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The University of North Carolina at Asheville

“Shakespeare on a Shoestring.”¹

A History of the Montford Park Players

A Senior Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the Department of History
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¹ Hazel Robinson, interviewed by author, Asheville, NC, United States, August 25, 2015.

“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” This iconic quote, taken from William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, was among the first words spoken by the Montford Park Players (MPP) in their maiden season in 1973. This Asheville, North Carolina-based theatre company stages free outdoor productions of the works of William Shakespeare and has been a key fixture in the artistic community since its foundation. The founder of the company, Hazel Robinson, has worked tirelessly since that time to provide Asheville with quality community theatre while forging strong relationships with the Asheville Parks and Recreation Department and with other theatres and community organizations. Over the past forty-three years, MPP has developed from a tiny group of dedicated volunteers performing in Montford Park to a fully-fledged nonprofit organization boasting the third-highest audience of any outdoor drama in North Carolina as well as its own permanent amphitheatre. In that stretch of time Hazel Robinson’s vision, perpetuated by MPP’s volunteers and aided by the Asheville Department of Parks and Recreation, has brought fruition to the idea that the works of Shakespeare are a resource which every English speaker has a right to experience.

Since no scholar has as yet chronicled the history of this organization, the historiography on MPP is limited to the scholarship on similar topics and organizations. The first contribution to this historiography is the introduction to a 2004 issue of the well-regarded journal *College Literature*, which deals entirely with the role of Shakespeare in the popular consciousness. This particular piece emphasizes the strong role that small companies and festivals have in shaping perceptions of Shakespeare and in making his work more accessible to people who might otherwise be turned off by the so-called “highbrow” approach to performing Shakespeare.²

² Elizabeth Abele, “Introduction: Whither Shakespop? Taking Stock of Shakespeare in Popular Culture.” In “Shakespeare and Popular Culture.” Special issue, *College Literature* 31, no. 4 (Fall, 2004): 1-11. Accessed March 30, 2015. <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/pdf/25115224.pdf?acceptTC=true>.

Community theatres rely upon and embody the qualities of the cities in which they exist. Nan Chase furnishes us with a complete history of the city of Asheville in her book, *Asheville: A History*. Though not much space is devoted to theatre and the arts in Chase's history, published in 2007, it does illuminate the overall environment in which such endeavors came to thrive and it gives the reader plenty of historical context for the home of MPP. It is particularly useful for examining the economic atmosphere following the Great Depression in which the Montford Park Players emerged, and is a reliable local history despite being mostly light on topics directly related to theatre.³ The "Theater in Parks" webpage written by the NYC Department of Parks & Rec provides a useful and insightful history of New York City's parks and their endeavors in producing theatrical works, ranging from puppet shows to Shakespearean tragedies. This includes more parks than just Central Park, and is useful in understanding the role of outdoor drama in New York City's cultural atmosphere. It also details the transition from Depression-era arts to the modern day cultural utopia that New York has evolved to become, which dovetails well with Nan Chase's history of the City of Asheville.⁴

Lillian Lewis and Sarah Wilson McKay collaborated to write "Seeking Policies for Cultural Democracy: Examining the Past, Present, and Future of U.S. Nonprofit Arts" for a leading art education journal in 2008. The article offers a good analysis of the state of the American nonprofit, and also places these organizations within a larger political and economic framework in the United States, as well as charting their future direction. The authors examine the plight of small community-based nonprofits and their endless search for sufficient funding to stay in operation. They go on to question whether small nonprofits, of which the Montford Park

³ Nan K Chase, *Contributions to Southern Appalachian Studies*. Vol. 19, *Asheville: a History*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., ©2007.

⁴ New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, "Theater in Parks." : NYC Parks. Accessed March 18, 2015. <http://www.nycgovparks.org/about/history/theater>.

Players are one, which have to rely heavily on volunteer involvement, fundraising, and grant assistance, must continue to do so in order to remain afloat. This analysis of the dynamic with which organizations like MPP must currently contend in order to survive is crucial to appreciating the economic struggles the organization has faced over the last half century.⁵

In 1918, an astonishing forty-five years before MPP was even an idea, one of the notable theatre directors and playwrights penned our seminal work of scholarship pertaining to the historiography of community theatres and Shakespeare in the United States. Constance D'Arcy Mackay offers a perspective to nonprofits that is strikingly similar to Hazel Robinson's in her journal article, "Why Not a Little Community Theater for Your Town?" Both have a mindset geared very much towards localized theatre. Instead of examining the financial pros and cons of nonprofits in the arts, Mackay provides an impassioned defense of small theatres regardless of the financial burden that they can confer upon those who run them. That said, this article is an excellent embodiment of the sort of civic spirit and grassroots activism that lay at the heart of MPP's founding and is a good basis for how to go about creating such an enterprise. In spite of its age, this piece is integral in understanding the spirit of MPP's mission and that of Hazel Robinson herself. The author makes a case for the civic benefit of creating and maintaining community theatres, mainly via artistic enrichment of the community. As with the article on the role of artistic nonprofits in the community, this one posits that small artistic organizations impart a disproportionately significant impact upon the culture in the area in which they are situated.⁶

⁵ Lillian Lewis, and Sarah Wilson McKay, "Seeking Policies for Cultural Democracy: Examining the Past, Present, and Future of U.S. Nonprofit Arts." *Studies in Art Education* 49, no. 4 (Summer, 2008): 1. Accessed March 30, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/25475871?sid=21106316460153&uid=4&uid=3739256&uid=3739776&uid=2>.

