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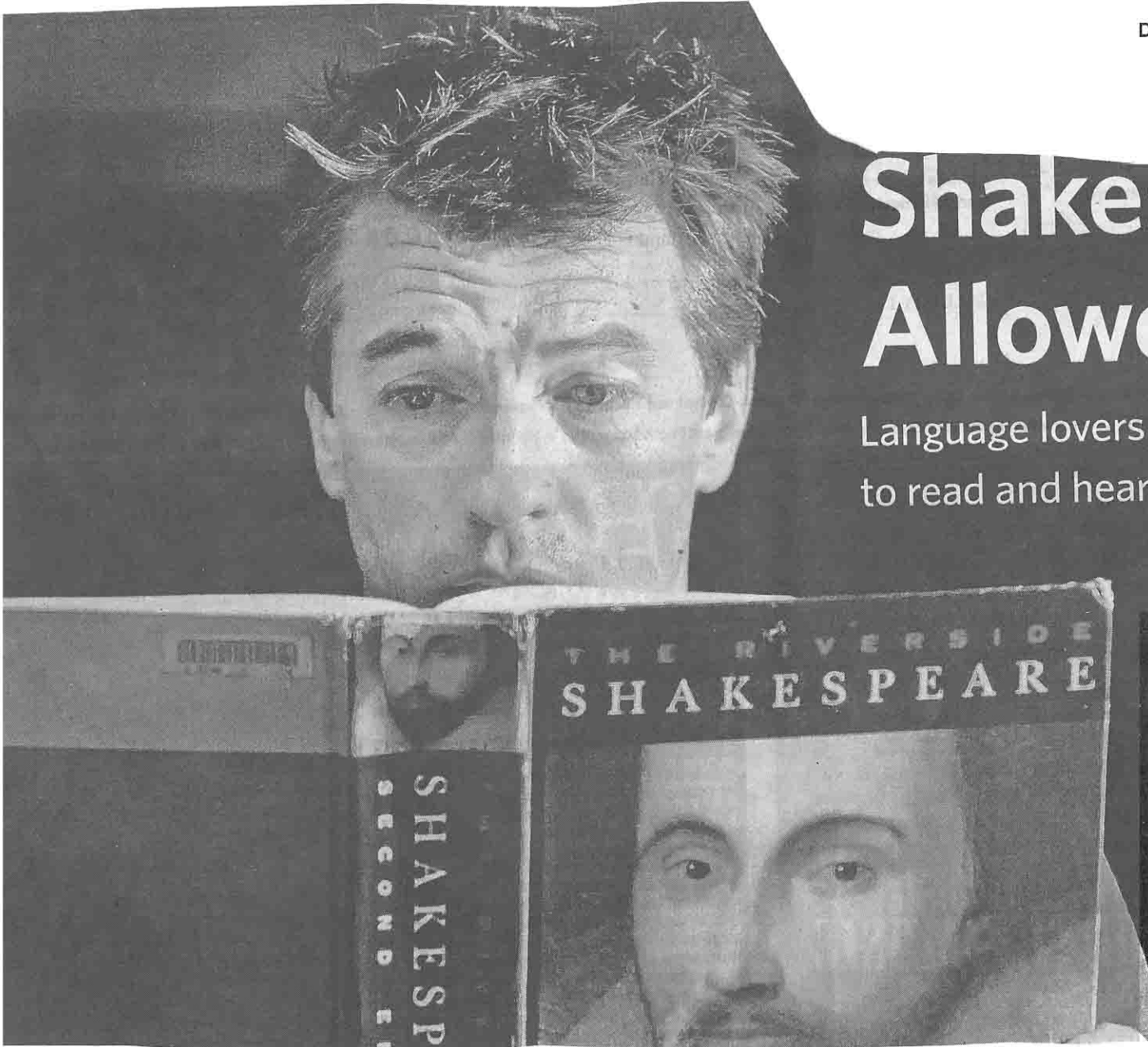
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Shakespeare Allowed!

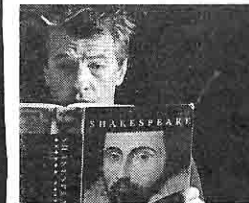
Language lovers gather at library to read and hear all of Bard's plays

