

California's Marin County is known for musicians, movie stars, hippies and outstanding natural beauty. It also has an open-air Shakespeare festival, one that's celebrating its silver jubilee in typically flamboyant style...

# Marin County Memories



Back in 1989, a group of theatre fans in Northern California's picturesque Marin County set out to revive the local Shakespeare festival. They had the perfect outdoor summer venue in Dominican College's Forest Meadows Amphitheatre – now they just needed the right team. An enterprising theatrical couple named Robert and Lesley Currier were duly hired. Relocating to Marin County, the Curriers quickly threw themselves into a fundraising campaign. Marin Shakespeare Company's first production, *As You Like It*, was unveiled the following summer. Starring San Francisco actress Nancy Carlin as Rosalind, it was a galloping success.

"In 1989 gasoline cost around a dollar a gallon, a US postage stamp cost 25 cents and we had never heard of the internet," says Lesley. "We had a Mac Plus computer, a dot matrix printer and a lot of youthful goodwill and enthusiasm."

Apart from primitive technology, the Company also had nature to contend with. Indeed, their debut production was almost

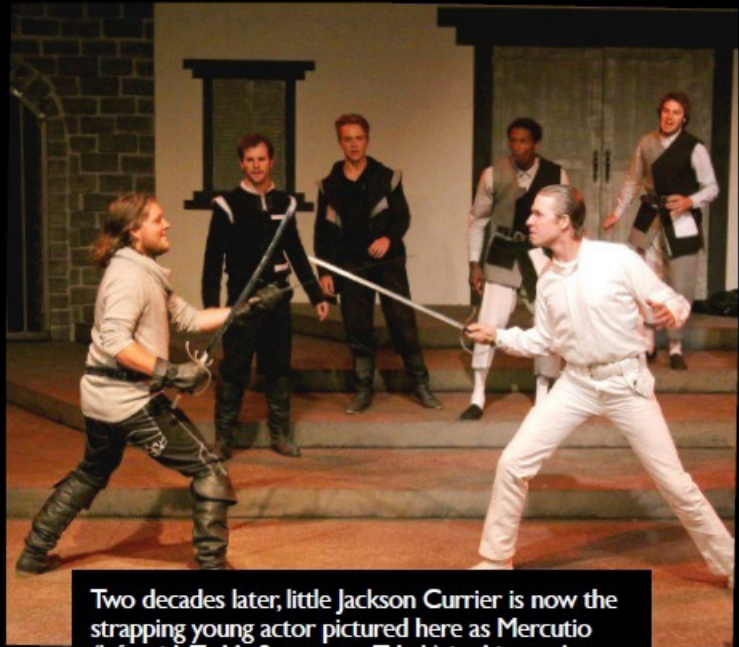
scuppered by an earthquake. "Everyone told us we should forget trying to do a show in 1990," says Robert who, needless to say, ignored the advice. This early adversity instilled an ethos of "the show must go on" that endures to this day in the face of blackouts, smoke and ash from grass fires, bee stings, poison oak and wildly variable weather. Not to mention on-stage cameos by various woodland creatures.

The Company's 25th anniversary celebrations were already underway when, sensationally, they received an anonymous donation of one million dollars. "We are thrilled," says Lesley, who describes the gift as "transformational". Some of the money has already been put to good use with the installation of a new microphone system. But the Company still has an agreeably old school approach to its take on Shakespeare. "There have been tremendous technical advances," Robert says. "Today everything is digital. But we still have to build our stage every year, put up light towers and build the dressing rooms."



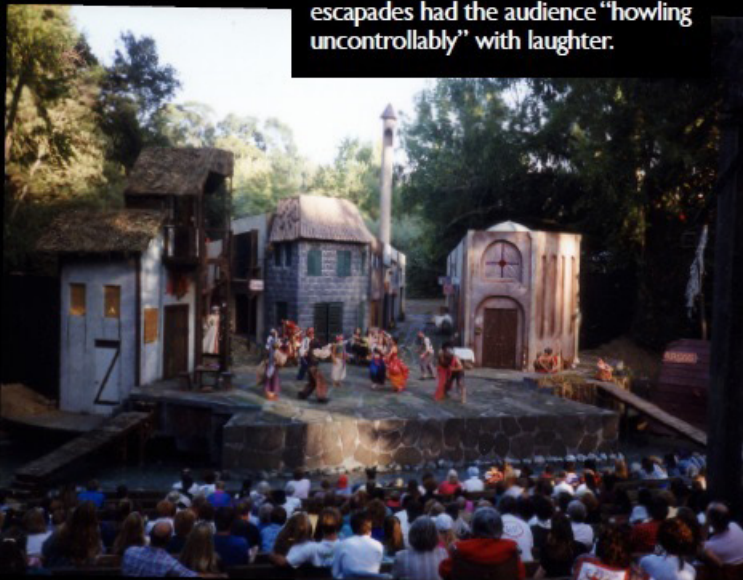


Robert and Lesley Currier with their young son Jackson at Forest Meadows Amphitheatre, 1990.