⁶ Constance d'Arcy Mackay, "Why Not a Little Community Theater for Your Town?" *The Art World* 3, no. 6 (March, 1918): 526-28. Accessed March 30, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25588402.pdf?acceptTC=true>.

Adding to the scholarship of theatres and nonprofits is John Moehlmann's review of the second season of the North Carolina Shakespeare Festival in 1979. The Festival, despite being founded several years after MPP, was the largest Shakespeare company in the state for nearly forty years and offers a good means of comparison to the Asheville-based company. This review and others that followed it offer a means to analyze the quality and artistic direction of the larger High Point-based company and how it was successful in its mission to provide Shakespeare to its community for the period of time that it did, as well as offer hints into why that organization fell into financial ruin rather than the always meagerly-budgeted MPP.⁷

Philip Hill's 1962 article, "A Theatre for the Outdoor Historical Drama," is an examination of the history of outdoor theatre, especially in North Carolina where the tradition of outdoor drama is among the richest in the world. Along with MPP, the most successful outdoor dramas are Manteo's *The Lost Colony* (which Hill primarily focuses on), Cherokee's *Unto These Hills*, and Boone's *The Horn in the West*. Hill goes on to talk about the significance, challenges, and benefits of using an outdoor amphitheatre as a venue for a theatre company, which foreshadows the construction of MPP's amphitheatre in the early 1980s.⁸

Another journal article on arts and community, entitled "Arts in Parks and Recreation Settings" (1975) gives an insight into the role that Parks and Recreation departments play on a local level in supporting the arts. The piece is useful in understanding MPP's relationship with the City of Asheville and their Parks and Recreation Department. It is also helpful in presenting a

⁷ John Moehlmann, "North Carolina Shakespeare Festival." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (Spring, 1979): 200-2. Accessed March 31, 2015. <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/pdf/2869304.pdf?acceptTC=true>.

⁸ Philip Hill, "A Theatre for the Outdoor Historical Drama," *Educational Theatre Journal* 14, no. 4 (December, 1962): 312-17, accessed April 22, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3204639.pdf>.

documented desire by various demographics of Americans for more theatre and other live entertainment, therefore highlighting the relevance of companies like MPP.⁹

Moving from the context of other theatres and nonprofits, the History webpage, taken from the Montford Park Players' website, is a good general summary of MPP's narrative. It is useful in particular because it provides an internal perspective of how the company developed into what it is today. The page is by no means a scholarly source but it is an indicator not only of the major events in MPP's timeline but a self-chosen one that reflects the image that the company wishes to project. This subjective perspective shown against a more comprehensive picture of the company provides a cogent juxtaposition of approaches to the same story.¹⁰

Olivia Smith, a writer for the *New York Daily News* provides a look into the legacy of Shakespeare in the Park programs following their widespread development in the 1960s and '70s in her 2009 article, "Free Shakespeare in the Park Comes with a Price." Her overview of Shakespeare in the Park in New York offers a sample of what one should expect upon attending such a performance in the present day. Her journalist's perspective examines the ground the Shakespeare in the Park endeavor has covered and also illustrates how it differs in New York from other less metropolitan locales, such as Asheville.¹¹

Despite the vast existing scholarship on urban theatre companies, historians have heretofore ignored for the most part the humble community theatre which can be found in most of small-town America. Just as Hazel Robinson so democratically believes in Shakespeare as a resource that everybody should have the opportunity to access and enjoy, so too do I believe that

⁹ Bennett Schiff, and M.K., "Arts in Parks and Recreation Settings." *Studies in Art Education* 16, no. 2 (1975): 1. Accessed March 31, 2015. <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/pdf/1319923.pdf>.

¹⁰ The Montford Park Players, "History." The Montford Park Players. Accessed March 18, 2015. <http://www.montfordparkplayers.org/about/history/>.

¹¹ Olivia Smith, "Free Shakespeare in the Park Comes with a Price." *NY Daily News*. August 21, 2009. Accessed March 18, 2015. <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music-arts/success-free-shakespeare-park-price-audiences-worth-wait-article-1.395430>.

these small theatres, of which the Montford Park Players are a sublime example, deserve to have their voices heard in the same settings as their metropolitan counterparts. This paper seeks both to chronicle MPP's history and to underscore the importance of Robinson's belief in Shakespearean drama.

Hazel Robinson is by all accounts a remarkable woman. At the age of eighty-nine, she still possesses an overwhelming amount of vitality and sharpness of intellect, especially for a woman of her years. It is this same vivacity and force of will that led to her succeeding in forming a theatre company which has succeeded where so many others have failed. Indeed, not only have the Montford Park Players managed to stay afloat and in the black for forty-three years, but they have now managed to attract the third-most attendees of any outdoor theatre in North Carolina per season for the last two years, behind Manteo's *The Lost Colony* and Cherokee's *Unto These Hills*, while managing to beat out Boone's *The Horn in the West*.¹² To get to that point was no mean feat, however.

