

*Shakespeare*

*in the*

*Arb*

*Celebrating 20 years*

*2001 - 2020*

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# Timeline

2001 - 2020

- 2001 A Midsummer Night's Dream
- 2002 A Midsummer Night's Dream
- 2003 Much Ado About Nothing
- 2004 As You Like It
- 2005 A Midsummer Night's Dream



- 2011 The Winter's Tale
- 2012 The Merry Wives of Windsor
- 2013 Much Ado About Nothing
- 2014 As You Like It
- 2015 A Midsummer Night's Dream

- 2006 Love's Labour's Lost
- 2007 The Tempest
- 2008 Two Gentlemen of Verona
- 2009 Twelfth Night
- 2010 A Midsummer Night's Dream



- 2016 Love's Labours Lost
- 2017 The Tempest
- 2018 Romeo and Juliet
- 2019 Twelfth Night
- 2021 A Midsummer Night's Dream



# Kate Mendeloff

*Artistic Director, Shakespeare in the Arb*



Twenty years ago, I had the privilege to be invited to stage a production in Nichols Arboretum. When I thought of the play most suited to the environment, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* came to mind. I wanted the audience to feel transformed by their experience of the Arb and this play was the perfect choice. Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius, Peter Quince and his mechanicals, even those at home in the fairy world, all are changed by their journey into the forest.

Back then, I didn't know where this journey would lead me. The popularity of Shakespeare in the Arb has given me the chance to stage almost a dozen different Shakespeare plays in nature and to work with a company of actors and artists that includes students, faculty, and community members of all ages and backgrounds. Despite mosquitoes, rain, mud, helicopters, trains, and thunderstorms, I still love spending the Michigan spring watching trees leaf out and buds open. I am still grateful to Matthaei Botanical Gardens & Nichols Arboretum for providing such a canvas for my vision as a director. I still embrace the opportunity to make the Arb a featured character in each production, and I still feel like I have the best job in the world!

And now, it's my pleasure to present "Shakespeare in the Arb- Twenty Years of Making Magic". In these pages you will get an inside look at the creative process behind our performances and get a clearer idea of how the natural world inspires our staging from the very start of the rehearsal process. It is this integration of nature and art that makes us so unique.

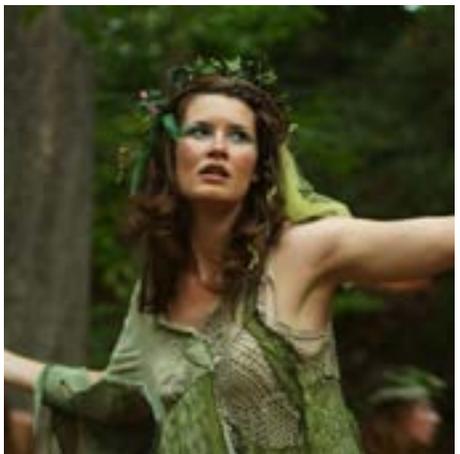
I want to thank all the SITA family who participated in gathering reflections and images from our two decades of theater making. My colleagues Carol Gray, Graham Atkin, Alexis Ford, Joseph Mooney and David Betz have all contributed help and advice on this project. The photographs that so beautifully capture our productions are by Kent McCormick, Mike Hulsebus, Tom VanderMey, Michele Yanga, Scott Soderberg, Daryl Marshke, and the late David Smith.

I want to give special recognition to Avery Fessenden, my artistic collaborator on this book, whose enthusiasm, editorial insight and computer graphic skills made it what it is!

# Carol Gray

*Associate Director, Shakespeare in the Arb*

As granddaughter of the co-founder of Huron River Day, Carol was raised to be civically and environmentally engaged. Her passion for Shakespeare was encouraged, alongside a commitment to sharing his poetry with her whole community. When Shakespeare in the Arb was founded, she was overjoyed to not only perform her beloved texts, but to engage with the audience and the wilderness in a truly original way. Over the past 20 years, Carol has performed, produced, associated directed and/or stage managed 16 productions - sometimes all at once! In 2019, she and Graham Atkin co-directed Twelfth Night, and co-taught a spring term course through the Residential College focusing on environmental theater.



