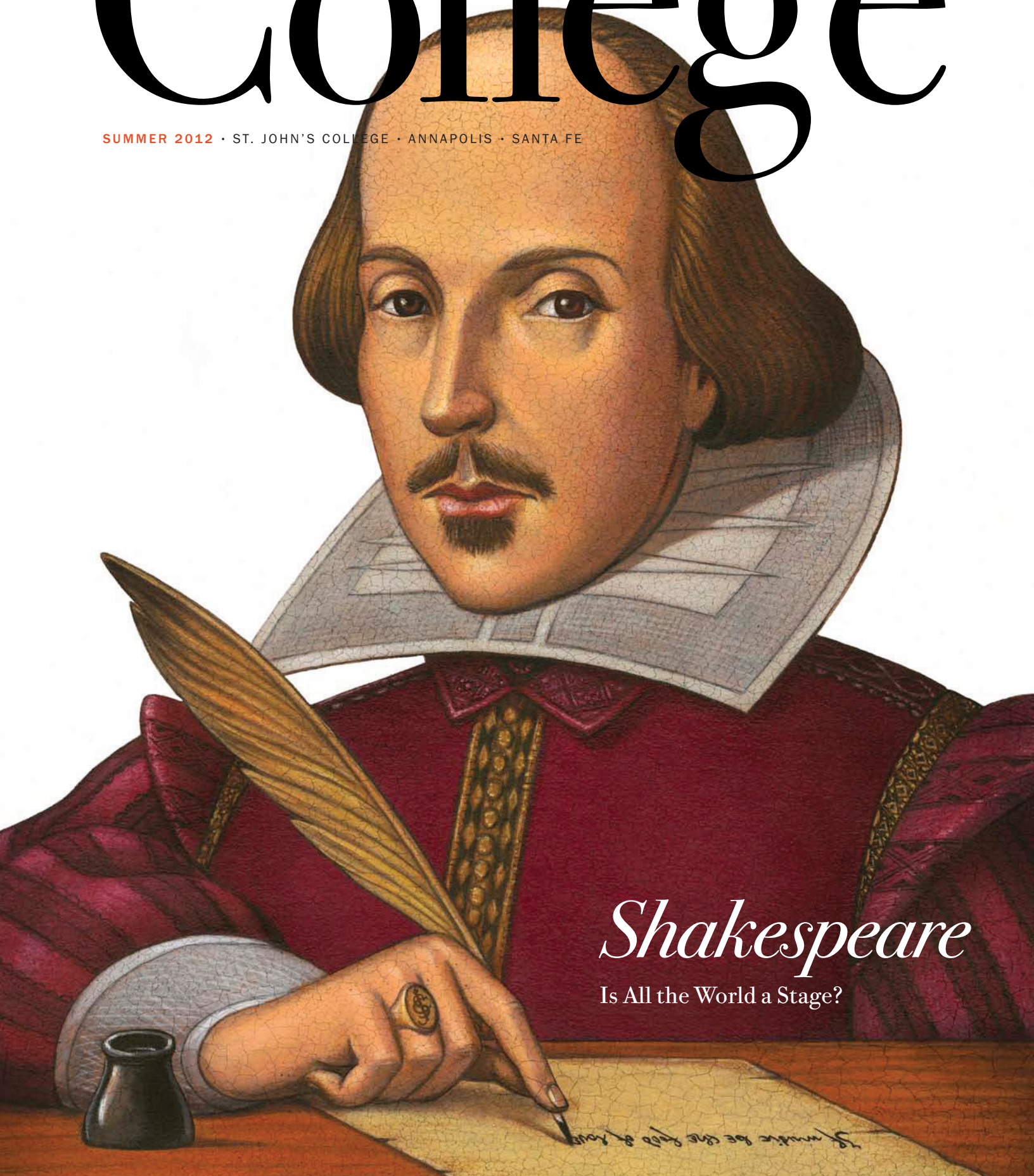


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Shakespeare

Is All the World a Stage?

