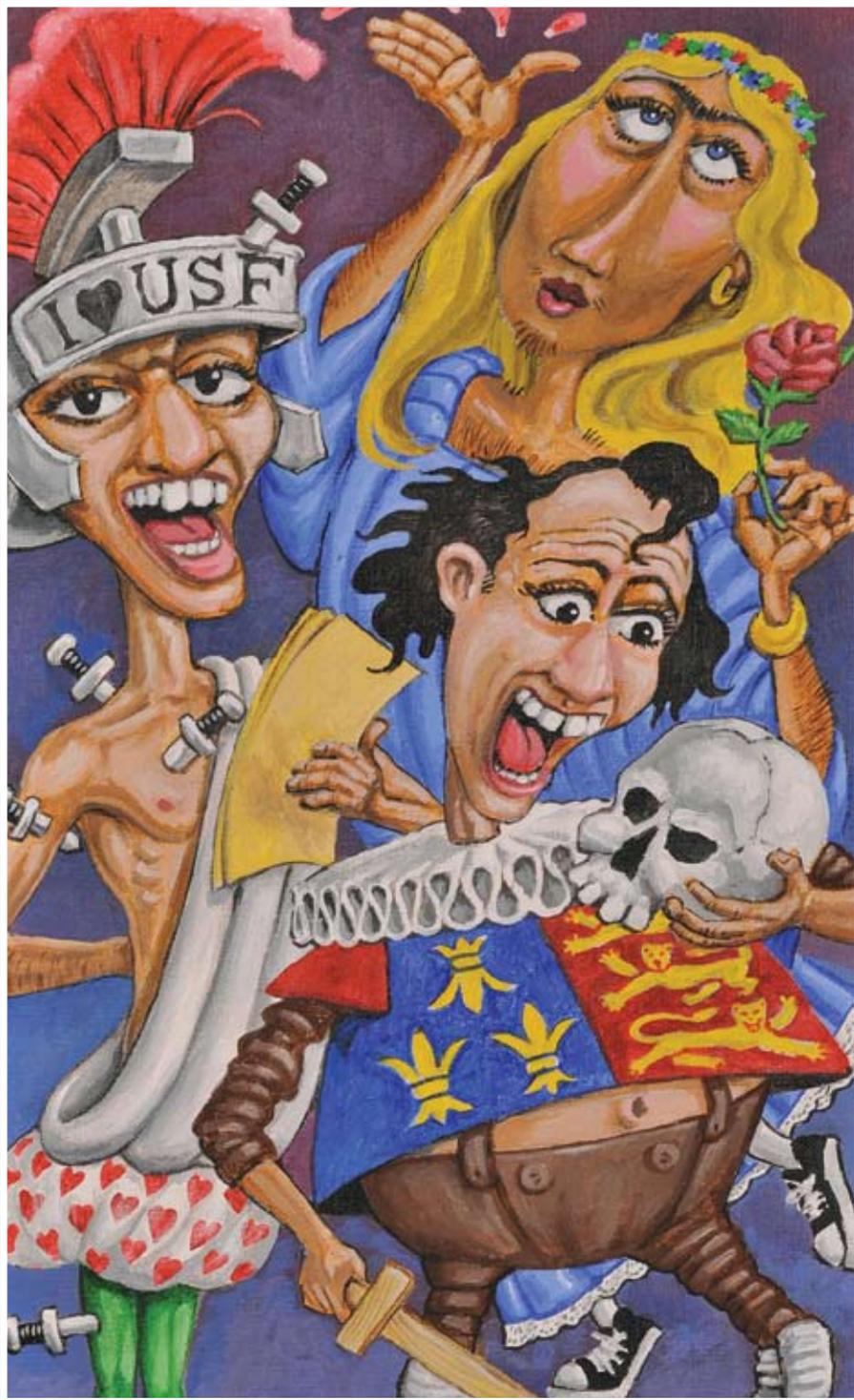




# Insights

*A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespearean Festival*



*The  
Complete  
Works of  
William  
Shakespeare  
(abridged)*

The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespearean Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

The Study Guide is published by the Utah Shakespearean Festival, 351 West Center Street; Cedar City, UT 84720. Bruce C. Lee, communications director and editor; Phil Hermansen, art director.