To celebrate the 20th anniversary, Carol worked with Residential College and Arboretum leadership to plan a season of events commemorating the Bard's residence in the Arb. Alumni were poised to return to Ann Arbor, and donors and community groups invited to celebrate and support our work. Although this was postponed, Carol is looking ahead to next summer when the fairies will dance through the peonies again. She looks forward to partnering again with Kate, a fearless experimenter and a gracious leader. And she continues to be inspired by her deep connection with past performers, with the audience and her beloved community, and with the natural environment.

# Graham Atkin

*Associate Director, Shakespeare in the Arb*

Graham performed the role of "Oberon" in the very first Shakespeare in the Arb production and has been involved in all but four of the productions since. He acts and directs, as well as wondering how on earth 20 years could have passed so quickly.

Looking back over that time, he says, "I think the best way to make art in this space is to make art *with* this space, and with each other. We do not strive to conquer the Arb, to turn its wild settings into man-made interiors; we let the life of the Arb shape the work we create."

Going on, he recalls, "The moments that stand out the most to me from these 20 years are the ones that exemplify that creative partnership between artist and living stage. Every year that living stage changes – sometimes even during the production – teaching us that we, too, must grow: as artists, as people, as a collaborative. Growth can be happy, scary, challenging, sad. Each year we welcome new faces, celebrate the return of familiar ones, and miss those who have left to pursue other adventures or, heartbreakingly, passed on. We help each other grow, and the work we produce reflects the synergistic creativity, selflessness, passion, and effort of every single person involved. Shakespeare in the Arb is at its best when we create art in collaboration."

When not in the Arb, Graham teaches medical students at Michigan State University about the brain, and undergraduates at the University of Michigan's Residential College about environmental theater.



# Bob Grese

*Director, Matthaei Botanical Gardens & Nichols Arboretum*

"Shakespeare in the Arb has introduced a whole generation of people to the Arb who might never have otherwise spent a full evening soaking up its subtle beauty," says Bob Grese, director of Matthaei-Nichols and a professor of landscape architecture in the UM's School of Natural Resources and Environment. "I hope many of these people have come back on their own later and revisited the various settings used in the play."

This engagement with the Arb's landscape is key for the audience and for Shakespeare in the Arb. "The natural world is always dynamic and forces the production to adapt in ways that merges the setting and the action of the play," he says. From the dramatic setting of the Peony Garden with the peonies in bloom, to the tight enclosure of Heathdale, to the expanse of the prairie in Dow Field with thousands of dragonflies buzzing over the grasses, each scene merges the background setting and the storyline of the play in ways that make performances here quite different than anywhere else.

Collaboration--with students, with Matthaei-Nichols, and with faculty--is a hallmark of Shakespeare in the Arb and its continued success, says Grese. He also appreciates the partnership with Kate Mendeloff through the last 20 years of producing Shakespeare in the Arb. "Her creative energy and vision, dedication to the project, and desire to use the play to help protect the various settings in the Arb have been very important to me personally and to all of my staff who have worked with her."



# Artistic Collaborators

## Roberta VanderMey, Angeline Fox-Maniglia Costume Designers, 2001 - 2020



With no painted backdrop or sets to create the scene, it's up to the costumes to transport the audience back into Elizabethan England. Shakespeare in the Arb's costumers have no small task. Not only must we design costumes that are visually captivating, but they must survive the elements. By the end of a season, the costumes will have seen rain, mud, grass stains, and sweat. The costumer must also be on hand to make repairs, wash and press the costumes, and remove the stains in preparation for the next night's performance. With the show often double or triple cast, the costumes must be flexible enough to fit different actors without major modifications.

Despite the wear and tear, many costumes last multiple seasons. Some of the *A Midsummer Night's Dream* costumes still in use were created by Roberta VanderMey for the original production. Roberta worked as the lead costumer for Shakespeare in the Arb for seven years. In a review of the 2006 production, *Love's Labour's Lost*, the

Michigan Daily praised her costumes as "worth the trip to the Arb alone." Roberta passed away in 2011, but her costume legacy lives on. I was able to use her stock for my *As You Like It* design in 2014.

