“The Play’s the Thing”

Victoria High School performs Shakespeare during WWI

by Stephanie Ann Warner

Victoria High School’s stage was the scene of stirring Shakespearean tragedies and comedies during World War I. The proceeds of the plays went to patriotic purposes. Many of the cast and crew later enlisted and served overseas. Reviews of the plays in the school’s student periodical, The Camosun, and the local morning paper, The Daily Colonist, bring to life the drama of these popular student productions.

1916 – Julius Caesar and Henry IV, Part 1

“In other years than these the celebration of Shakespeare’s three hundred years would have eclipsed all other events. However because of the war, this recognition will be left largely to the schools and the younger element of the population.”
– The Camosun, February 1916

Antony’s Lament over Caesar’s Body: —Gibson Photo

Antony: “O mighty Caesar! dost thou lie so low? Are all thy conquests, glories, triumphs, spoils, shrunk to this little measure? Fare thee well.

Vic High students in scenes from Julius Caesar, March 1916. Many of the boys in the cast later enlisted. Image courtesy Victoria High School Archives
The tercentenary of Shakespeare’s death occurred in 1916. Vic High students marked the occasion by performing selected scenes from *Julius Caesar* and *Henry IV, Part 1* as their annual matriculation year production. *The Camosun* promised that “The production will be the greatest of its kind ever undertaken by the students of Victoria High School.”

In December 1915, *The Camosun* reported that the upcoming play would be a “fundraiser,” with the proceeds devoted to the Red Cross. The editorial put not-so-subtle pressure on students to “boost” the play:

Next year will be the tercentenary of Shakespeare. The Matriculation Year are anxious to celebrate this, and it has been decided to give parts of two plays of Shakespeare’s. The plays of “Julius Caesar” and “King Henry” were fixed upon, and players were carefully picked to represent the different characters. Judging from the preliminary rehearsals which have taken place, the plays will be very successful indeed. As the proceeds will be devoted almost entirely to the Red Cross it is expected that every “live” High School student will do his or her best to “boost” the play and second the efforts of the Matriculation Year!

From *The Camosun*, December 1915. Image courtesy Victoria High School Archives

The director was Miss Millicent Ward, a former member of the F.R. Benson Shakespearean company in England. *The Camosun* noted that “Since Miss Ward had taken care of coaching the enthusiasm of the players has increased and the results are especially gratifying.” She was assisted in the *Julius Caesar* scenes by Vic High teacher Arthur Yates, formerly a Rhodes Scholar from British Columbia. Yates was “an authority on Shakespeare, Stratford upon Avon, and Shakespearean life.”

The performance took place on 18 March 1916, so it did not interfere with the spring exams. There was a large crowd. Cadets stood guard at the door, and the evening opened with Shakespearean-themed music. The school’s orchestra under teacher Ira Dilworth furnished the music. “Professor Dilworth with flowing locks of sixteenth century style was in true Shakespearean humour last night and imparted this spirit to his orchestra.” A “bevy” of girls performed Shakespeare-inspired dances: “Four pretty and graceful high school nymphs in clinging costumes opened the programme with an exhibition of esthetic Shakespearean dancing” (*The Daily Colonist*, 19 March 1916).

The performances were strong. *The Daily Colonist* noted that the “work of High School students shows much talent.” The April 1916 edition of *The Camosun* said: “There are few comments on the production except to award general praise to all participating in
it.” However, *The Camosun* had particular praise for Strother Foulkes as Mark Antony, who “certainly made the most of his lines. At times in his eulogy of the dead Caesar, he almost brought the audience to the weeping stage.” This must have come as no surprise – Foulkes was a popular school “idol” and a member of the boys’ Beta Delta debating club. *The Camosun* later reported: “As an actor he showed no mean dramatic power, his interpretation of Marc Antony being a revelation.”

![Strother Foulkes. Image courtesy of Victoria High School Archives](image)

*The Camosun* found that “The play was remarkably free from the baldness usually associated with the amateur attempt.” Yet *The Daily Colonist* noticed an unintentionally funny amateur moment: “When great Caesar fell last night on the stage of the Victoria High School, he hit the hardwood floor with such a thump that some good souls in the audience feared he was down and out for good . . . but some misguided attendant behind the curtain raised the curtain just after it had descended on a stirring climax and showed the noble Caesar being resurrected from his bier.”

The event was clearly a success. But *The Camosun* later reported the following scene: “On the Monday following the presentation of *Julius Caesar* this was the expression frequently heard: Teacher: ‘I would like to congratulate those etc etc – but now you must get down to work.’”
These Romans got down to work to complete their studies -- then joined up. Many of the male cast members of *Julius Caesar* appear on the school's Honour Roll of those who participated in World War I.

- Valdemar Bendrodt (Julius Caesar) enlisted with the Royal Flying Corps in 1917
- Torquil Burns (Cinna) enlisted with the Divisional Ammunition Column in 1917
- Harry Cross (Cassius) enlisted with the artillery in 1916
- Strother Foulkes (Mark Antony) enlisted with the Canadian Army Service Corps in 1917
- Heber Jones (servant of Caesar) enlisted with the 196th Overseas Canadian Universities Battalion in April 1916
- William McKinnon (Popilius Lena) joined the Royal Flying Corps in 1917
- Douglas Scott (Brutus) is on the school Honour Roll but information cannot be found about his war service
- Arthur Yates (their teacher and Shakespearean coach) enlisted with the 196th Overseas Canadian Universities Battalion in March 1917.
The Matric Play was just one of Harry Cross’s many extracurricular activities. He enlisted in the fall of 1916. Image courtesy Victoria High School Archives

**1917 – The Merchant of Venice**

On 10 February 1917, the 1917 matriculation class performed *The Merchant of Venice*. A news item in *The Daily Colonist* (“H.S. Pupils to give Merchant of Venice”) noted that there was a “very healthy rivalry between members of the cast to emulate, if not surpass, the work of the 1916 matriculation class plays.”