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# *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)*

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# “To Abridge or Not To Abridge”

By Heidi Madsen

The question “to abridge or not to abridge” can be a dangerous one, particularly when the collection being kicked around belongs to perhaps the most exalted pen in history. Collaborative playwrights Winfield, Long, and Singer, though “unbaked and doughty youth,” must have understood the risks—to be seen as cliff-notes reading undergrads, as shallow punsters, as irreverent mockers. With cited influences ranging from Tom Stoppard to Harpo Marx, they dared to interpret these quasi-sacred texts independent of all dogmatic influences, translating Shakespeare’s 37 plays and 154 sonnets from the exclusive lingua into “slacker-generation idioms and MTV-style truncations” (Dominic Cavendish, *Dickens Unplugged: They Did It to Shakespeare* [Telegraph.co.uk Feb. 22, 2008]). And what about their critics who believe this kind of satirical reduction dumbs-down the culture? “The opposite is true,” retorts Adam Long, “when works of literature are considered worthy and are segregated off, you get ghettoisation. Ideally, this will point people back to the source material” (Cavendish).

## Daniel Singer

In 1981, inspired by Stoppard’s *The Dogg’s Troupe 15-minute Hamlet*, Daniel Singer, an American and recent student of drama at the Guildford School near London, dreamed up the outline of what was to become *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)*. Singer held auditions for his amateur production, which initially was just a half-hour *Hamlet* and a much reduced *Romeo and Juliet* (proudly performed in Mall courtyards). Singer, along with Adam Long and Jess Borgeson—who later changed his name to Winfield—emerged as the primary performers, eventual founders of the Reduced Shakespeare Company, and co-authors of the world’s most condensed *Complete Works*, clocking in at a dizzying ninety-seven minutes. They “juggled Shakespeare’s plays as if they were hot coals,” showcasing their stopwatch performances world-wide, from Washington D.C., to London’s West End, to Israel, Malta and Bermuda” (Mel Gussow, *The Essential Shakespeare, as You Might Like It, in Two Hours* [Theater Review: New York Times, 1991]). Miraculously, “instead of pooh-poohing this preposterous attempt by three eternally adolescent American[s] . . . the critics went wild with admiration” (Cavendish).

However young at the time of The Reduced Shakespeare Company’s (RSC) inception, Daniel Singer was no novice to theatre ingenuity; at the age of eighteen he co-founded the General Amazement Theater in Santa Rosa, California, which produced three plays, including Singer’s own musical adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*. Though he started the mad ball rolling, Singer was the first to flee the fast lane of “Bardian abridgment.” In 1989 he left RSC and went to work as an Imagineer at Walt Disney; here, among other things, he helped design mini-theme parks Splash Mountain, Toontown, and Indiana Jones. Singer also helped organize another acting troupe, The Flower Street Players, for which he co-produced six plays, as well as directed and starred in *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown*.

## Adam Long

Before “falling into” the business of Shakespearean performance, which he deemed only a hobby, Adam Long was an accountant, musician, and stand-up comic. However, of the original three, he stuck it out the longest, not leaving RSC until he had delivered Ophelia’s modified line “I’m out of my tiny little mind” more times than even he could count. His particular specialties were Shakespeare’s women, all of whom were said to “look alike and suffer from indigestion,” (Gussow). In defense of the Winfield, Singer, Long paring down of

Shakespeare, he cites a poem by Allen Ginsberg: “I saw the best minds of my generation/ Destroyed by madness / Starving, hysterical, naked; / Dragging themselves through the negro / Streets at dawn / Looking for an angry fix” (*Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems* [London, Penguin, 2009]). “I knew,” continued Long, “that we weren’t [really] the best minds of our generation, but we were starving and hysterical. And we often went without clothes” (Writer’s Notes, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)*). Long went solo as a writer and director in 2003; he has since abridged another’s distinguished canon, the works of Charlie Dickens, or *Dickens Unplugged*.

### Jess Winfield

Perhaps the most outspoken of the three, Jess Winfield (because no one could pronounce Borgeson) theorized that “every theater-goer, deep in his heart, wants to see Shakespeare ripped to shreds; we fulfill that fantasy” (*Entertainment Tonight*, Weekly Edition, July 2, 1989). He must have assumed that the populace felt similarly about James Joyce, for Winfield has since satirically reduced Joyce’s great work *Ulysses: Jam Joy Yes*, his self-proclaimed personal best. After resigning from RSC, he too, went to work for the magical world of Disney, earning two daytime Emmy awards for his work on the television series *Teacher’s Pet* starring Nathan Lane and Jerry Stiller. He has also worked on feature films, including *Leroy & Stitch! The Movie*. In 2008, he wrote *My Name is Will: A Novel of Sex, Drugs and Shakespeare*.