It's the details of the costumes that help to create their magic. Both Roberta and I did extensive research into Elizabethan art and history in order to recreate the clothes of kings and of peasants. Shakespeare's use of myth and magic allows the costumers to break from this task when designing the non-human spirits found in several plays. The fairies and Pucks were first envisioned by our choreographer, Angela Youells in 2001 and created with discarded dance clothes. For *The Tempest* in 2007, which Kate set in 1610 in indigenous Michigan, Roberta put the Ariels in green deerskin. In 2017, I chose to make them birdlike. The organic world of the Arb pushes us to focus on looks that tie in the natural elements, rather than impose a romanticized "pretty" fairy look. The end result is a mystical creature that looks right at home in the Arb.

~ Angeline Fox Maniglia

## Katie Sucha, Music Director, 2015 - 2020



My first show with Shakespeare in the Arb was our 2015 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As a newcomer, I had a lot to learn about the process of integrating drama and music, and about embracing and utilizing the minimalist natural environment. *Midsummer* is an elaborate play with a large cast, and it felt like I had jumped into the deep end. But the show is practically written for the Arb; it's magical, organic, and wild, as is the creative process that makes it come to life. Since then, Shakespeare in the Arb has become my favorite summer tradition, and I spend my entire spring looking forward to the first day of rehearsal when we all troop down the hill and leave the present world behind for a few hours.

The glorious thing about putting on each show is that we get to turn the Arb into a living, breathing, flowering laboratory. Plans hatched over the previous winter come to fruition, but they evolve, taking on the personality and joie de vivre of the present year's cast and crew. I might spend hours in preparation researching and arranging music, attempting to create a sonic backdrop for Shakespeare's words, but it isn't until we are all together in the Arb that the ideas actually begin to coalesce.



I always try to start from a base of historical research for the music, using melodies that could have been heard during Shakespeare's time, but from there I look to the talents of the cast to give the music character and dimension. I might harmonize one of these melodies for a choir of unruly fairies. A simple catch might lend itself to a natural echo effect when played by a flute trio perched in and around the trees. A renaissance madrigal might morph into a tin-panny trumpet ragtime for a band of clown musicians. Ideas that begin as jokes and accidents work their way into the fabric of the show in a beautifully additive, collaborative process.

This year, like every other musician/actor/artist in the world, I feel a great sense of loss over the postponement of this year's 20th anniversary season, but I know that next summer will be all the more wonderful for it. I am really looking forward to the next time we can all steal away into the Arb and to Shakespeare's make-believe world for a few hours.



## Melissa Freilich, Stage Combat Choreographer, 2018

Choreographing the fights for Shakespeare in the Arb's *Romeo and Juliet* had me seeing double. In the first place, there were two actors for each role. A seemingly endless set of possible combinations of Romeos, Mercutios, Tybalts, Benvolio and Paris for each fight. In the second place, there was the Arb itself, suddenly two places at the same time: the park I had been somewhat familiar with and now the city of Verona I was coming to know like the back of my hand.

Luckily, I was doubled as well, part of a choreographing team. This was my first time co-choreographing with someone else and I worried initially that it would add an additional challenge. Instead, it offered an approach to the unique challenges of choreographing for a group. Any choreography had to work for any combination of actors, not just for me and a single actor. Greg and I went through combination after combination, constantly switching roles and throwing out new ideas to find choreography that could fit all of the different actors. At the same time, we looked for any way we could transform the geography of the Arb, jumping from fallen trees or running out from the underbrush.

It is the double-ness of Shakespeare in the Arb that invests it with its own particular form of magic. The Arb became more than a public park, it became my personal workspace, my artistic home for a few months, just as it was coming into its best spring bloom. The doubled actors seemed to be blooming as well! I'll never forget watching one Tybalt standing to the side of the fight rehearsal, holding the other Tybalt's water bottle like the coach on the side of a boxing ring. The Romeos were walking each other through their side of a fight, because one of them



had been busy up a tree rehearsing the balcony scene. Meanwhile Greg was watching the whole cast do the opening brawl. Everywhere, the play was coming to life. Greg and I wanted the fight choreography to tell the story of the play as it shifts from comedy to tragedy. The opening brawl is lighthearted and flashy, with Tybalt flourishing his cloak as a weapon. By the end of the play, Romeo and Paris are fighting desperately with lanterns over the bodies in the Capulet tomb. The Arb darkened as well, the sun setting over the course of the performance. The play ends somberly, and dimly lit. But my experience working on Shakespeare with the Arb shines brightly in my memories.