A number of factors converged prior to the summer of 1973 that convinced Robinson that Asheville needed a Shakespeare company. The catalyst for Hazel and John Robinson to start their endeavor occurred when the two took a vacation to Minneapolis in the summer of 1972 to visit John's family. While there, they went to a production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in a municipal park. That experience, coupled with Hazel's observations that nobody in Asheville performed Shakespeare, led others to suggest that Hazel start a Shakespeare company of her own. The only other theatre companies at that time were Asheville Community Theatre, which primarily put on Broadway shows, and Tanglewood Youth Theatre, which was associated with

¹² Institute of Outdoor Theatre, *Final Report - 2014 Outdoor Theatre Attendance* (Greenville, NC: Institute of Outdoor Theatre, 2014).

the former; Hazel was involved with both.¹³ In spite of having several conversations with those close to her in which her husband and others urged her to consider using the local Montford Park to start a company of her own, Hazel did not entertain the thought of acting on the vacuum of Shakespearean performance in Asheville until a New Year's Eve party at the dawn of 1973. John Cram hosted this party, incidentally. Cram is now the owner of several businesses in downtown Asheville and Biltmore Village, including the Fine Arts Theater and New Morning Gallery. Hazel fondly recollected the moment in which she finally gave in to the notion of creating a Shakespeare company. At the party, a man whose name neither she nor Ray Kisiah, at that time Director of Parks and Recreation in Asheville, can recall approached her and asked about the idea while offering his acquaintance of Kisiah as assistance, and, as she put it,

if I had not had three strawberry daiquiris (which I have never touched since), I would have said no...but I thought well, this current's just too strong. I'll go with it. So I said, "sure!" The next day...he called me and said "Ray loves the idea! Can I set you up an appointment?" That was when I knew I was lost.¹⁴

In spite of her initial reluctance, Hazel gathered her friends and family, contacts from Tanglewood and ACT, and hammered out a working relationship with Kisiah and the Department of Parks and Recreation. Before Robinson could gather actors and other volunteers to start getting a play underway, they had to secure a location in which to work.

Montford Park had been a part of the Montford community since the turn of the 20th century, and proved to be an ideal location for the emergent company. George Willis Pack, who was also the benefactor of the library in downtown Asheville, donated the land for the park.¹⁵ It had been suggested as a location by John Robinson, Hazel's husband, due to its proximity to their home. It was also suitable owing to its steep-sided hills forming a bowl around what would

¹³ Hazel Robinson, interviewed by author.

¹⁴ Hazel Robinson, interviewed by author.

¹⁵ Montford Neighborhood, "Historic Montford," Montford Neighborhood, 2015, accessed October 30, 2015, http://montford.org/?page_id=57.

become the playing area, where there was a wading pool for children. In the spring of 1973, Parks & Rec furnished the newly-dubbed Montford Park Players with some greenwood boards to place over the top of the pool for a small two-tiered octagonal stage, which the Players constructed themselves. This was not an ideal solution, since the stage had to be frequently lifted off to make way for its original function, and since the wood was untreated, it would warp every year. To compensate, the company members would flip the boards at the beginning and ending of each season; this would ensure that they stayed at least moderately even.¹⁶ In spite of the fact that the steep-sided hills and grassy walks of Montford Park made for a good playing space, the fledgling company found that their presence was not altogether welcome to some already living in Montford.¹⁷

The neighborhood of Montford was home to a large black community, some of whom felt encroached upon by the formation of a new Shakespeare company in their backyard. Montford is well known for having “included both black and white residents” for much of its history.¹⁸ Indeed, it is one of the neighborhoods in Asheville for which it can be said that there were and still are a significant number of African-American residents. The relationships that the Montford Park Players had with the local black community served to both shed light on and complicate the status of race relations in the neighborhood in its time. According to Ray Kisiah, then-director of Parks and Recreation,

some of the people in the area, particularly the black people...wanted their own centers and their own spaces, which maybe they were justified in thinking...Back in ‘71 and ‘72 it was just very different. The antipathy between blacks and whites came to the surface a little later in Asheville than in other cities in North Carolina. Issues haven’t completely settled since then, but many strides have been made, tremendous ones, and Montford

¹⁶ Hazel Robinson, interviewed by author.

¹⁷ MPP members constructing stage, photograph from unknown newspaper clipping, June 6, 1973; Hazel Robinson, Asheville, North Carolina.

¹⁸ Michael T. Southern, ed., *Historic Montford: Asheville, North Carolina* ([Asheville?]: The Preservation Society of Asheville & Buncombe County, 1985), 7.

Park helped this. Traditionally it was whites only, but when we moved the [Montford Community] center into this neighborhood, it started out largely black and has filtered into being more integrated.¹⁹

One of the early issues facing MPP was the way in which the local black community reacted to the new organization. MPP was by no means a segregated organization; indeed, Hazel Robinson had cast several African-American children from the neighborhood in MPP's first production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1974. However, such examples of local black actors participating in the company were few and far between. Hazel recalled having witnessed several black children being cast in Tanglewood productions, Tanglewood being a small community theatre for children at the time, and having them back out amidst strong pressure from their friends who would mock them for participating in a play with white people. This problem of reluctance by local African-Americans to participate persisted in the Park, and indeed manifested itself in other troublesome ways.²⁰

On several occasions in the first year of MPP's existence some of the younger members of the black community in Montford openly expressed their antipathy. Indeed, as Ray Kisiah revealed, the actors had to on several occasions in their first year contend with neighborhood children going so far as to throw rocks at them and even the audience. Nobody was ever injured by any of these, but the psychological impact that this must have had on those performing would have been formidable.²¹ After all, all MPP actors were and always have been volunteers, and to have one's endeavors rewarded with having people throw rocks at oneself would have been highly demoralizing and disconcerting. Indeed, Kisiah went on to say that since local police "weren't particularly interested" in protecting the actors, Parks and Recreation took it upon themselves as co-sponsors of MPP to hire their own small security task force, recruited from the

¹⁹ Ray Kisiah, interviewed by author, Asheville, NC, United States, August 18, 2015.