During their illustrious collaboration, Winfield, Singer, and Long displayed supreme confidence in Master Will’s good humour; when asked to conjecture what the orthodox playwright would think of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)*, Jess Winfield confidently replied “Shakespeare would not only approve of their play, he would go bowling with them after the performance” (America’s Talking Network, “Break a Leg, with Bill McCuddy,” 1995). Still, however devoutly these men practice the belief that “brevity is the soul of wit,” their acts of abridgment, at least as far as the great Shakespeare is concerned, are not without some conscience: “the deed is done,” Adam Long softly laments. “May the Bard forgive us” (*The Complete Works of Shakespeare (abridged)*, xxii).

# About the Play

In August of 1981 a few young performers set out to create a half-hour version of *Hamlet* for the Novato California Renaissance Pleasure Faire. In the originator Daniel Singer's own words: "the result was far more comical than I had originally planned. Our venue was hot, dusty, noisy, and full of distractions. Holding an audience's attention was unusually challenging. Drunken hecklers, intrusive parades, and backstage confusion forced us to improvise bits . . . which constantly improved as our schtick evolved."

These conditions are reminiscent of what many scholars imagine the young William Shakespeare himself would have faced traveling through Renaissance England and later in his own Globe Theatre on the South Bank of London.

From these challenging circumstances came two performances, 400 years and an ocean apart, that share timeless comedic elements: actor to audience interaction, limited use of scenery, contemporary allusions and, of course cross-dressing.

Since its inception during the 1980s, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* has been seen on stages across the world, with a decade-long run on London's West End. The script is reworked and redeveloped at every one of its productions, thereby remaining uniquely contemporary and delightful to every one of its audiences.

# Synopsis: The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)

Can three guys really cover thirty-seven Shakespeare plays in less than two hours? This fast-firing comedy does just that as it parodies all of the Shakespeare plays (plus the sonnets!) with only three performers in two acts. This play is full of energy as the characters run across the stage and keep you guessing how they will pull off the next play. Clever use of some interesting costumes also adds to the fun.

The play starts with an eccentric version of *Romeo and Juliet*, followed by a parody of *Titus Andronicus* (which is portrayed as a cooking show). Next is *Othello*, which is done as a rap song (the infamous “Othello Rap”). The members of the trio compete in a hilarious football game which summarizes the histories (*King John*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *Henry IV* etc), complete with commentary and details of each character’s rise and fall from power.

As the characters are about to come to the end of the first act, they realize they forgot to perform *Hamlet*. One of the actors becomes nervous and runs out of the theatre with another actor chasing him. The final actor is left to entertain the audience by himself, which he does by telling jokes and calling for the intermission.

After the intermission, the missing two actors return and save their companion from reciting all of the sonnets. All three actors then perform their very abbreviated version of *Hamlet* (with a little help from the audience), thus “completing” the canon in only an hour and a half!

# The Characters: The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)

It would be impossible to list and describe all the characters in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)*. After all, three actors portray the characters in all thirty-seven of Shakespeare's plays in about ninety minutes!

*The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* was first performed by the authors (Adam Long, Daniel Singer, and Jess Borgeson) on June 19, 1987. The three performers used their own first names. They advise actors in all subsequent performances to substitute their own names for "Adam," "Jess," and "Daniel."

The script further specifies which Shakespeare character each actor is portraying, but there are far too many to list! Knowledge about Shakespeare's works is helpful, but not necessary. All that's really necessary is "a willing suspension of disbelief" and the ability to not take Shakespeare too seriously, as you laugh at him, his characters, the actors, and (sometimes) yourself.

# Shakespeare in Neon Colors

By Olga A. Pilkington

*The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* is a hilarious adaptation of the Bard's thirty-seven plays presented with even more hilarious scholarly commentaries by the author of "I Love My Willy" and "one of America's preeminent Shakespearean scholars" who while at the University of California at Berkeley "read two books about William Shakespeare" (Long, Singer, Winfield, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* [New York: Applause, 1987], 8). Watching this play is perhaps similar to flipping channels on a Saturday night—one minute it's a melodrama, the next a history program followed by a cooking show, and finally, nothing like a good game of football to complete the evening. John Lariviere claims that this play is capable of "turning an evening of Shakespeare into something out of *Saturday Night Live*" (<http://www.talkinbroadway.com/regional/sfla/sfla219.html>, March 26, 2009).

The play will delight everyone—those audience members who barely know who Shakespeare is and which state he is from (Utah, of course) and those who have committed to memory every line the Bard ever wrote. The audience members will walk away from the theatre having discovered such truths as, "Comedies aren't half as funny as the tragedies" (Long, Singer, Winfield, 36) or Shakespeare "dictated to his secretary, Rudolf Hess, the work *Mein Kampf* (12) and followed that up with a play on the effects of nuclear energy on the Soviet Union—"Chernobyl Kinsmen" (39).

