Letter From the Director
Professor Michelle M. Dowd

It has now been a year since I became Director of the Hudson Strode Program in Renaissance Studies at The University of Alabama, and what an exciting year it has been! During the 2016-2017 academic year, our program hosted a wide range of scholarly and community events, continuing its longstanding mission to “bring the Globe to Alabama.”

One of the highlights of the year was the February visit of the highly acclaimed American Shakespeare Center’s touring company. Through events such as this one, the Strode Program seeks to provide opportunities for students, faculty, and community members from around the West Alabama region to share and develop their mutual interests in Shakespeare and his world.

I invite you to read more about the ASC tour and other Strode-sponsored events in the pages that follow (and look out for a second newsletter installment, which will be published in winter 2018!).

In the meantime, please follow us on social media to keep up with all the latest Strode Program events!

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The American Shakespeare Center in Tuscaloosa
By D. Geoffrey Emerson

In February of 2017, The Hudson Strode Program invited the American Shakespeare Center (ASC) to Tuscaloosa to perform Two Gentlemen of Verona and Romeo and Juliet at the historic Bama Theatre in Tuscaloosa. Both performances were free and open to the public, drawing over six hundred people from the surrounding community over two nights. In addition, the acting company conducted two workshops for the graduate students of the program: one on embedded stage directions, and the other on textual variants of Romeo and Juliet. Emotions ran highest, however, when a dog from a local shelter, Brittany, took the stage to play Crab in Two Gentlemen.

The ASC attempts to recreate an original Shakespearean performance by inviting some of the audience to sit on-stage and keeping the house lights up during the entire play—according to them they “do it with the lights on”. Both of these performance decisions make for a unique theatre experience. The audience members on stage participate in aspects of the performance, and visible scene changes means that the audience never loses sight of the theatrics on stage. While Brittany’s Crab stole most of the show in Two Gents, Valentine and Proteus emphasized their electric friendship which elevated Proteus’s problematic remorse in the final scene of the play. Romeo and Juliet, on the other hand, maintained the balance between fun and heartbeat. Erin Hildebrand, a Strode student, said that the production “embraced Elizabethan charm and spoke with a playful, wistful voice that rapidly mutates into the tragedy that audiences are so familiar with.”

One of the most rewarding aspects of bringing the ASC to...
Tuscaloosa was casting Brittany as Crab. At the urging of the ASC, The Hudson Strode Program partnered with Betty Freeman at the Humane Society of West Alabama (HSWA) to identify a canine that could take the stage. I went out to Hot Diggity Doggy Care, where Brittany is fostered, to snap some pictures of the basset-retriever mix to complete the poster. The night of the show, the HSWA set up a table in the lobby of the theatre to talk about their organization with all those who enjoyed Brittany’s performance as Crab.

The Hudson Strode Program would like to thank our partners, the ASC, the HSWA, the Bama Theatre, and the community of Tuscaloosa—it was a pleasure to bring Shakespeare to West-central Alabama.

**Strode Lecture Series**

By M. K. Foster

March 22, 2017: Strode Shakespeare Lecture - William Engel (Sewanee) - "Mnemonic Culture in Early Modern England"

October 10, 2016: Strode Shakespeare Lecture - Miles Parks Grier (Queens College, CUNY) - "Scenes from the Transatlantic Career of Blackened Character"

September 28, 2016: Strode Shakespeare Lecture - Lara Dodds (Mississippi State) - "'Affected and Disaffected Alike': Women and Print 1623-1660"

As part of its commitment to actively engaging critical discourse beyond UA’s campus, the Hudson Strode Program in Renaissance Studies hosts a series of guest lectures from visiting scholars over the course of the academic year. In the 2016-2017 year, Strode students and faculty welcomed to campus Professor Lara Dodds from Mississippi State, Professor Miles Parks Grier from Queens College CUNY, and Professor William Engel from Sewanee.

Our first fall semester guest, Professor Dodds, whose interests include Margaret Cavendish and science fiction, guided us through her project "'Affected and Disaffected Alike': Women and Print 1623-1660," and explored with us questions connecting early modern women writers and print culture in the seventeenth century. Later in the fall semester, Professor Grier, whose specialties include transatlantic literary studies of race, introduced...
his fascinating progress with "Scenes from the Transatlantic Career of Blackened Character" as part of his forthcoming monograph following adaptations and representations of Othello; Professor Grier engaged our questions connecting contemporary media histories of race and early modern texts.