# Beyond the Arboretum

In nature, the propagation of new plants is the ultimate success story. Two SITA alums went on to found their own environmental Shakespeare companies. Through the work of Corinna Christman, leader of the Hyde Park Players in Chicago and Andy Wiginton, director of Savvy Theater Works in Puerto Rico and Mexico, the legacy continues!

## Corinna Christman

In the summers during and after college, I traipsed through the Arboretum, fiddling and singing between scenes of *As You Like It* and *Love's Labour's Lost*. I enjoyed walking from location to location and hearing the excited chatter of the crowd as they anticipated the next bit of drama unfold. I knew as my own life unfolded that I would not leave Shakespeare in the Arb behind. I and my husband, Bill, moved to Chicago in 2007, and in 2009 we became founding members of the Hyde Park Community Players, an all-volunteer theater group in the Hyde Park neighborhood. The group started small, performing one acts and works by royalty



free playwrights, but by 2016, we had expanded to four shows a season, including Shakespeare in the Park-Nichols Park, to be specific! The Players' first outdoor Shakespeare production was *The Tempest*—a production so dramatic that Prospero and the fey actually summoned



a storm for two of the performances, scattering the audience away. *Twelfth Night* followed in 2017. I directed *As You Like It* in 2018. For that show I borrowed the SITA tradition of moving the audience through scenes. When Rosalind was banished, the entire audience was sent to Arden with her. Last summer, the Players performed *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and are looking forward to producing *Much Ado About Nothing* in 2020. Although no setting compares to Nichols Arboretum, it is always a lovely tradition to sit in a field or under a tree on a summer's day, and perform Shakespeare's words and music.



## Andy Wiginton



When Kate and I sat on her porch brainstorming the first production of *Midsummer* in the Arb, I had no idea how much that production would serve as the foundation for much of my career. In rehearsal for that first show, I vividly remember sitting on a damp log as the morning mist steamed from the forest floor, completely transported to the enchanted forest outside the City of Athens. I wrote on my script, "Wiginton, THIS is theatre. Remember this magic."

After my first year in the RC, I went to Mérida, Venezuela to polish my freshly honed language skills at the University of the Andes. Later, I returned to Venezuela to study the way that LGBTQ artists were responding to the incredible political changes that were shaking the country. By then I was an RC Drama major, and together with Kate worked on turning what I learned abroad into a play. Later, while

working on my MFA, I decided to return to Mérida to practice applied theatre techniques with a group of young people frustrated by environmental changes. Without a theatre to work in or any money to rent space, we rehearsed and performed our short pieces outdoors in the city's many parks and plazas. Performing at the base of the Andes provided us the perfect setting and a built-in public audience.



After completing my MFA, I was hired by an academy in Puerto Rico to lead the theatre program. The school had recently been rebuilt after a hurricane and again there was no theatre space in which to perform. With little time to prepare, I decided to direct something familiar and transformed the grounds of the school into the setting for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. We enlisted an army of elementary school fairies led by "Mustardseed," a bad-girl Regatton Star who rapped Shakespeare in the parking lot. We took the audience on a walk around the tropical grounds, culminating with the wedding set against a perfect Puerto Rican sunset. When the rain forced us to move our production into the gymnasium; I panicked because the kids had never rehearsed inside. Just like when Kate moved our rained out Arb performance into a lecture hall in Ann Arbor (six years prior), the Puerto Rican young actors successfully adjusted their staging and sight lines without any prior rehearsal. This is an advanced skill that usually takes professional actors years to master. I realized that because we had rehearsed outdoors, the students had practiced adjusting their performances to meet the changing environment; so moving the show indoors proved an easy task.

That summer, I took a handful of Puerto Rican students to Mexico to work with a local school on an outdoor environmental performance. The program was a huge success and summer after summer our numbers grew, until ultimately the applied theatre company, Savvy Theatre Works was born. Every summer, high school and university students travel to rural Mexico to work with elementary and middle school students on a piece of outdoor theatre. For our fifth anniversary, we adapted *Midsummer* as a desert musical. The piece was performed on the grounds of an abandoned tequila distillery located behind the elementary school, and relied on found objects for the sets and costumes.