While *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* is full of slapstick comedy and bawdy jokes in the worst traditions of Shakespeare himself, it also points out some amusing facts about the Bard's writings which even real scholars will be able to laugh about. *The Complete Works* discusses how Shakespeare "'distilled' the three or four funniest gimmicks of his time, and milked them into sixteen plays" (33). *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* promptly corrects Shakespeare's wordiness by taking "the liberty of condensing all sixteen of Shakespeare's comedies into a single play" (33). And, of course, what discussion of the Bard's genius can bypass the authorship question? *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* offers its own "groundbreaking" theory (41).

The play also delves into the depths of *Hamlet*. After watching *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)*, the audience will develop doubts about whether or not this is really the longest of Shakespeare's plays. After all, *The Complete Works* presents *Hamlet* not once, not twice, but three times. In addition to this, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* "is notable for holding the (self-proclaimed) world record for the shortest-ever performance of *Hamlet*, clocking in at 43 seconds" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Complete\\_Works\\_of\\_William\\_Shakespeare\\_\(abridged\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Complete_Works_of_William_Shakespeare_(abridged))) March 26, 2009).

Some might be surprised to find out that *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* was first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company. However, it was not the Royal Shakespeare Company that originated the show. Reduced Shakespeare Company's founder, Daniel Singer, wrote the play. The company describes itself as "a three-man comedy troupe known for taking long, serious subjects and reducing them into short, sharp comedies" (<http://www.reducedshakespeare.com/>). In fact, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* was Reduced Shakespeare Company's first show.

The ninety-seven minute show began with a 1981 twenty-five minute version of *Hamlet* written by Singer. The show premiered at a California Renaissance fair but wasn't a success until "Three weeks into the run of the production . . . one of the actresses broke her ankle.

It was after she was replaced with a man in drag named Adam Long that the show developed a large following” (Lariviere).

Riding on the wave of success, Daniel Singer and Adam Long penned another twenty-five minute Shakespeare—this time, *Romeo and Juliet*. Both their abridgements delighted audiences at Renaissance fairs across the country, and the authors decided it was time to shoot for the stars. In 1987, Singer and Long “decided to take their act to the famous Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Scotland” (Lariviere). However, as John Lariviere points out, Adam Long and Daniel Singer needed a longer running show and “proposed doing Shakespeare’s other thirty-five plays to round out an abridgement of everything the Bard wrote in less than one hour. The play proved a great success. After Edinburgh, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* appeared in London at the Arts Theatre in 1992 and at the Criterion Theater in the West End in 1996, where it “ran for nine record-breaking years” (Lariviere). In 1991, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* first premiered off-Broadway as part of the “international arts festival” (Bruckner, <http://theater2.nytimes.com>, March 26, 2009). It has had two revivals since, the first one in 1995 and the second one in 2001. Along with *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)*, Reduced Shakespeare Company also staged *The Complete History of America (abridged)* and *The Bible: The Complete Word of God (abridged)* among other shows. These three shows “were London’s longest-running comedies, and the RSC had more shows running in the West End than Andrew Lloyd Webber” (<http://www.reducedshakespeare.com/bio-rsc.php>, March 26, 2009).

In 2000, Acorn Media produced a movie version of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* starring Daniel Singer and Adam Long. However, a movie will never be able to compete with a stage production of *The Complete Works* since, as Singer, Long, and Winfield point out, “The show was developed through improvisation” and still owes its success to the actors’ ability to “respond honestly to audience’s performance, and their own, rather than stick blindly to the written text” (6). Yes, the audience is a big part of the production. The members are to participate in the action, and one lucky theater-goer will get a chance to workshop his or her acting skills. There will be no plants!

Needless to say, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* will be a memorable and exuberant experience. It will change the audience’s view of the Bard and his immortal works. Many scholars have suggested that Shakespeare’s writings are contemporary and relevant even in the twenty first century, but there is only one play that illustrates this point with such neon colors—*The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* by Adam Long, Daniel Singer, and Jess Winfield. Shakespeare is forever, and this show proves it.

# Language

*The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* contains several substantial sections of Shakespeare's actual text as well as highly condensed retellings of the Bard's tales. This makes for an exciting mixture of language within the play.

## Famous Lines by Shakespeare

"All the world's a stage."

—*As You Like It*, 2.7.140

"Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?"

—*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.33

"One who loved not wisely, but too well."

—*Othello*, 5.2.344

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears."