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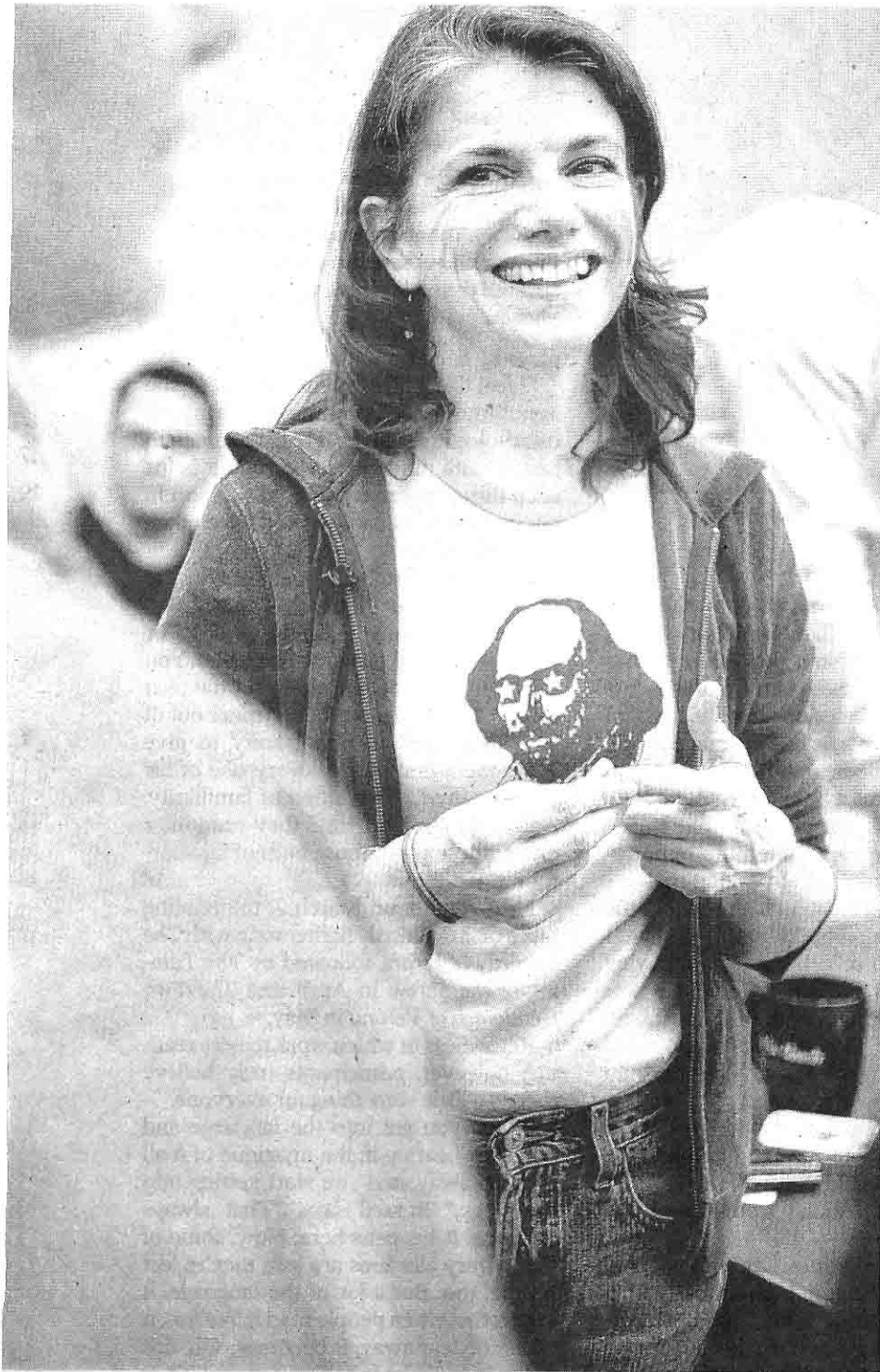
Shakespeare out loud



Ross Bolen reads *Titus Andronicus* at the downtown public library. COVER

PHOTO BY DIPTI VAIDYA / THE TENNESSEAN

A dream of Nashville Shakespeare Festival Artistic Director Denice Hicks comes true every month as language lovers gather at the downtown Nashville Public Library to read one of William Shakespeare's plays.3-4



Denice Hicks, artistic director of Nashville Shakespeare Festival, enjoys a reading of *Titus Andronicus* at the downtown public library. DIPTI VAIDYA / THE TENNESSEAN

Shakespeare reading circle brings Bard down to earth

By Fiona Soltes
FOR THE TENNESSEAN

No costumes. No props. Not even a stage.

Just words.

"It really is just about the words," says Denice Hicks, addressing the crowd of 20-plus folks gathered on a recent Saturday afternoon to read through William Shakespeare's brutal tragedy *Titus Andronicus*. "It's just to read these darned plays."

Twelve of the people, varying in age, gender, accent and dramatic emphasis, volunteer to sit in the inner "reading circle," speaking aloud speech after speech in round-robin fashion, rather than taking on specific roles. More people line the walls. They trip sometimes over tongue-twisting names like "Saturninus" and "Bassianus" and such terms as "hath," "wert" and "youngling," pausing occasionally for affirmation or clarity.

"That's OK," encourages Hicks, artistic director of Nashville Shakespeare Festival. "It's not about right or wrong. It's about reading in your own voice, about getting to hear these words come to life once again."

Once a month, on the first Saturday, lovers of language descend on a room of the downtown Nashville Public Library,

working through each of Shakespeare's plays in the order in which they were written. Everyone is welcome, no reservations required. The effort is called "Shakespeare Allowed!," and it's been a personal dream of Hicks' for as long as she can remember.