I now have a PhD in Theatre for Young Audiences. Looking back it's hard to ignore the importance that outdoor productions by, for and with young people have had on my career. I believe that rehearsing and performing outdoors helps young actors internalize their roles organically that is hard to achieve in a rehearsal hall. Even when the cast is going to perform in a theatre, I try to rehearse outdoors as a natural way to teach fundamental techniques. Working this way teaches kids about projection and blocking, and provides "sets" that are difficult to achieve in a traditional space. I return to *Midsummer* over and over again, because the story is easily adapted and the themes are timeless. I recently directed another outdoor production of *Midsummer* in Franklin, New Jersey. As I sat on the grass swatting gnats, I witnessed the students experiencing the same magic I felt in the Arb \_\_\_ years ago. Over the years, I've been lucky to have shared that same magic in parks, playgrounds, and school yards with hundreds of young actors and thousands of audience members all over the world.





# Jaclyn Dudek

Jaclyn Dudek is a talented physical actor and her charismatic work as one of the tripartite Pucks in our 2005 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* delighted Arb audiences. She also got to use her considerable comedic skill in her portrayal of "Mote", the page to the passionate Spaniard, Don Armado, in our first iteration of *Love's Labour's Lost* in 2006. She majored in Classics and went on to pursue a Master's Degree in the subject before getting her doctorate in Educational Technology. She wrote a brilliant translation of Euripides *The Bacchae*, which I have produced twice in the Botanical Gardens Conservatory, and chose to write her PhD dissertation on Shakespeare in the Arb in 2017.

Jaclyn Dudek

The Arboretum is a special place. Nestled among the jostling institutions of city, university, and hospitals, the Arb provides welcome respite of green and growing. It's a classroom of infinite possibilities, and offers a sweet balm for healing bodies and minds.

I grew to know Shakespeare in the Arb from the inside, performing as "Puck" in *Midsummer* and "Mote" in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Now, as an educator, researcher, and designer, I believe in the educational power of arts, the outdoors, and belonging to community— important lessons learned from my time in the Arb. My research focuses on places of learning. So in 2017, I decided to make SITA the subject of my dissertation. I spent six weeks with the cast and crew of *The Tempest*, interviewing, recording, taking pictures, making maps, sewing fairy shoes and all manner of things. Very few people can say that their dissertation was borne from joy, and wonder, and friendship, but I can.



People's identities are bound up with place—where they have been and where they are going. For twenty years, SITA has been a source of joy and belonging for me and for the hundreds of people, both performers and audiences, who have participated in our placemaking. On returning to the Arb, I experience something more than nostalgia. It is the sense that in this place, I am witty and creative, safe, strong, and ready to share. My experience with SITA helped make the Arboretum into my own place and gave me a sense of belonging to the university. Surely then, SITA and the Arboretum is a unique laboratory and context in which to understand the creative ways people make place together.

What has always fascinated me about SITA is how the experience pulls people in and keeps them coming back. Many of us remain linked to the program; co-directing, making costumes, or writing dissertations! In my study, I tried to map "hidden topographies" of SITA's continuous learning and dwelling in the Arb to reveal the rich but often ephemeral or invisible meanings that crisscross the space; mapping hidden trails, special features that were associated with scenes from