²⁰ Hazel Robinson, interviewed by author.

²¹ Ray Kisiah, interviewed by author.

ranks of crossing guards and other similar occupations, to take it in turns to keep an eye out for the performers and audience. By all accounts, any overt harassment of actors on the part of onlookers stopped shortly after, though it would not be an exaggeration to say that the people living near Montford Park did not all immediately take to the idea of having a Shakespeare company in their midst.²²

Early resistance to the Montford Park Players' presence can be seen in an early photograph taken of a performance of what appears to be *As You Like It*, MPP's inaugural production. The photograph features the stage and its actors in the foreground, and approximately fifty audience members looking on. Behind the audience a member of Parks & Rec's security detail stands prominently on the crest of the hill; off to the right, a lone African-American boy sits. The rest of the audience appears to be predominantly Caucasian couples and families. This indicates a disparity between the racial makeup of the neighborhood and that of the audience. The presence of this single black child, isolated from the rest of the onlookers, would seem to suggest that at the very least the local African-American community was not particularly interested in the spectacle offered by MPP. The lack of black representation in Shakespeare's works, as well as the common practice of having white actors play characters of African descent in blackface, may have contributed to their reluctance to participate in or even accept the presence of MPP's shows.²³

When a company dedicates itself to the performance of Shakespeare's works, it is inevitable that, sooner or later, the company must produce *Othello*. In the case of the Montford Park Players, this would prove to be a challenge for several reasons. First of all, in wake of the Civil Rights movement and changing attitudes towards race in the United States, the common

²² Ray Kisiah, interviewed by author.

²³ Paul Brezny. Photograph. 1973. Hazel Robinson. Asheville, NC. See Appendix 1.

practice in the theatre of having a white actor in black makeup enact the role became less prevalent and in many cases taboo. In spite of this, a number of well-regarded white actors played Othello, including Laurence Olivier in a controversial 1965 film, which is documented by a *New York Times* review by Bosley Crowther published early the next year.²⁴ Indeed, several productions of *Othello* since Olivier's infamous portrayal have featured actors in blackface. With regard to the Montford Park Players, no performance of *Othello* or any other production for that matter has featured an actor using blackface. The very notion is rejected in the personal philosophy of the company's founder, who adamantly believes that Shakespeare is "a birthright for all English speakers."²⁵ That belief extends to all, regardless of their race, creed, religion, gender, or sex. The practice of applying blackface has deeply controversial and offensive connotations for any organization or person who takes part, though by no means has that precluded theatres from producing plays with white actors portraying black characters.²⁶

The fact that MPP never utilized white actors in blackface to play Othello did, however, present the company with a problem: in a neighborhood where there is internal pressure for African-Americans *not* to participate in theatre, how would they recruit an actor to play the fabled Moor? In a small twist of irony, the solution came from the initial problem. One of the original members of the security detail hired to prevent children from throwing rocks, an African-American man by the name of Mr. Fulp, had a son named Rocky who was studying drama at a school in Virginia, and in 1980 the Montford Park Players presented its first

²⁴ Bosley Crowther, "The Screen: Minstrel Show 'Othello': Radical Makeup Marks Olivier's Interpretation," review of *Othello* (1965), *The New York Times* (1966), <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9D07E0D6163AEF34BC4A53DFB466838D679EDE>. Accessed September 21st, 2015.

²⁵ Hazel Robinson, interviewed by author.

²⁶ Mark Lawson, "Theatre Should Turn Its Back On Blackface," *Guardian*, October 23, 2012, accessed September 21, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/oct/23/good-riddance-blackface-mark-lawson>.

production of *Othello*, with Rocky Fulp playing the lead. Overall, MPP handled the challenge of moving into a neighborhood that at times did not approve of their presence with grace.²⁷

In spite of the various small trials facing MPP in its first season, the company succeeded in its experiment with aplomb. Evaluating the position of MPP's first season whilst looking ahead to the next, *Asheville Citizen* staff writer Martha Abshire remarked on how a number of factors, not solely "Robinson family enthusiasm" contributed to the success of that year. Indeed, "Hazel was not only directing but son John Jr. was playing one of the leads and husband John was...keeping the books."²⁸ Hazel's sons Ken and Joe were pressed into action as well, helping to construct the stage and to acquire materials and personnel. This was, in fact, part of Hazel Robinson's philosophy for community theatre, to get family members working together on a production. Her notion was that "a group that's used to interacting" makes it "easier...to shape the [play]," and the sense of community that this approach has engendered endures today at Montford.²⁹ In the *Citizen* article, Hazel also lauds the fact that "the troupe came out in the black the first year...especially when you consider that all our income is donations." John, Hazel's husband, was the primary money manager and Hazel's family were all integral to MPP's enduring success, but what Martha Abshire quoted one actor in saying encapsulates what is and was the central secret to the Players' vitality: "Hazel Robinson. She is the center of the whole troupe, of all our enthusiasm." Her initial reluctance, it would seem, was quickly forgotten in the face of a season in which not only her family and friends but also her patrons contributed and sacrificed in order for her company to flourish.³⁰

²⁷ Hazel Robinson, interviewed by author.

²⁸ Article on MPP's first season, undated clipping from *Asheville Citizen*, summer 1974; Hazel Robinson, Asheville, North Carolina.

²⁹ Hazel Robinson, interviewed by author.

³⁰ Article on MPP's first season, undated clipping from *Asheville Citizen*, summer 1974; Hazel Robinson, Asheville, North Carolina.