“All the World’s a
STAGE”

For centuries actors, writers, directors, set designers, and many others have been drawn to the stage, interpreting dramatic works and theater. Five Johnnies transform—and are transformed by—the stage. As a set designer in New York City with a flair for opera, **Ilana Kirschbaum** (SF07) is both scientist and illusionist, tinkering with the audience’s perception. When actress **Sara Barker** (A98) “treads the boards” as Queen Elizabeth, she becomes larger than life and looks like Hillary Clinton. At the Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre, **Jack Armstrong’s** (SF83) inventive plot charts reveal hidden notes: “A well-told story,” he says, “can be graphed like a piece of music.” Playwright **Damon Rhea Falke** (SFG101) lets his characters lead and morph into themselves on the page. Shakespeare’s strong female leads inspired actress **Maria Jung** (A12) to take the reins of her life, just weeks after graduation.



Graphing Shakespeare Like Music

Jack Armstrong (SF83) plots charts

BY ANNA PERLEBERG (SF02)

“IF THIS WERE PLAYED UPON A STAGE NOW, I COULD CONDEMN IT AS IMPROBABLE FICTION.”

Twelfth Night

JACK ARMSTRONG’S (SF83) OFFICIAL title at Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre (PST) is vice president of the board of directors—but his roles are many: producer, fundraiser, dramaturge, and graphic designer. He is also charter of plots, a title all his own, with its roots in a junior-year preceptorial, where Armstrong first encountered Heinrich Schenker’s musical analysis. “Schenker was the first person who codified music theory,” he says, inventing a system of notation to show “how the composer creates and releases tension in each of the lines to form a symbolic whole.” Armstrong sees story structure the same way: “A well-told story can be graphed like a piece of music.”

The chart for cross-dressing comedy *Twelfth Night*, for instance, unfurls in a riot of color and a wealth of information. Columns for each scene run across the top; below, color-coded bars for each actor show who is present in the scene and with whom. A row titled simply “Drama” asks the question the scene poses: “Can Viola land safely in this strange country?” “How far do they dare push Malvolio?” Running down the side, where Schenker might have kept track of major triads, are the myriad subplots of the play, again phrased as questions: “Can Viola keep her female identity secret?” “Will Sebastian be reunited with Viola?” Every scene that advances one of these plots is faithfully noted, and their progress can be tracked across the acts, like rising and falling

notes, until they reach their resolutions. It’s both a beautiful representation of data and a handy primer for anyone working with the play—actor, director, or student.

Although he acted in high school—and developed a lifelong affection for Hamlet in particular—Armstrong says he would never have worked in the theater without his wife, Carmen Khan, an English actress who credits the Bard with saving her life. “She grew up in a rough family, a rough neighborhood. And she came into English class one day and her teacher recited a passage from *Macbeth*. It opened her eyes. It was the first time she saw life as more than a trial to be endured, that there could be joy and fulfillment.” One of their first dates was to a production of *Hamlet* that Armstrong hated so much he had to leave—“she thought I didn’t like her!”

“Shakespeare’s plays are full of these passages, which at first blush seem to be a pause in the action for sizzling wordplay. It’s not a pause at all, but drama so intense you’d feel it even if the actors weren’t speaking.”

In the late 80s, Khan was working with a classical company called Red Heel Theatre when circumstances thrust her into the position of artistic director. Under her leadership, the company began exclusively performing Shakespeare, changing their name to reflect this. Currently, the PST does two repertory plays every spring—this season *Twelfth Night*

was paired with the blood-soaked tragedy *Titus Andronicus* in a unique production inspired by the Grand Guignol puppet theater—in a 120-seat theater converted from a former parish hall. Armstrong freely admits that their preparation for being on the board of a theater company was “nothing.” Then he adds, “It’s like having a baby—that baby teaches you what you need to know about being a parent, whether you like it or not.” He does have a day job—printing election ballots—but he says it’s only busy for three months in the spring and two months in fall, allowing him to spend as much time on the theater as he does on his “paying gig.”