Two decades later, little Jackson Currier is now the strapping young actor pictured here as Mercutio (left, with Teddy Spencer as Tybalt) in this year's production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Jackson also acts as set designer. Photo: Eric Chazankin

In 1992, Robert directed *The Comedy of Errors*, with Jim McKie's elaborate set design representing the Turkish city of Ephesus. The *Pacific Sun* reported that the comic escapades had the audience "howling uncontrollably" with laughter.



*A Midsummer Night's Dream* was staged for the Company's fifth season in 1994. It featured members of San Francisco's renowned Pickle Family Circus, including Diane Wasnak, seen here as Puck.

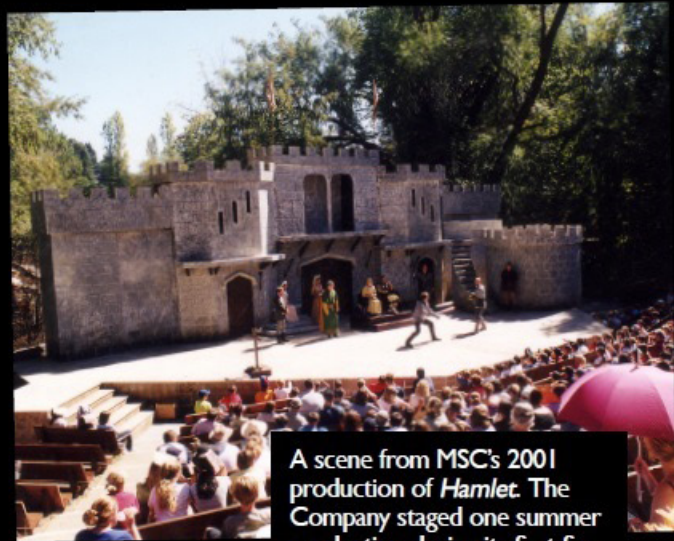
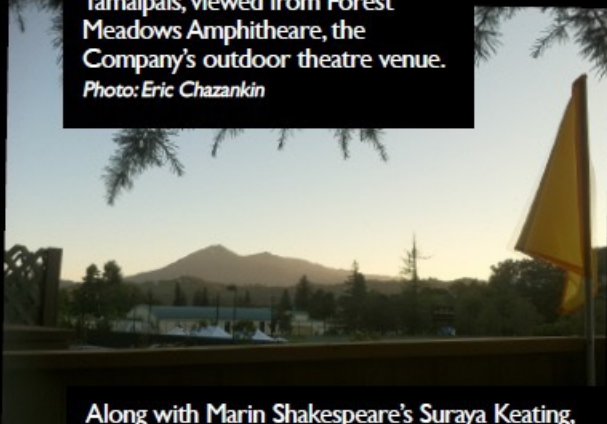




 **Diary: Marin County**

Marin County's majestic Mount Tamalpais, viewed from Forest Meadows Amphitheatre, the Company's outdoor theatre venue.

Photo: Eric Chazankin

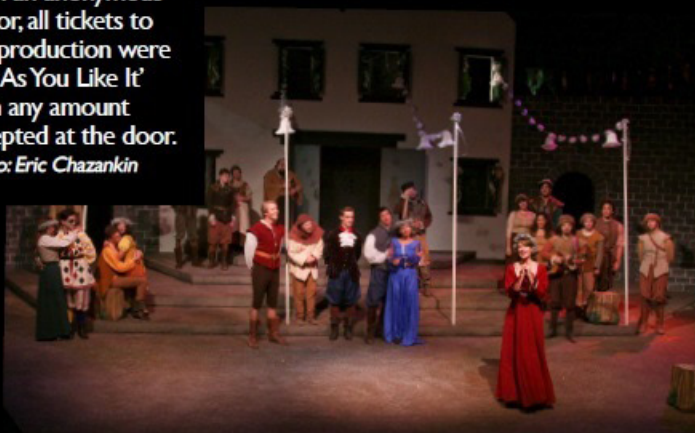


A scene from MSC's 2001 production of *Hamlet*. The Company staged one summer production during its first five years and two for its second five years. Since 2001 it has staged three productions from July to September.