Since the first production, the organization has “passed the hat,” that is, sent actors into the audience area to receive donations from those viewing the performance. In her interview with the author, Hazel Robinson noted that “one guy had been picking tomatoes... all day in the hot sun... and he gave us his day’s paycheck, which was \$20, and I almost fainted... all of us were just over the moon about that.”³¹ Indeed, the Montford Park Players have relied on such generosity for their entire existence, regardless of the size of the donation. In fact, one of the most valuable donations which the company received in its early days was not cash or check but rather fabric. A local newspaper, likely either the *Asheville Citizen* or the *Times*, made note of a donation by the American Enka company, which “consisted of a wide variety of rayon, nylon, and polyester fabrics” that by the time of writing had been used by MPP to create “at least 45 costumes from some of the material already.” Hazel Robinson and her band of faithful followers were by no means the only persons who wished to see the group succeed.³²

In 1975, a year before the United States’ centennial, a member of an organization in charge of sending select groups of American performing artists to put on their work in England came to see a condensed version of *Midsummer* that the Montford Park Players were putting on in downtown Asheville. He subsequently invited the troupe to visit England the following year as part of a showcase celebrating the 100-year anniversary of the United States. The only snag for MPP was raising the money for airfare; every other expense was covered. The Players worked hard on fundraising for a year, putting together touring shows, hosting fundraising dinners, and asking for private donations, all with the caveat that if they failed to raise the requisite funds, they would return every penny. A week before they were due to fly to England,

³¹ Article on MPP’s first season, undated clipping from *Asheville Citizen*, summer 1974; Hazel Robinson, Asheville, North Carolina.

³² Article on fabric donation, undated clipping from unknown newspaper, summer 1973; Hazel Robinson, Asheville, North Carolina.

they were still short--until an anonymous donor contributed about \$1,000 and another donor, a schoolteacher, gave an interest-free loan of another \$1,000, enabling the Players to make the trip. When there, they toured the Lancaster countryside with their production of *The Taming of a Shrew*, including one performance at an abbey in Wharton Village, which was according to Hazel Robinson the ancestral home of George Washington's family. After the performance, Robinson said,

A village alderman...came up and said "I didn't want to come, I thought I hated Shakespeare. My wife made me come, and I'm so glad she did!" That was our thesis--if you see it live, you can enjoy it. Present them with words on the page, or god forbid, a teacher who divides up "you take this three lines, etc" in *Romeo & Juliet*, [and] no wonder they hate it! Never mind, tell the story, get them interested.³³

Overall, the trip was a resounding success. Not only were the Montford Park Players well received by William Shakespeare's countrymen, but they succeeded in converting at least one person to the joys of his work. Furthermore, the England trip made two things abundantly clear to the members of the organization and its subscribers. The first of these was that even those who would not otherwise have been expected to contribute much material assistance to a non-profit, such as a schoolteacher, would be willing to dig deep and help a company who made accessible and quality theatre their mission. The second was that Robinson had a quality theatre troupe on her hands, one that could expand its repertoire into other areas.

One of the most tangible outcomes of MPP's 1976 trip to England is still in place thirty years later. That year, in order to help pay off the loans they had accrued to pay for their adventure, the Montford Park Players introduced their annual production of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, which continues to be performed every year. It was the first regular ticketed show that MPP put on, and has become a tradition for Asheville theatregoers. Indeed, many actors at MPP have cut their teeth in productions of *A Christmas Carol*. The funds that a ticketed

³³ Hazel Robinson, interviewed by author.

show provided, in addition to the assistance they received from donors, public and private, have fueled their endeavors for decades. The help they obtained from Parks & Rec, and Ray Kisiah in particular has been instrumental in helping them to thrive and prosper.³⁴

Starting with MPP's agreement with Parks & Rec to use Montford Park as a playing space, as well as the latter's donation of wood to construct the stage, the relationship between the two entities has been long and fruitful, especially for the Players. The linchpin of this relationship between Hazel Robinson's new theatre troupe and the city organization was Ray Kisiah, the newly-appointed Director of Parks and Recreation in the city. Kisiah's tenure was marked by a number of exceptional improvements to existing parks and the construction of many new facilities throughout town. He described the department as having been "neglected for many many many years [sic], and the parks were in bad shape, and the budget was very poor," since the economic slump that characterized the Great Depression had by and large persisted in Asheville for several decades beyond its conclusion in the rest of the country. His impact was immediate, however. Kisiah had been working in Parks & Rec with Charlotte and later High Point for over a decade, and he brought his acumen with him to Asheville.³⁵

One of Kisiah's innovations which he implemented to the benefit of MPP as well as other people and organizations in the community was the way he handled labor for building and maintenance projects. The typical protocol for people in his position would have been to hire contracted specialists to clear and grade land, maintain lawns and athletic fields, and other tasks that would normally fall under Parks & Rec responsibility. Kisiah very shrewdly hired and trained his own workers instead and purchased earthmoving equipment so as to avoid contract labor and save expenses for the department while still accomplishing municipal goals with the

³⁴ Hazel Robinson, interviewed by author.

³⁵ Ray Kisiah, interviewed by author.

same level of proficiency.³⁶ An added benefit of this practice is that it contributed to the costs of qualifying for the federal Model Cities Program, which allocated millions of dollars to designated cities for upgrading and rebuilding city facilities, particularly in low income neighborhoods, Montford being “marginally low-income, [though] we did get Montford Park in that program, which was a neat little trick.”³⁷ The way the money allocation worked was that the federal government matched a sum raised by local government, which was useful for Kisiah’s purposes since “a couple of [City] Counsel members were reluctant...to spend much or commit the city to future expenditures.”³⁸ Kisiah’s approach to cutting costs proved farsighted in improving the public facilities in the city, but his support for MPP was not only measurable by tangible monetary contributions.

