



Josh Aaron McCabe, Photos by Enrico Espada

# JOSH OF ALL TRADES

BY JASON VELAZQUEZ

**S**hakespeare & Company has always operated both its administrative and artistic areas with artist-managers, partly due to the constraints of a not-for-profit's budget, but also partly, even largely, as a way of ensuring the Company manages itself in accordance with its mission statement: "to perform as the Elizabethans did." William Shakespeare and his men were investors, builders, carpenters, writers, etc., in addition to being frequently-arrested actors. If the actors (players) didn't build it, write it, and market it, they couldn't very well act it. So they were passionate about their work inasmuch as it was their livelihood. They could succeed all they wanted to on stage, but if they couldn't support it, of course, their playing was all for naught. To this end, Shakespeare's men, including Richard Burbage, and other leading players since, including Laurence Olivier, and Kenneth Branagh, who both owned and ran their theatre companies, were responsible. They were not pawns in the larger entertainment scheme that actors today are treated as. The artists had a stake in the company, a stake in their and their partners' work, and they personally shared the success and the failure. They were taking responsibility for their decisions, and that's what Shakespeare & Company does. The artists are teachers, administrators, designers, builders, and Board members. They know the Company intimately and have a passion for its work and have a stake in its future prosperity. And when they fail, they don't ask, "Why didn't THEY do such-and-such?" They ask, "What can WE do better?"



Being an artist-manager is specialized and demanding. It is a discipline of time-management, focus, energy, resolve, and grace under daily, immediate, and stressful pressure. On the other side of the discipline is the willingness to replace the artist's drive for "self" with "us" in the theatre community and in the Berkshire community. This also transfers beautifully onto stage. Shakespeare & Company is a vital part of the community; we are all good neighbors and we are all as comfortable digging a ditch, cleaning a basement, marketing the season, creating our budgets. As we are on stage or designing a set or adapting a novel by Edith Wharton or a play by Molière. The artist-manager model, while not for the faint of heart, is a large part of what is responsible for keeping Shakespeare & Company alive through good and bad times because the creative impulse is always at the heart of our artistic and managerial decisions. We encourage articulation, multiple leadership, new ideas, and stepping out into the darkness knowing full well we will probably make a mistake or two. This is what a brave actor does, and it is this courage from passionate, disciplined artist-managers that has allowed Shakespeare & Company to achieve something fewer than 10% of all start-up companies achieve: a life of 35 plus years with at least 35 plus more to go.

### JOSH OF ALL TRADES

Long has it been proclaimed, "No one has just one job at Shakespeare & Company!" Now, whether the sentiment is meant to reflect a strong *esprit de corps* or a cautionary note to job seekers depends on your point of view, but one Company man who could shed some light on the issue is a certain Josh Aaron McCabe, an adept Artist Manager and our own Josh of All Trades.

Originally cast by Tony Simotes in 2006 for a role in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, McCabe quickly found a place in the Education Department—he has directed in six *Fall Festival of Shakespeare* programs since then. He is currently leading this year's *Shakespeare in the Courts* program running in Pittsfield and North Adams, a program he has directed in for several years as well. McCabe has also directed for the *Shakespeare & Young Company* and *Riotous Youth* programs. He's directed residency programs for elementary and middle schools, both near and far. He played the title role in *Macbeth* in the Company's Touring production of that show in 2007 and spent two years performing in *Shakespeare and the Language that Shaped a World*. This blend of performance and work with youth is a strangely logical one for a guy who almost abandoned his acting career in favor of a more logical pursuit.

"As a kid I wanted to be an actor," says McCabe, "but after high school I decided to be 'practical' and major in Education. During my first year of Undergrad I took an acting class for non-majors, and the instructor, Bob Winters, sat me down after class one day and said, 'What in the hell are you doing? You're an actor. You pretend as though you have a choice, but it's who you are.'