All tickets to the show were available for one price of 50 cents. The amount may have been steep for a school production, but again the purpose of the show was fundraising – to “obtain money for an honour roll commemorating those students and old boys who have volunteered for service.” The January editorial in *The Camosun* encouraged students to support the show, since “the cause is indeed worthy of the support of every student.”

This year the director was Miss Helen Badgley, a graduate of the Ontario Ladies’ College (a girls’ school in Whitby, Ontario) and also of the Emerson College of Oratory, Boston, Massachusetts. The stage manager was last year’s Julius Caesar, Valdemar Bendrodt. Shylock was played by the later-renowned journalist and editor Bruce Hutchison.

The actors performed to “a full hall” (*The Camosun*) but reviews of the performance were mixed. Said *The Camosun*: “Certainly their efforts had not been in vain if the applause by the delighted audience was anything to go by.” A review in *The Daily Colonist* found that “even with the lack of realism and passion in the love and other emotional scenes, parents and relatives who crowded the auditorium had no reason other than to be proud of the ability shown by the young actors.”

*The Camosun* noted that the “acting of Bruce Hutchison in the part of Shylock showed an understanding and appreciation of the part that cannot be underestimated. He possessed in full measure the qualities essential to the interpretation of the role.”
Shylock with his daughter Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*. Photo from *The Camosun*, February 1917, courtesy Victoria High School Archives

*The Daily Colonist* was more reserved but said that Bruce Hutchison gave a consistently strong performance as Shylock and Claude Campbell never lacked in confidence as Gratiano. However, the paper noted that “the enunciation of some of the male characters made it difficult for the audience to follow them.”

Both *The Daily Colonist* and *The Camosun* liked the costumes: “The costumes were elaborate” (*The Daily Colonist*) “But the costumes! Ah the costumes! There indeed was full scope given . . . the Duke in a costume which was a cross between a Chinese mandarin and a Santa Claus; Gratiano in a conglomeration of red and green, Salarino in heavenly blue tights — they at least were happy” (*The Camosun*).
Once again, there were future soldiers in the cast:

- Claude Campbell (Gratiano) enlisted with the Fort Garry Horse in 1918 after first being turned down by the Royal Flying Corps due to poor eyesight
- Arthur M. Gee (Bassanio) joined the Canadian Army Dental Corps in spring 1917 but transferred to the Royal Flying Corps in early 1918
- Harold Pearce (Salanio) enlisted with the artillery in spring 1917.
1918 – As You Like It

The 1918 matriculation class performed As You Like It on February 15 and 16, 1918. Helen Badgley was once again the director. Bruce Hutchison (last year’s Shylock) was behind the scenes, working as stage manager.

A review of the cast members’ names does not show any students who served overseas. This is not surprising: the boys would not have been eligible for conscription, which began at age 20, and the war was over by the end of the year. Yet our young high school students would have still been touched by the war.

Once again, As You Like It was a patriotic fundraiser, with proceeds benefiting The Camosun, the school’s Honour Roll, and the Victoria High School Patriotic Aid Organization which sent comfort parcels to former classmates serving overseas.
The play was an “unquestionable success.” A review in *The Daily Colonist* on 16 February (“High School Students Please Big Audience”) was complimentary: “An almost perfect acquaintance of their lines characterized the work of the actors, this together with their picturesque costuming and the artistic scenic effects attained went far in contributing to the success of the entertainment.”

As *You Like It* included 23 fully costumed characters. Unfortunately, reported *The Camosun*, the “picturesque” costumes arrived too late for photos to be taken for publication. But we can imagine what they were like from this *Camosun* commentary: “If the merit of the play were to be measured by the brilliant hue of the costumes then
Shakespeare himself would have paid for the privilege of standing room. Gay they may have been — but comfortable? ... If you are desirous of a graphic but unexaggerated description — well ask the man who wore one!"

On the evening before the Saturday performance, the cast and crew were entertained to a “delightful supper” in the school lunchroom. Speeches were made by the director, the stage manager and the school principal. Yet, it seems not all the cast was satisfied — this wry comment appeared in *The Camosun*: “The way in which the banished lords banished their frugal fare [on stage] on Saturday night did not speak well for the supper they enjoyed just previous to the play."

1918 saw the last of the wartime Shakespeare productions. The following year, the war was over, and the Matriculation Play was replaced with a Matriculation Concert that included a one-act play. Shakespeare retreated to the classroom until 1922, when Ira Dilworth began a new series of Shakespeare productions at Vic High. Most of the soldiers from the 1916 and 1917 student productions (and their teacher Arthur Yates) survived the war. But Harry Cross (Cassius in 1916’s *Julius Caesar*) was gassed at Passchendaele in 1917 and died of the effects in 1922. Harold Pearce (Salanio in 1917’s *Merchant of Venice*) was killed in action just days before the Armistice.

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Stephanie Ann Warner has an interest in early 1900s Victoria amateur dramatics. She first heard about the Victoria High School Matriculation Plays while researching alumni who had served with her grandfather in the Canadian Artillery. Thank you to Deb Blackie at the Archives for her enthusiasm in locating photographs and playbills.