Kisiah was not only a key player in the rejuvenation of Asheville’s parks and other public facilities, but he was also a staunch friend of the Montford Park Players. In their first few years, Ray recalls,

I did work to improve the public impression of Montford Park Players, in some instances...I would hear...how Montford Park Players were a bunch of no-goods and that nobody of any consequence would participate with them...and that was not official, that was an attitude in the community of Asheville. So Hazel, realizing this, asked me...if I would participate in a play.³⁹

To his credit, despite having no real experience with theatre, Ray agreed. In addition to a power pole and storage shed for props and costumes, in the summer of 1975 Parks & Rec furnished MPP with another actor: he played Christopher Sly in their first performance of *Taming of the Shrew*, which was well-publicized.⁴⁰ Ray’s gesture helped draw focus not only onto the Players’ presence, which has been a recurring issue throughout their history, but also onto their quality as

³⁶ Ray Kisiah, interviewed by author.

³⁷ Ray Kisiah, interviewed by author.

³⁸ Ray Kisiah, interviewed by author.

³⁹ Hazel Robinson, interviewed by author.

⁴⁰ MPP Member Handbook, Pamphlet, 1980; Hazel Robinson, Asheville, NC.

a theatre troupe. Ray noted that a staff writer for the *Citizen-Times* attended the performance, and that his role in the show was widely remarked-upon because Sly is a drunken character, and Ray is well-known for having been a lifelong teetotaler.⁴¹ The system of favors was not one-sided, however. MPP also frequently sent small groups of actors to city events to perform scenes and parts of ongoing shows or audience favorites as part of the evening's entertainment--it was, according to Hazel Robinson, a "symbiotic" relationship. But the fact that MPP did reciprocate Ray Kisiah's help where they could did not by any means diminish the magnitude of his generosity. Indeed, in 1983 he became the orchestrator of the most important improvement made to Montford Park Players since the start of their existence.⁴²

One of the greatest contributions that Kisiah and Parks & Rec made to the city, and especially to MPP, was the construction of their current playing space: the Hazel Robinson Amphitheatre. The Players had been performing in Montford Park for eleven years when, as Hazel puts it, Ray "called me in one day and said, 'I've got some good news for you...you're going to have a proper amphitheatre...it's HUD money [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development] and it was supposed to go for picnic shelters, but we have enough.'" ⁴³ Though he had allocated monies for a different purpose than what was originally intended, Ray Kisiah justified the action well. Thanks to his aforementioned practice of hiring and training his own workforce and purchasing the department its own construction equipment, he was able to match federal HUD money more easily and end up with a surplus, which he used in the construction of the amphitheatre.⁴⁴ His actions were not, strictly speaking, within the ethical bounds of his office in that he used federal monies for a non-allocated purpose. However, it could be argued that Ray

⁴¹ Ray Kisiah, interviewed by author.

⁴² Hazel Robinson, interviewed by author.

⁴³ Hazel Robinson, interviewed by author.

⁴⁴ Ray Kisiah, interviewed by author.

used money that might otherwise have been spent on a resource which the city already had in abundance. Furthermore, he invested in a cultural mainstay which would thrive as a result and indeed benefit the city as well with its patronage.

The Hazel Robinson Amphitheatre proved to be a superb improvement to the Players' original space, and offered a litany of benefits. In an *Asheville Citizen* article written in the spring of '83, Hazel remarked that "Montford Park is a lovely place to play, but it's noisy. Here [at the amphitheatre] you can sit without tumbling down the hill." The new space featured terraces cut into a steep hill facing a building constructed by Parks & Rec the previous autumn. The terracing was done by members of the U.S. Naval Construction Forces, commonly known as Seabees. Where before, the hill at Montford Park could accommodate perhaps 50-100 patrons, the new amphitheatre could comfortably seat 500, with room on the hill above for more.⁴⁵ Indeed, a 2012 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* featured one performance in which over 700 people were recorded as having been in attendance before company members gave up counting. Originally the stage consisted of merely a building with a leak-proof roof upon which actors could play, and a grassy playing area in front. This has been added to over the years and the amphitheatre now boasts an additional level above that roof, with wooden backdrops and tunnels through which actors may travel, unseen, from entrance to entrance. The design, characterized by white panels and "Montford brown" latticing, is evocative of the Globe Theatre, which was built to house Shakespeare's own actors at the turn of the 17th century.⁴⁶

The culminating event that, along with constructing the amphitheatre, solidified MPP's legitimacy as a company occurred in 1989. That year, the Montford Park Players were officially

⁴⁵ G. Dale Neal, "Seabees to Help Montford Players Build Amphitheater," *Asheville Citizen*, May 12, 1983; Hazel Robinson, Asheville, NC.