Long before the actors tread the boards, Armstrong and Khan go through the script line by line, asking three questions of each: What is this person saying? Why does the character say this—what is he or she trying to accomplish? Why is this in the play? Once they know the answers to these questions for each line, Armstrong writes up an annotated script with all their notes, and then generates his Schenkerian plot charts. It’s a monumental task: He estimates spending at least 60 hours for the close reading and the creation of chart and annotated director’s script. The result of all this preparation, he says, is that “the actors get to know the story so well that five minutes into it you forget you’re listening to archaic language. Sometimes it’s like you’re listening to improv comedy.”

The prep work can also bring scenes to life that seem to be just trading lines on the page. “Shakespeare’s plays are full of these passages, which at first blush seem to be a pause in the action for sizzling wordplay. It’s not a pause at all, but drama so intense you’d feel it even if the actors weren’t speaking.” As an example, he offers *Twelfth Night*, where Duke Orsino

presses the disguised Viola about “his” favored lady, who, Viola says, is Orsino’s complexion, Orsino’s years. In other words, she’s mustering up the courage to tell him she’s really a woman, and that it’s him she loves. When he keeps not taking the hint, she backs off—and then tries again. Played this way, says Armstrong, “instead of just clever wordplay, you’re on the edge of your seat.”

Their mission reaches far more than their main-stage audience. PST has a dizzying array of educational programs: Classes in Shakespeare for teenagers and adults. School matinees. Lectures by Shakespeare scholars. Workshops for English and drama instructors on teaching the Bard. A three-person touring production of *Hamlet*. An artist-in-residency program in which teams of actors work with a class of high school students for an intense week or two; then the students perform a scene. PST’s plot charts, in poster form, are up on the walls of English classrooms across the city. “A lot of kids are introduced to Shakespeare through our programs. And we’ve been doing this long enough that some of the first generation are now teachers.”

Asked what he thinks about the state of theater in the U.S., Armstrong answers with a quote from George Bernard Shaw: “Our generation is a low ebb in the history of the theater. Every generation is a low ebb in the history of the theater.” In other words, he feels the perennial proclamation of the death of live theater is an exaggeration. “I think it’s very healthy! We envy, of course, companies in Canada and England and other enlightened countries where the government supports the theater.” But he admits that the lack of government funding gives them more freedom to do their productions exactly how they wish, even if



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raising the money to do so is an “endless, exhausting, terrifying process.”

Philadelphia, with 80 professional theater companies, has “an extraordinary pool of actors.” Most of the organizations, says Armstrong, are working “on an even more tenuous basis than us. It’s mind-blowing what people will give up to be on stage. But the work is amazing! I think it’s a golden age of theater in Philly.” He’s pleased to be able to share it with playgoers from his alma mater, too. “We have been hosting a ‘St. John’s Night’ at the theater for several years. A dozen or so alumni come early, we have a little party beforehand, then watch the play. It has been great to reconnect with old classmates and meet new friends.”

For Armstrong, the struggle to bring Shakespeare to all is vitally important work. He recently read an article about a symposium “justifying teaching the humanities,” and although some of the points made by the disciplines’ defenders were interesting—such as that they

In one of his many roles, Jack Armstrong (SF83) analyzes each script produced by the Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre.

“can help you get through tough situations”—Armstrong thinks they were really peripheral. “Asking why you teach the humanities is like asking why you put gas in a car. If you know what a car is, you don’t have to ask the question.” Drama, literature, writing, history: these are “the science of being human,” he says passionately. “Through stories we learn to be human. They’re how we expand our vocabulary of possible human behavior, and the bigger our vocabulary is, the better our chances of making a good decision. Hell is the accumulated result of bad decisions. Paradise is the result of education in the humanities.” ☐

To view one of Armstrong’s plot charts, visit www.stjohnscollege.edu/news.