In the spring, Professor Engel, whose work centers around early modern memory arts, enthusiastically shared with us his enriching work on "Mnemonic Culture in Early Modern England" and afterward fostered a strong dialogue about the presence of mnemonic devices in religious, educational, and political manuscripts in the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

Each guest lecture season brings greater dimension to the scope of dialogues and research within the Strode community, and with the 2017-2018 year just ahead, the Program looks forward to the engaging insights and conversations to come.

**Strode at the Folger**

By Matt Smith

The Strode community benefits from The University of Alabama’s membership in the Folger consortium. The partnership between the Folger Library in Washington, D.C. and Alabama includes priority consideration in applications, grants-in-aid for travel to the library, and access to Alabama’s Folger liaison, Prof. Daniel Riches. As part of the Folger Shakespeare Library consortium, the Strode community at The University of Alabama recently participated in a variety of programs at the Folger Institute, including multi-disciplinary workshops, colloquia, seminars, and symposia.

The programs at the Folger Institute are designed to stimulate research, create networking opportunities, and foster innovative collaboration. The grants-in-aid, available only to members of the Folger consortium, waives attendance fees and reimburses attendees for travel and lodging expenses. Acceptance to a Folger Institute event also includes reader status, which allows access to the Folger’s rare materials. While at the Folger, attendees will have access to collections that include rare printed books, manuscripts, works of art, and modern scholarship. Because each seminar is typically geared toward a specific topic or methodology, attendees will also meet and work alongside...
students and professors with similar research interests. Jess Hamlet, a current Ph.D. student, attended the “Research Methods and Agendas” course focused on methodological assistance in early modern book description, cultural and technological histories of texts, and bibliographic tools. These skills are especially relevant given the prominence of archival work in textual studies. The programs that the Folger Institute offers typically spotlight and develop recent trends in critical, textual, and historical scholarship. Recent members of the Strode community have participated in year-long dissertation workshops, semester-long archival research, and a broad range of weekend symposia.

Within the past year, the Strode Program has sponsored five students and instructors to attend seminars and symposia at the Folger. Former Strode Ph.D. and current Instructor at Alabama, Nicholas Helms, attended the “Early Modern Theatre and Conversion” symposium, which examined how the crisis of conversion opened up a space for dramatists to play with key questions of the time. Helms notes that “I have found Folger symposia to be invigorating, community-building events that always leave me refreshed and eager to dive back into my own research.” Laura deFurio participated in the “Cavendish and Hutchinson” seminar, which investigated the ways both authors shaped early modern poetics and “politically active” humanism. Geoffrey Emerson and Matt Smith attended “The Embodied Senses” symposium, which considered ways to reconstruct how early modern people lived, felt, and sensed their way through life. According to Smith, “the Folger symposium is not only an enriching academic and intellectual experience, but it is also an incredible opportunity to meet and work with the scholars who have shaped your field.” Emerson says that “the format of Folger Institute symposia, which features abbreviated presentations combined with extended discussions” made for “the most fruitful academic experiences I have had.”

The Folger Library programs deepen and invigorate scholarly horizons. These programs foster intellectual creativity and develop rigorous methodological practice, and the guidance from leading scholars in the field cultivates scholarly growth. The typical weekend symposium is four sessions per day, with each session comprising two 20 minute presentations, followed by an hour of group discussion. The discussions respond to, interrogate, and build upon the previous two presentations. This schedule encourages participation from graduate students, and participation from more seasoned scholars from multiple disciplines provides productive intersections between a student’s research scope and other intersecting avenues. The year-long programs typically meet eight weekends throughout the year, and the semester-long programs meet three weekends throughout the semester. Both programs offer grants-in-aid that pay for the attendees’ travel and lodging expenses. These programs gather communities and generate fresh research agendas for early modern humanities. The programs offer new insights into any research interest, develop methodological rigor, and introduce graduate students to the scholars in their field. The Folger experience stimulates the intellect and develops research methods, but it also energizes scholars by showing them the ways early modern literature is new and exciting.
Improbable Fictions
By Nic Helms

What’s an Improbable Fiction? Ask Fabian of Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night: “If this were play’d upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction” (3.4.69). That’s what theatre is: an improbability that comes to life on stage. Embrace the illusion while it lasts, for it’s gone in an instant. Shakespeare (in the minds of Nic Helms and Alaina Jobe Pangburn, founders of the series in 2010) isn’t just meant to be read: it’s meant to be experienced. Shakespeare’s plays have endured for four centuries because each generation has been willing to reproduce them and reinterpret them in ways that have a contemporary, local resonance. It’s improbable that these old plays can move modern audiences to laughter and to tears, but they do, and that power has nothing to do with high culture or overdone theatre. It is born whenever an actor speaks Shakespeare’s words genuinely and a spectator listens earnestly.

