



INTERVIEW:

“COME ON OUT AND TRY IT!”

Festival Dramaturg Kee-Yoon Nahm (KYN) has a conversation with author Nancy Steele Brokaw (NSB), who is writing the Green Show (*Shakespeare Boot Camp*) and Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) play (*Who Stole Cleopatra?*) for the 2019 season. This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for length and clarity.

KYN: How long have you been involved with the Illinois Shakespeare Festival (ISF)?

NSB: I wrote my first Theatre for Young Audiences show four or five years ago, when [Former Artistic Director] Kevin Rich asked me to write for ISF. It is a fun project, something I do in the summer when I am not as busy. I have a passion for bringing the arts to kids, which is why I also write kids' operas. I want all kids to be able to hear classical music. It is especially a passion for me that kids be exposed to Shakespeare in a way that excites them and engages their curiosity.

KYN: To me, it almost feels like translation. You are taking the classics, such as Shakespeare, and translating them into slightly different language and making some adjustments to make it more accessible.

APRIL 2019

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NSB: Right. I always say that the kids get to hear Shakespeare's actual words, but not too many. I've seen many cut versions of Shakespeare presented to kids, and if they do not understand the language, their curiosity is not whetted. That is the opposite of what I want.

KYN: Could you talk about your writing process? Let's use the plays that you wrote for this year as examples: the Green Show (*Shakespeare Boot Camp*) and the TYA play (*Who Stole Cleopatra?*). How do you go about putting together ideas?

NSB: It is weird. I think there is a person living in the basement of my mind that hollers up, "Write this, write that." Last summer [ISF alumna] Lori Adams, [ISF Artistic Director] John Stark, and I did a big Fourth of July community show for a massive audience here in Bloomington-Normal. As we were handing out flyers for ISF, person after person said, "Shakespeare? Ugh. I had to read *Romeo and Juliet* in high school. I hated it. I would never go." That "Shakespeare? I hate it." mentality just stuck in my head. I thought it would be fun to tackle it head on. For a while, I had as a working title, "Shakespeare, You'll Like It." That morphed into *Shakespeare Boot Camp*, and the camp motto became "Shakespeare, You'll Like It." Then I brought in two characters who each hate Shakespeare for various reasons.

KYN: I find that there are even students who major in theatre who want to stay away from Shakespeare, even though they love everything else about the theatre. Somehow Shakespeare feels inaccessible or in some cases a little pretentious to them.

NSB: Exactly. I think it probably goes back to their first experience. That is why I feel a great sense of responsibility for our young audiences' first exposure to be fun and engaging and positive.

KYN: Do you usually respond to the plays in the season? I did see that you make references to *As You Like It* and *Julius Caesar* in both plays this year.

NSB: Yes, I like to put hooks in there because we are all about building audiences. Ideally, the Green Show and TYA show can whet people's appetites enough that they will come see the main productions. That is one of my goals.

KYN: That is a great way to put it. You are giving them a little taste.



Nancy Steele Brokaw
(author)

NSB: Yes, I am saying, “Look, this might be fun. You have never tried it, but you might like it.”

KYN: In *Shakespeare Boot Camp*, there is a character who is interested in environmental issues and finds a connection to Shakespeare there. People talk in general about Shakespeare’s plays being so relevant today. What about Shakespeare speaks to you the most?

NSB: Shakespeare speaks to me on so many different levels. One thing that I connect to is the environmental message that you can see in so many places in Shakespeare. I wanted to play with that this year. Our daughter directs Shakespeare at Yosemite National Park on Earth Day. This is her third year there. I have seen how powerful Shakespeare can be in a national park setting. We have a miniature version of that at the Illinois Shakespeare Festival—the beautiful outdoor theatre at Ewing Manor. It is another chance to say to the audience, “Hey, look around. This is our planet.”

KYN: And Shakespeare treats these natural settings as somehow magical. There is something appealing about these locations that connects nicely to why we should be concerned about the environment.

NSB: Right. I think that is such a plus at the Illinois Shakespeare Festival. Where else can you go to such a beautiful place and be under the stars and see a play?

KYN: I would like to shift gears and talk about *Who Stole Cleopatra*? I love that Shakespeare himself is the protagonist of this play. But he also needs help from the audience to stay on track. Can you talk about the inspiration and writing process for the TYA play?

NSB: There are a lot of things underneath what I am trying to do. First of all, you have kids as young as preschoolers and their parents and grandparents at the show. I am writing for all ages, adults included. Outside, the lawn mowers are running and the garbage trucks roll by. The show has to keep moving, especially since attention spans are shorter in the summer. I wanted a plot with a lot of action. I love mystery stories, so I decided to have Shakespeare search for his lost manuscript. Along the way, he meets all these characters who give him inspiration for new plays. He meets Romeo and Juliet, Orlando and Rosalind, Puck, Prince Hal and Falstaff, and Prospero. I wanted to show that these ideas did not just come naturally to Shakespeare the super-successful playwright. He

worked hard. He had deadlines to meet and things did not always go his way. I wanted to show the value of perseverance, or, as I say in the play: “Be strong and carry on.”

KYN: I especially loved the way that you demystify the writer’s process in *Who Stole Cleopatra?*, showing younger audiences that artists always respond to the world around them. I also thought it was great that you plant the idea that you too can become an author in the children’s minds.

NSB: I think a lot about how kids engage with the world. I go to a restaurant and they are all looking at their screens. I think they are missing so much by not looking at the world around them. I wanted to stick that in there—that writers are people who look around at the world.

KYN: One last question: do you have any words of wisdom for parents who want to get their children interested in Shakespeare?

NSB: Live theatre has become sort of exotic to kids now. It is the opposite of what they see on their screens. And I think that the Illinois Shakespeare Festival is the perfect gateway into the whole world of theatre. The TYA show is a great place to start because you are outside. If you are feeling wiggly, you can get up and walk around. It is not that long, it is informal, and there is an immediate sense of community with other kids. I would just say, “Come on out and try it!” Also, you do not have to bring a kid to come. Adults like the shows, too!