Along with Marin Shakespeare's Suraya Keating, Lesley gives weekly Shakespeare classes at the infamous San Quentin State Prison, which is also in Marin County. Apart from giving an annual performance of a Shakespeare play, San Quentin students also write and perform autobiographical pieces inspired by Shakespeare. The picture shows 2012's *Hamlet* at San Quentin.



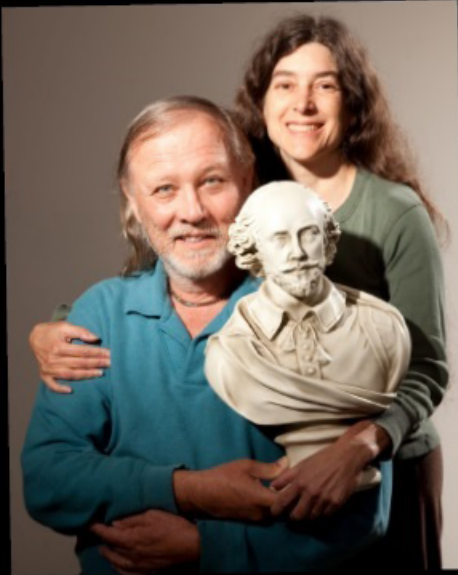
*As You Like It*, August 2014. Thanks to a million-dollar gift from an anonymous donor, all tickets to the production were 'Pay As You Like It' with any amount accepted at the door. Photo: Eric Chazankin



A triumphant King John (Scott Coopwood) and The Bastard (Erik MacRay) in 2012's production of *King John*.

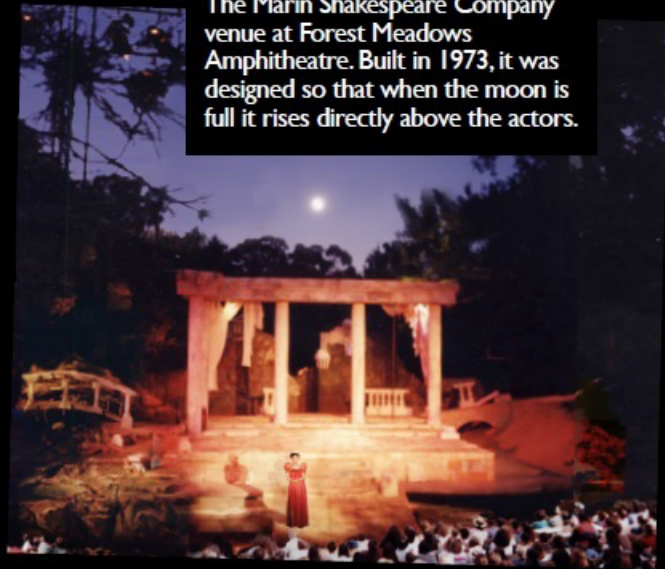
Photo: Eric Chazankin





A recent pic of Robert and Lesley Currier, along with the guy who started it all, William Shakespeare.

Photo: Steven Underwood



The Marin Shakespeare Company venue at Forest Meadows Amphitheatre. Built in 1973, it was designed so that when the moon is full it rises directly above the actors.



Lesley Currier as Audrey with John Furse as Touchstone from Marin Shakespeare's first production of *As You Like It* in 1990. Previously Lesley spent three years with the Ukiah Players in California. She also acted at Ashland's Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

Robert and Lesley's psychedelic adaptation of *Twelfth Night* or *All You Need is Love*. Opening the Company's 20th Season, it transported audiences back to the swinging '60s and the Summer of Love.

Photo: Morgan Cowin



Lesley applying make-up backstage in 2003. She stepped into the role of Puck after Diane Wasnak (reprising her critically-acclaimed 1994 appearance) fell ill. "A few days before our opening, Diane missed a rehearsal due to a stomach ache," says Lesley. "We were concerned, but we thought she'd be fine."

However, when Diane had to be admitted to hospital, Lesley realised she would have to play Puck herself. Beyond learning the lines, this physically-demanding role involved working with Diane's circus dog, Bonzer.

"I was terrified," Lesley remembers. "It was a physical workout... a great deal of concentration and willpower. I ended up performing in eight shows. Diane returned, much to everyone's delight. But we had proven the show must go on."

Photo: Kim Taylor

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