⁴⁶ Owen, Brad. "Untitled." Digital Image. September 3, 2015. Tim Arrowood Photography. See Appendix 2.

incorporated as a 501 (c) (3) Non-Profit Corporation within the City of Asheville. This act legally defined the company as an entity and established a set of bylaws, as well as setting up conditions for membership. Since MPP had been operating for over fifteen years already, the company of course already had rules and systems in place for how the company should be run, but the Articles of Incorporation issued by the state gave those rules official status and meaning. This, coupled with MPP's possession of their own space, would cement their status as a bona fide theatre company with as much status as any other in Asheville.⁴⁷

In the years since the construction of the amphitheatre, the Montford Park Players have continued to present their brand of high quality Shakespeare in the Park, being one of several companies in the United States to offer it for free. The amphitheatre was deservedly named the Hazel Robinson Amphitheatre in 1997, though Hazel had no knowledge of the city's plan prior to the ceremony, having been surprised with the gesture by Parks and Recreation and her own actors.⁴⁸ Indeed, the company is now expanding at a rapid rate, both in terms of the number of productions on offer and of their physical space. MPP's season now encompasses five summer shows, an indoor production in both spring and autumn, and the annual winter production of *A Christmas Carol*, which at this time of writing will be entering its 30th year of continuous production. The Hazel Robinson Amphitheatre, moreover, is now being subjected to an extensive renovation project which will add a roof to the stage house, extra terraces to the audience, and a welcome center and gift shop at the top of the hill. Forty-four years after Hazel and John Robinson first saw that performance of Shakespeare in the Park in Minnesota, the Montford Park Players have become a cornerstone of the artistic community in Asheville.

⁴⁷ North Carolina Secretary of State. 1989. *Articles of Incorporation of Montford Park Players*. Prepared by Hazel Robinson, Deborah Austin, and Richard James. Hazel Robinson, Asheville, North Carolina.

⁴⁸ Hazel Robinson, interviewed by author.

Hazel Robinson fulfilled her vision of Shakespeare for everyone. With her creation of MPP in 1973, she made the Bard's works accessible to the community at large, regardless of race, gender, or economic status. For an evening, any resident or visitor could forget the delineations between people and sit together on the hill, enjoying the lyrical sounds of the greatest playwright to ever grace the English language. Hazel's philosophical belief that Shakespeare is a birthright and her resolve to keep providing it for anyone willing to see it, coupled with the generosity and shrewdness of Ray Kisiah and the resources of his Department of Parks and Recreation, have propelled this remarkable theatre troupe into the public eye and have made them a mainstay in an already-impressive Asheville cultural community.

Primary Sources Cited

Institute of Outdoor Theatre. *Final Report - 2014 Outdoor Theatre Attendance*. Greenville, NC: Institute of Outdoor Theatre, 2014.

This report chronicles the attendance over the year 2014 of every outdoor theatre of note in North Carolina, helping to place MPP within a larger context of outdoor drama in terms of popularity and visibility, and providing perspective in its expansion from a makeshift group operating in a municipal park to one of the most successful outdoor theatre companies in the state.

Robinson, Hazel. Collection of Newspaper Clippings, Financial Statements, Notes, Letters, Misc. Papers, and Photographs. Ca. 1973-2000. Privately held by Hazel Robinson, Asheville, North Carolina.

This collection comprises the bulk of the primary sources used in this thesis. The collection is varied and includes material from roughly thirty years of activity, and as such must be reduced to particular categories of pertinent documents.

The inception of the Montford Park Players is well chronicled in a series of photographs taken in the first few years of its existence. Most of these are simply pictures of actors in costume, but even those are useful in discerning the scope and commitment of the organization even in the face of limited finances and resources. There are also photographs that give the viewer an idea of the space and stage in which they worked, which helps us to understand the contributions made by Parks and Recreation to MPP, which were crucial to its survival and which are important in understanding the difficulty of such an enterprise as well as the original philosophy which drove the Robinsons to create free Shakespeare in the Park in Asheville.

Over the years a number of articles have been written in the Asheville Citizen, the Asheville Times, and the Citizen-Times about MPP, which are crucial to understanding how the community at large perceived the organization and which provide a useful outsider perspective on a paper that will be dominated by that of its members.

Hazel Robinson also has in her hands a very large collection of playbills, flyers, and newsletters spanning MPP's entire existence that perform several functions. First, each one bears the endorsement of the city's Parks and Recreation department, which is integral to understanding the close relationship the two organizations have shared since the early '70s. Secondly, there are among this vast repository of advertisements several unique productions indicating Montford's scope and community involvement, ranging from performing scenes at Asheville's Bele Chere festival and the Jewish Community Center to taking a touring production of "The Taming of the Shrew" to England in 1976.

Another less traditional set of historical documents in the Robinsons' possession is a series of minutes from MPP board meetings, which are hugely insightful into the inner workings of the organization, including priorities on big picture projects as they developed on and day-to-day operations.

Another part of the collection is a series of financial and operational records and statements, including grant applications to the Asheville Arts Council in 1984, which provide a detailed picture of Montford's budget and working. This is important to fomenting the understanding that MPP was hard by for money for most of its existence and needed the

assistance of the city to operate, but also that (as evidenced by numerous generous donations) MPP has been a friend to the Asheville community, a patron and partner of local culture and similar institutions, and a quality institution that in its own right helped make Asheville a better place to live.

Interviews

Robinson, Hazel. interviewed by author. Asheville, NC, United States, August 25, 2015.

The founder and leader of the organization, Hazel is the most source of information for this thesis. She provides us with detailed explanations and oral accounts of much of MPP's dealings and endeavors, many of which were not chronicled in document form and which are only be accessible through her oral history.

Ray Kisiah. interviewed by author. Asheville, NC, United States, August 18, 2015.

Kisiah is a former head of the City of Asheville's Parks and Recreation department, who became perhaps the most important friend and patron of the troupe, endorsing each MPP production and frequently contributing monetary and material aid to keep the company afloat and able to contribute to the community.

