

# How Shakespeare ended up in the park

By Richard Paul, Public Radio International on 04.15.19

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A view of the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, home to the New York Shakespeare Festival. Photo by: Timothy A. Clary/AFP/Getty Images

Outdoor Shakespeare feels like a ubiquitous part of summer, but its existence in America was not organic. It got here through an odd mixture of religious fervor, class concerns and gender politics.

The Puritans and Quakers who settled in the northern parts of North America feared and hated theater. Even as late as the 1770s, Congress banned it outright and the Methodist Church maintained a theater ban well into the 19th century. The initial concern was that the practice of acting unleashed demonic forces that drew people away from God. Later, plays were seen as frivolous, while theaters were places where men sat in the dark, often with women who they didn't know.

Credit for changing these attitudes in America goes, in large part, to Sir Philip Barling "Ben" Greet, a British theater impresario active in England's Church and Stage Society, which hoped to make peace between high culture theater and church-run Sunday schools. Greet's solution was to do his plays not in the dark, where who-knows-what-else was going on, but outside, under God's blue sky. He chose Shakespeare as his material, because what could be more elevating than Shakespeare?

In 1903, a promoter brought Greet's Woodland Players to New York where they staged the first ever professional outdoor performance of Shakespeare in America — the forest scenes from "As You Like It," on the campus of Columbia University. After a tour of North America that eventually led to the White House lawn, Greet was hired by the Methodist founders of the Chautauqua Circuit to offer evening entertainment to some of the 45 million Americans who came to their annual summer camps.

This was also a time when live theater was going head-to-head for the first time with film. A lot of theater directors thought the best way to compete was to offer what movies couldn't: live people on stage. This led to the building of outdoor Shakespeare venues around the country. A leader of this movement, William Poel, heavily influenced another director, B. Iden Payne, who ended up teaching Angus Bowmer, the man who started the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. After the Oregon Festival, the Stratford Shakespeare Festival opened in Ontario in 1952. That same year, John Lithgow's father, Arthur, started an outdoor Shakespeare Festival in Ohio. All of this helped inspire Joe Papp who, soon after, created the New York Shakespeare Festival, which eventually settled in Central Park.

## Quiz

- 1 Why did the author write this article? How does the author use logic to show this purpose?
- (A) to argue that professional groups are staging too many outdoor Shakespeare festivals today; by illustrating that the only outdoor festival a century ago took place at Columbia University
  - (B) to explain why religious leaders objected to theater in general and Shakespeare in particular; by comparing the different reactions and bans by various religions in North America
  - (C) to persuade readers to find an outdoor Shakespeare festival near them; by listing the prominent locations and directors planning to feature Shakespeare this summer
  - (D) to describe the development of outdoor Shakespeare festivals in North America; by explaining the specific people and events that caused productions to be moved outside

- 2 Read the following selection from the article.

*Greet's solution was to do his plays not in the dark, where who-knows-what-else was going on, but outside, under God's blue sky. He chose Shakespeare as his material, because what could be more elevating than Shakespeare?*

Which answer choice explains HOW the author uses rhetoric in this selection to construct his overall argument?

- (A) The author uses vivid language and exaggerated contrasts to develop Greet's thought process in that time and place.
  - (B) The author uses a specific series of events to explore the logical consequences of moving theater productions outdoors.
  - (C) The author uses a concern expressed by authorities to establish expertise on the subject of American theater productions.
  - (D) The author uses emotional language and urgent questions to create a sense of Greet's worries about the theater.
- 3 What is the meaning of the phrase "going head-to-head" as used in the following sentence?

*This was also a time when live theater was going head-to-head for the first time with film.*

- (A) working effectively together
- (B) becoming increasingly alike
- (C) competing directly against
- (D) meeting secretly to negotiate

- 4 Read the following sentence from the article.

*Credit for changing these attitudes in America goes, in large part, to Sir Philip Barling "Ben" Greet, a British theater impresario active in England's Church and Stage Society, which hoped to make peace between high culture theater and church-run Sunday schools.*

Adding which of these sentences to the article would help to explain the meaning of the word "impresario" in the context of the article?

- (A) Greet was impressed by the actors he met when he moved to North America from England.
- (B) Greet was well-known for managing and organizing successful theater productions.
- (C) Theatrical productions of Shakespeare had been taking place in London for centuries.
- (D) Theatrical productions in England's Church and Stage Society regularly drew large crowds.

- 5 Which answer choice provides an accurate and objective summary of the article?
- (A) Americans' failure to understand Shakespeare has not prevented outdoor productions from becoming popular in the past century. Whether they continue to be popular depends on religious attitudes toward theater.
  - (B) The surprising popularity of outdoor theater productions during the summer grew out of early attempts to close theaters. Moving productions outside allowed directors to safely skirt those efforts.
  - (C) Americans' love of outdoor Shakespeare festivals was a natural result of changing attitudes toward religion and literature. There is nothing like the thrill of watching actors produce a show live on stage.
  - (D) The popularity of outdoor Shakespeare festivals in America grew slowly as a result of efforts by Ben Greet and others. Moving theatrical productions outside helped alleviate fears rooted in religion and class.

- 6 How does the CENTRAL idea first emerge in the article?
- (A) through an outline of the number of Americans who attend summer camps and productions that feature Shakespeare
  - (B) through an anecdote about how Shakespeare productions in parks helped young people meet and date
  - (C) through a contrast between the popularity of outdoor Shakespeare festivals today and historic feelings about theater
  - (D) through a description of the reasons why Puritans and Quakers first came to fear and despise actors in the theater

- 7 Read the following selection from the article.

*A leader of this movement, William Poel, heavily influenced another director, B. Iden Payne, who ended up teaching Angus Bowmer, the man who started the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. After the Oregon Festival, the Stratford Shakespeare Festival opened in Ontario in 1952. That same year, John Lithgow's father, Arthur, started an outdoor Shakespeare Festival in Ohio. All of this helped inspire Joe Papp who, soon after, created the New York Shakespeare Festival, which eventually settled in Central Park.*

Which of the following can be inferred from the selection above?

- (A) Famous actor John Lithgow was the one who convinced his father to start a Shakespeare festival in Ohio.
- (B) The Oregon Shakespeare Festival was forced to close when the Ohio and New York Shakespeare festivals began.
- (C) High-profile successes inspired other directors to create their own Shakespeare festivals across North America.
- (D) Shakespeare festivals of today are very different from the initial festivals run by directors Poel and Payne.

Read the following sentences from the article.

1. *Even as late as the 1770s, Congress banned it outright and the Methodist Church maintained a theater ban well into the 19th century.*
2. *Later, plays were seen as frivolous, while theaters were places where men sat in the dark, often with women who they didn't know.*
3. *In 1903, a promoter brought Greet's Woodland Players to New York where they staged the first ever professional outdoor performance of Shakespeare in America — the forest scenes from "As You Like It," on the campus of Columbia University.*
4. *After a tour of North America that eventually led to the White House lawn, Greet was hired by the Methodist founders of the Chautauqua Circuit to offer evening entertainment to some of the 45 million Americans who came to their annual summer camps.*

Which two sentences taken together provide the BEST support for the claim that Greet's efforts to reverse political and religious attitudes toward theater in America were successful?

- (A) 1 and 3
- (B) 1 and 4
- (C) 2 and 3
- (D) 2 and 4