—*Julius Caesar*, 3.2.73

"A horse, a horse! My kingdom for a horse."

—Richard III, 5.4.7

"To be or not to be, that is the question."

—*Hamlet*, 3.1.55

## Paraphrased Lines from Shakespeare

"A nose by any other name would still smell."

—*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.43–44

"To sleep perchance to snooze."

—*Hamlet*, 3.1.64

## Pop Culture Allusion

The play contains a number of allusions to pop culture, items or ideas of common or popular knowledge, usually very current, mentioned but not actually explained or explored within the text as the author presumes the reader will understand the connection. Within *The Complete Works of Shakespeare (abridged)* these allusions are used for comedic effect.

This show has developed through improvisation over more than twenty years. Though some sections, like *Hamlet*, have remained almost unchanged, other sections, like the football scene, have been adapted to suit popular media as well as the various locations of the production. (It has been portrayed as a rugby, soccer, or Aussie Rules footy.)

While the script published by Applause Books in 1994 was replete with references to Ronald Regan and Chernobyl, the most recent authorized script copy, which the Utah Shakespearean Festival 2009 production uses, includes updated references to the following: *The View*, iPod, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, Barack Obama, LOL, and *Desperate Housewives*

# Lesson/Project Plan

## Title

Making the Cut: the Art of Abridging the Arts

## Objective

Students will understand the process and purposes of abridgement by successfully reducing a large body of work.

## Materials

Students will select a body of work. (This need not be limited to a book series, it can also include the work of a certain painter, art movement, film director, comic book legend, or musician.)

## Hook

Present students with examples of abridgements and originals. Discuss abridgements they have read or seen. Explain the difference between an abridgement and an adaptation. (Adaptations include added information not included in the original, i.e. The early *Harry Potter* films might be considered abridgements, but the more recent may be considered adaptations.) Some projects will require both abridgment and adaptation.

## Process

1. **Discuss** as a class “What is important in reducing a body of work?” “What makes a good abridgment?”
2. **Explain** the literary elements of theme, tone, mood, and thesis. Recognize that these elements also exist outside of literature and are found in art and music. The best abridgments capture all of those while still considerably reducing the volume of the work.
3. **Have students select** which medium and body of work they will be abridging. Examples include: Abridge all of *Harry Potter* into a 1,000 word story, create an impressionist painting that encapsulates the movement, write a scene between two of characters in a play/film that summarizes the whole, create a news article on the most recent season of a favorite sports team.
4. **Research** to become very familiar with the elements that define the selected body of work.
5. **Create** the abridgement.
6. **Present** the abridgement to the class.
7. **Evaluate** the project with peers and teacher.

## Conclusion

Discuss the challenges, benefits, and insights gained by abridging the body of work. How are these different from medium to medium? It is often said that “less is more”; was the body of work strengthened or weakened by abridgement? What did students learn about “trimming the fat”? What have they discovered are the true essentials in capturing an artist’s meaning?

## **Assessment Questions**

How well did the students abridge their selected works? Were their projects well researched and well thought-out? How well did they execute their vision of the projects? Were they prepared and professional for their presentation?

# Activities

## Adaptation

Examine a film adaptation of one of Shakespeare's plays (*She's the Man*, *10 Things I Hate about You*, *O, Ran*, *Romeo+Juliet*, etc.). What has the adaptation retained or dropped from Shakespeare's original? What is or isn't successful about it?

## Critique

After examining the similarities and differences between *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* and Shakespeare's works, write a review from Shakespeare's perspective. Would he approve or disapprove of this play and what it has done to his material?

## Corruptions

Choose a famous Shakespeare line, either in or out of the play, and rework it in at least three different ways. How much can you change it while still retaining the same basic meaning? Try including popular slang.

# Questions

## **Textual**

Does this play teach Shakespeare? Which of Shakespeare's plays did you learn something new about? Were there some you hadn't heard of? Were there any moments of Shakespeare's language that stood out to you?

## **Relative**

Examine the popular allusions and references within the script. Are there any that already feel outdated? If you were to update the script what are some current topics you could make a jab at? (health care, Twitter, Brett Farve, etc.)

## **Compare/Contrast**

Identify and discuss a few of the comedic devices (cross-dressing, word play, popular references, vomit) that exist in both the play and in Shakespeare's work. Think of other popular forms of comedy (a specific comedian or sitcom) and evaluate the similarities and differences in their work.

## **Critical Thinking**

If Shakespeare were alive today, what art form would he be working in? When critics and historians look back on the arts in the twenty-first century who might they label as our Shakespeare?

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