Secondary Sources Cited

Abele, Elizabeth. "Introduction: Whither Shakespop? Taking Stock of Shakespeare in Popular Culture." In *Shakespeare and Popular Culture*. Special issue, *College Literature* 31, no. 4 (Fall, 2004): 1-11. Accessed March 30, 2015. <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/pdf/25115224.pdf?acceptTC=true>.

This is the introduction to an issue of the well-regarded journal *College Literature*, which deals entirely with the role of Shakespeare in the popular consciousness. Much is said in this particular piece about the role that small companies and festivals have in shaping perceptions of Shakespeare and in making his work more accessible to people who might otherwise be turned off by the so-called "highbrow" approach.

Chase, Nan K. *Contributions to Southern Appalachian Studies*. Vol. 19, *Asheville: a History*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., ©2007.

This special volume of the *Contributions to Southern Appalachian Studies* series is a complete history of the city of Asheville. Though not much space is devoted to theatre and the arts in Chase's history, it does illuminate the overall environment in which such endeavors came to thrive and it gives the reader plenty of historical context for the home of MPP.

Crowther, Bosley. "The Screen: Minstrel Show 'Othello': Radical Makeup Marks Olivier's Interpretation." review of *Othello* (1965), *The New York Times* (1966). Accessed September 21st, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9D07E0D6163AEF34BC4A53DFB466838D679EDE>.

Crowther here reviews a notable production of *Othello*, in which renowned white actor Laurence Olivier donned blackface makeup in order to play the title role. This review is demonstrative of attitudes towards blackface at the time of writing, which was just before MPP was created.

Hill, Philip. "A Theatre for the Outdoor Historical Drama." *Educational Theatre Journal* 14, no. 4 (December, 1962): 312-17. Accessed April 22, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3204639.pdf>.

Hill's article provides some background information on the rich tradition of outdoor drama in North Carolina, of which the Montford Park Players became a part soon after this was written.

Lewis, Lillian, and Sarah Wilson McKay. "Seeking Policies for Cultural Democracy: Examining the Past, Present, and Future of U.S. Nonprofit Arts." *Studies in Art Education* 49, no. 4 (Summer, 2008): 1. Accessed March 30, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/25475871?sid=21106316460153&uid=4&id=3739256&uid=3739776&uid=2>.

This article is crucial to the understanding of the status of Nonprofit Arts organizations, of which MPP is one, and also to seeing how those organizations fit within a larger political and economic framework in the United States, as well as their future direction.

Mackay, Constance d'Arcy. "Why Not a Little Community Theater for Your Town?" *The Art World* 3, no. 6 (March, 1918): 526-28. Accessed March 30, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25588402.pdf?acceptTC=true>.

This journal article is an excellent embodiment of the sort of civic spirit and grassroots activism that lay at the heart of MPP's founding and is a good basis for how to go about creating such an enterprise. Notwithstanding the date, this piece is integral in understanding the spirit of MPP's mission and that of Hazel Robinson herself.

Moehlmann, John. "North Carolina Shakespeare Festival." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (Spring, 1979): 200-2. Accessed March 31, 2015. <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/pdf/2869304.pdf?acceptTC=true>.

This journal article is a depiction of the first two seasons of the North Carolina Shakespeare Festival, which, despite being founded several years after MPP, was the largest Shakespeare company in the state and which offers a good means of comparison to the Asheville-based company.

The Montford Park Players. "History." The Montford Park Players. Accessed March 18, 2015. <http://www.montfordparkplayers.org/about/history/>.

This webpage, taken from the Montford Park Players' website, is a good general summary of MPP's history. It is useful in particular because it provides an internal perspective of how the company developed into what it is today.

Montford Neighborhood. "Historic Montford." Montford Neighborhood. 2015. Accessed October 30, 2015. http://montford.org/?page_id=57.

This webpage provides some contextual information on the historical narrative of the Montford neighborhood, with regard to its creation and the people who live there, as well as a limited timeline of events.

New York City Department of Parks & Recreation. "Theater in Parks." : NYC Parks. Accessed March 18, 2015. <http://www.nycgovparks.org/about/history/theater>.

This article provides a useful and insightful history of the use of New York City's parks for producing theatrical works, ranging from puppet shows to Shakespearean tragedies. This includes more parks than just Central Park, and is useful in understanding the role of outdoor drama in New York City's cultural atmosphere.

Schiff, Bennett, and M.K. "Arts in Parks and Recreation Settings." *Studies in Art Education*. 16, no. 2 (1975): 1. Accessed March 31, 2015. <http://0-www.jstor.org.wncln.wncln.org/stable/pdf/1319923.pdf>.

This article, written only two years after MPP was founded, gives an insight into the role that Parks and Recreation departments play on a local level in supporting the arts and will be tremendously useful in applying to the understanding of MPP's relationship with the City of Asheville and their Parks and Recreation Department.

Smith, Olivia. "Free Shakespeare in the Park Comes with a Price." *NY Daily News*. August 21, 2009. Accessed March 18, 2015. <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music-arts/success-free-shakespeare-park-price-audiences-worth-wait-article-1.395430>.

This article from the New York Daily News offers a look into the legacy of Shakespeare in the Park programs following their widespread development in the 1960s and '70s, and provides a sample of what one should expect upon attending such a performance in the present day.

Southern, Michael T., ed. *Historic Montford: Asheville, North Carolina*. [Asheville?]: The Preservation Society of Asheville & Buncombe County, 1985.

This eclectic book examining historic architecture in the Montford neighborhood provides useful historical context as to how the neighborhood was formed as well as its population.

Appendix 1



Appendix 2