"This is the richest language that is available to us," she says. "I really believe that." And because so many of Shakespeare's plays are linked, she says, a familiarity with each one can help increase comprehension of them all.

A handful of people, including 16-year-old Stephanie Burnette, have attended the readings since the group's inception back in October. If all goes as planned, it will take several years to get through the entire canon. They pick up library copies of the works on a table outside the room, in some cases sharing with their neighbors and in others, just listening without a text.

"Hearing it out loud does help you understand it a lot better," says Burnette, a junior at Heritage Christian Academy who lives in Old Hickory. "And there are a lot of people here to talk to if you still don't get it. Reading Shakespeare by yourself is so much harder."

Burnette, a self-proclaimed "Shakespeare enthusiast" who also reads the Bard's works over the phone with an out-

If you go

What: The Nashville Shakespeare Festival presents *Shakespeare Allowed!*

When: 1 p.m. the first Saturday of each month. The readings last no more than three hours, and include a 15-minute break between the third and fourth acts. Those attending can join the reading circle either as a reader or a listener.

Where: Nashville Public Library main branch, 615 Church St.

Tickets: Admission is free and open to the public

Contact: www.nashvilleshakes.org/shakespeareallowed.htm

Other scheduled programs include:

The Comedy of Errors, March 7

The Taming of the Shrew, April 4

The Two Gentlemen of Verona, May 2

For further dates, visit: www.nashvilleshakes.org/shakespeareallowed.htm



Sarah and Brett Hudson read *Titus Andronicus* at the downtown public library. PHOTOS BY DIPTI

VAIDYA/THE TENNESSEAN

of-town friend, attends the gatherings with her mother, Anita Reed.

"She got into it because I got into it," Burnette says, taking a seat in the readers circle for the second half of the event.

Overall, the atmosphere is casual, peaceful and calm, without stuffiness or affectation. Here and there, members of the group chuckle in amazement at the play's violent acts, body count and rich descriptive phrasings such as "enter a messenger with two heads and a hand."

Brian Webb Russell, a professional actor who has taken part in close to 40 Shakespeare productions, says he can see how *Titus*, with all its "huge, bloody melodrama," would appeal especially to the coarse audience of the writer's time. But he's enjoying the opportunity, he says, to see the progression of Shakespeare's artistry by reading through the canon in order.

"There are some plays in the canon that you're just never going to get around to," he says. "It's not just that you're neglecting them, it's that they're just not likely to be done as staged plays. Now, when you read some of the first *Henrys* as we did (*Henry VI*, Parts I-III), you can see with some of the writing that he was a very young writer, a new writer, just

learning his craft. And then, by the time you get to a piece like *Hamlet* or *Othello*, you start to understand how this guy has grown. To read these early works is just fascinating. . . . Later on, death is handled a little bit more gently. The stage is still littered (with bodies) in *Hamlet*, but with this one it seems a little more palpable."

James Lewis, on his first visit to the group, says he appreciated the opportunity to "play catch-up" by taking part.

"I didn't read much in high school," the aspiring actor says. "I just feel like I missed out on something by not paying attention to it in high school." He was glad the gathering was as casual as it was, he says, and that people pronounced words in different ways, allowing him freedom to step out, as well.

Lewis had seen a movie version of *Titus*, he says, "but I wanted to read it so, hopefully, I would pick up things from the book that I didn't from the movie. And I did."

Hicks, whose appreciation for Shakespeare began back in high school with a teacher who "made it fun," has been performing in and directing his works on stage since the late 1970s. But even she, by her own admission, is challenged when she tries to read one of Shakespeare's



Dylan McCann uses her iPod to read *Titus Andronicus* at the downtown public library. The phone has a free application that allows users to read Shakespeare's complete plays on their phones.

plays by herself.

"I feel like it takes so much longer," she says. "And really, I get tired of hearing my own voice in my head. It helps so much to hear it with different voices, and it helps keep the energy of the play going, too. On my own, this probably would have taken me three days."

This pass through, Hicks says, she picked up "about 75 percent. But Shakespeare is like any really great song or piece of classical music or fine ballet. You might enjoy it the first time, but the next time you're going to get even more out of it. This is just an opportunity to give everyone a first pass at every one of his plays, to give a foundation of familiarity. And then, the next time they encounter one of these plays, those bells of familiarity will ring."

Next month, on March 7, the reading takes on a decidedly lighter tone with *The Comedy of Errors*, followed by *The Taming of the Shrew* in April and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in May.

Regardless of which work they're reading, however, participants truly believe there's a little something for everyone.

"Once you get into the language and you start hearing it, the mystique of it all is taken away, and you start getting into the story," Russell says. "That always happens. It happens here. Now, some of the literary allusions are lost; they're lost on me, too. But a lot of the language, it seems that when people read it like this, it takes the fear away. It becomes, 'Oh, this really is just words telling a story.' They start to realize there really is a beginning, middle, and end."