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Arts & Entertainment:

Berkeley Actor Completes Bard's Canon

By Ken Bullock Special to the Planet
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Berkeley actor Julian Lopez-Morillas has played in or directed every one of the 38 plays that make up the Shakespeare canon.

Speaking of this accomplishment, Lopez-Morillas is wry: "It's interesting that some people make a fuss over it. It is a curiosity. [Actor and Oregon Shakespeare Festival dramaturg] Barry Kraft's the only other one in my acquaintance who has done it. We had a competition over it for awhile; he got there first. I don't expect people to jump up and down. There's nothing stellar about it."

Lopez-Morillas passed the mark last June with his performance as Cardinal Woolsey in Henry VIII at the Colorado Shakespeare Festival. "I started there in the summer of 1966—my first really professional theater. I went out to Colorado every summer thereafter for eight or nine years. Last year, the Denver theater critics voted me an award."

By 1984, Lopez-Morillas had "done all but three or four [of the canon.]. I thought, Why not go whole hog? By '88, I'd done Timon; there was only Henry VIII. It took 20 years to find a production."

Lest he seem to dismiss too easily any virtue in the doing of it, Lopez-Morillas said, "I do believe being in a production of a play gets you to know it, rather than just reading it. In the practical experience of staging his plays, you get an idea how Shakespeare works, how his plays function in performance, ultimately because that was what he was up to."

Lopez-Morillas was born in Providence, Rhode Island. His father was "a Spaniard, who came just before the Civil War in Spain, and founded the Department of Comparative Literature at Brown University." Lopez-Morillas went to Swarthmore "as an undergrad, thinking I was going to be an archaeologist." He started acting halfway through his sophomore year, switched to an English major from classics, and decided theater would be his career. From Swarthmore, where there was no theater major, he went to Yale, eventually receiving his MFA in directing at Carnegie Mellon in 1972.

Lopez-Morillas then moved to the Bay Area. "I spent a whole spring in Sproul Plaza, with some of the best Frisbee players in the world. I lived in Berkeley briefly a couple of times, but mostly in San Francisco at first, then eight years in Oakland. All those years, I was commuting to Berkeley Shakespeare. Of course, gas was cheaper."

"I was always comfortable in Berkeley," recalled Lopez-Morillas. "Moving here felt like coming home; for me politically, a natural home. I'm proud to say I come from Berkeley."

Lopez-Morillas spoke about his long association with the Berkeley Shakespeare Festival: "Without being associated with a Shakespeare festival long-term, I never would've picked up all those performances. A couple of the artistic directors knew I was interested in performing the whole canon. Dakin Mathews staged Two Noble Kinsmen. And Michael Addison also knew. I was associate artistic director for awhile. And I directed Coriolanus, Timon of Athens, King John, knocked off some of the more obscure ones."

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Lopez-Morillas wasn't with Berkeley Shakespeare from the beginning. "It started in Emeryville, then found its way to John Hinkel Park, a WPA project amphitheater from the 1930s—a wonderful space waiting for somebody to exploit it. Rob Sicular, Joy Carlin and Peter Fisher (now on the CalShakes advisory council), were involved. We did three or four shows a year. The space was unsecured at first; things were sketchy. The lights had to be put up and taken down with every performance!"

"It really thrived in the '80s," Lopez-Morillas recalled of the festival. "Then came increasing tension with the neighbors. A faction of the City Council made it hard to renew the lease each summer. By the late '80s, we were looking to move. We first looked at an area up near the golf course at Tilden. It was chilly and foggy up there. But Orinda's more exposed. The wind just howls out there. And there were both cows and coyotes on the hillside. I did King Lear out there, and if I came out as Lear and cried "Howl, howl, howl!"—I didn't know whether I'd be met by yips or moos. I guess the yips were better; they sounded wild."

Berkeley Shakespeare Festival became California Shakespeare Theatre. Lopez-Morillas will play The Prince in Romeo and Juliet, directed by CalShakes artistic director Jonathan Moscone, opening at Bruns Amphitheatre May 30. It will be the Berkeley Shakespeare veteran's first role there since 2000, which was also Moscone's inaugural season.

"In the meantime, I've directed at San Jose State, Solano College—although not that much directing over the past decade; I'd like to get back to it—and acting at Marin Shakespeare and San Francisco Shakespeare, where I played Gloucester in Lear and Prospero in The Tempest. If there's a role in Shakespeare I really feel proprietary towards, it's Prospero. I feel I bring something personal, something special to it."

Reflecting on working at CalShakes after such a hiatus, Lopez-Morillas said, "Jonathan's established not exactly a company so much as a stable of some of the best classically trained actors in the Bay Area. I love being back in that group again—veteran actors with great chops I've worked frequently with over the past 20 years—and all in one place. It guarantees high-quality work. We're all very comfortable together."

Julian Lopez-Morillas blogs about his theater experiences on PlayShakespeare.com, a website created by actor and creative designer Ron Severdia. One piece of correspondence he passed along: "from Robert Hurwitt, theater critic for the Chronicle. 'Wouldn't it be funny,' Rob wrote, 'if newspapers, which have predicted the death of theater for so long, went first?'"

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