Jaclyn as "Mote" in *Love's Labour's Lost*



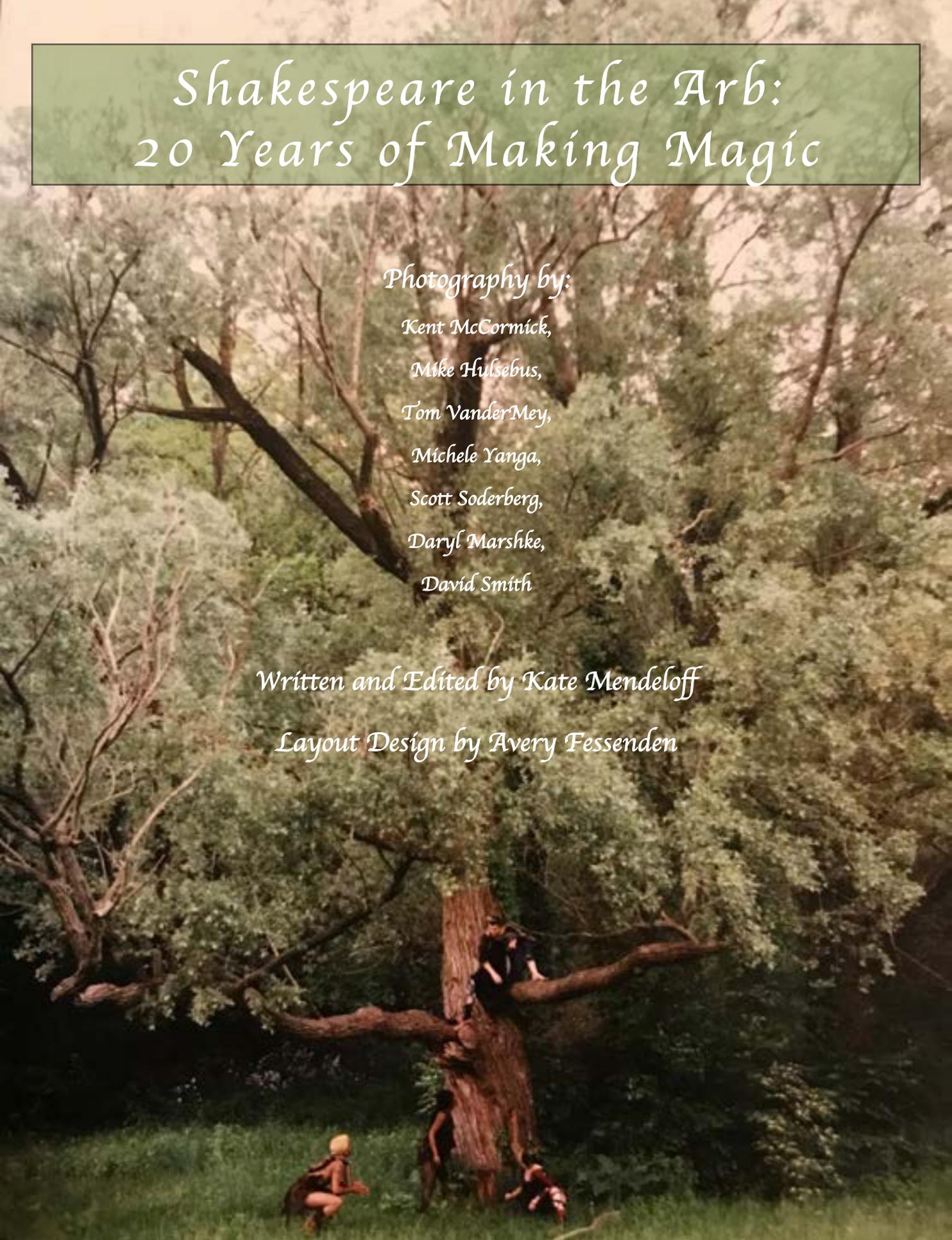
Jaclyn as "Puck" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

plays, and cataloging all the special names for areas that one would never find on a map. I also argued that SITA transformed the way that visitors interact with and experience the Arb. I pointed to the remnants of children's play exemplified by tiny fairy houses I saw during my research summer.



The stand of pine trees, so often used as a fairy space in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, over the years has now been designated as a magic play area where families perform the same kind of world creation on a miniature scale that SITA has been doing for the past twenty years. Inspiring and supporting other people's creative endeavors and new possibilities within the Arb—whatever its scale—is Shakespeare in the Arb's greatest legacy.





# *Shakespeare in the Arb: 20 Years of Making Magic*

*Photography by:*

*Kent McCormick,*

*Mike Hulsebus,*

*Tom VanderMey,*

*Michele Yanga,*

*Scott Soderberg,*

*Daryl Marshke,*

*David Smith*

*Written and Edited by Kate Mendeloff*

*Layout Design by Avery Fessenden*