Improbable Fictions is a series of such moments: staged readings of Shakespeare’s plays that aim to make the improbable the actual. With the assistance and support of The University of Alabama’s Hudson Strode Program in Renaissance Studies and Tuscaloosa’s Rude MechaMechanics, we at Improbable Fictions hope to make Shakespeare a living piece of the arts in Tuscaloosa. An improbability? No doubt. But it’s a dream worth working toward. To that end, Improbable Fictions has partnered with various programs to better strive toward our vision and to increase our University and community outreach. These partners include: UA’s Department of Theatre and Dance, UA’s Department of Modern Languages, UA’s Women and Gender Resource Center, and the 2017 Conference on John Milton.

At its core, theatre is about speech. Theatre is the social on display. A lot can cover up that core: elaborate costumes; overly realistic sets; canned acting that blurs the spontaneous interactions between people. An Improbable Fiction strips away these distractions, borrowing from a variety of minimalist movements to deliver “the thing itself.” With few exceptions, every prop and costume you see onstage comes from an actor’s closet. From Shakespeare’s Globe, we borrow the bare Elizabethan stage: the only set is the one you provide with your imagination. And from Brecht, we borrow alienation: our actors don’t memorize lines—they read, scripts in hand, a constant reminder that the entire show is an improbable fiction, an artifice. We want to lead you to believe, to use your imagination. Theatre, unlike the other arts, requires an active spectator.

Improbable Fictions began as a Shakespearean staged reading series, but, as seen in 2016-2017, it has expanded in recent years to include three distinct types of programing: First, we produce staged readings of classic playwrights such as Shakespeare, Marlowe, Euripides, and Milton (Samson Agonistes, Oct 2017). Improbable Fictions stages both the mainstays of such authors and more obscure works, such as Shakespeare’s King John, which Jacob Crawford cut and directed for the series in Nov 2016. Second, Improbable Fictions presents curated scenes paired with open discussion, such as “Bechdellian Shakespeare,” a collection of Shakespearean scenes that focused on women’s roles and incorporated a town
hall discussion on gender in Shakespeare’s stories. Another example of this sort of programming is Improbable Fictions’ ongoing collaboration with the Spoken Word Tent at the Kentuck Festival of the Arts, an annual folk arts festival held in local Northport. For the Festival, Improbable Fictions has presented classic and contemporary American writing, including selections from Southern writers and the personal letters of novelist Augusta Evans. Finally, Improbable Fictions organizes workshops and staged readings of new, Shakespeare-adjacent plays, such as Diamond Ford’s *Restoring Summer* and Meredith Noseworthy’s *What Vicious Loves* (spring 2017).

For more information about Improbable Fictions and for updates on the coming 2017-18 season, visit improbablefictions.org.

**Members of the Strode Community**

**Tenure-Track Faculty**
- David Ainsworth (PhD, University of Wisconsin-Madison)
- Alex Cook (PhD, University of California, Santa Barbara)
- Michelle M. Dowd (PhD, Columbia University)
- Tricia McElroy (PhD, University of Oxford)
- Emma Wilson (PhD, University of St. Andrews)
- Brad Tuggle (PhD, University of Virginia)

**Associated Full-time Faculty**
- Emily Fine (PhD, Brandies University)
- Nic Helms (PhD, The University of Alabama)
- Chris Koester (PhD, Indiana University)
- Natalie Loper (PhD, The University of Alabama)
- Russ McConnell (PhD, University of Western Ontario)
- Paul Phelps (PhD, University of Oxford)
- Cordelia Ross (PhD, University of California, Davis)
- Tyler Sasser (PhD, University of Southern Mississippi)
- Austin Whitver (PhD, The University of Alabama)

**Current MA Students**
- Charles Bell
- Erin Hildebrand
- Emma Leisentritt
- Theodore Nollert
- Tera Pate

**Current PhD. Students**
- Laura Defurio
- Geoffrey Emerson
- M. K. Foster
- Jess Hamlet
- Mark Hulse
- Will Ramsey
- Frank Sharpe
- Matt Smith

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