So McCabe switched tracks and, with the help of his incredibly supportive parents, Dan and Mary Lou, followed his dream, and moved to New York City for seven years, before eventually earning his Masters of Fine Arts degree in Acting from the University of Wisconsin—Madison. His professor, Tony Simotes, invited him to S&Co. to act in the summer season. McCabe will always be grateful to him for that opportunity. "It changed my life," he says.

Somehow, amidst all this work in Education, he managed to squeeze in 12 more performances on stage including box office hits such as *The 39 Steps*, *Parasite Drag*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Richard III*, *As You Like It*, *War of the Worlds*, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, *The Real Inspector Hound* and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*.

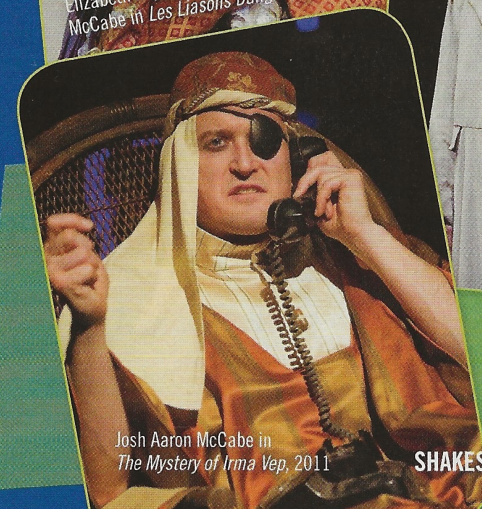
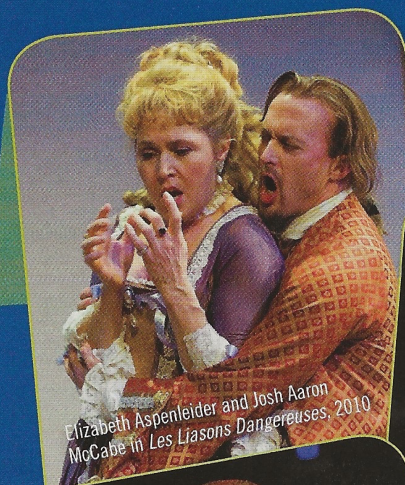
### So how does he do it?

"How do I sustain it?" McCabe chuckles. "It gets easier as I get into shape with each show! Ha ha! The first time we did *Hound of the Baskervilles* I lost 14lbs during the run. During *The 39 Steps* I lost 10lbs. It may sound cliché, but I strive to play. My mind is still willing to be childlike, but sometimes my body has to catch up!"

Though McCabe can be quick with a comedic comeback, his role as an Artist Manager is serious business. Both in performance and education, he's taken a thoughtful approach to his work. And Josh McCabe is serious about comedy.

"With the students, I try to work with them as I would work, myself," he explains. "The language—especially in Shakespeare is the jumping off point. We first have to understand the text—moment-to-moment, breath by breath. What is the story that is unfolding? We have to be curious! This is the detective work and the clues live in the rhetoric. Once we own what we are saying, then we can breath our own point of view into it: we add *our* voice."

As odd as it sounds, McCabe says, it is often meticulous and tedious work to ultimately appear loose and free-form. Typically, he sits down with a new script armed with different colors of pens and highlighters, taking notes and doing his detective work, connecting



Josh Aaron McCabe in  
*The Mystery of Irma Vep*, 2011



# ARTIST MANAGER'S LIFE FOR ME!

all the dots in the story. McCabe says that he has learned to honor his analytical nature ahead of time, so that his mind can be quieted to be present and listen in rehearsal—to let the kid out and play with the other voices in the space.

"It's a balance," he says, "Often I have to get out of my own way."

That type of embrace of, and then separation from, one's own identity might seem paradoxical to some.

"Children play freely with ease," he notes. "When we were little, our imaginations would bring our own sense of honesty to our play, and we'd *openly* play outside for all the world to see. A typical five-year-old is not going to suddenly announce to his friend, 'Billy, what are we doing? Just stop. I am no cowboy. You are no Indian. And, quite frankly, I feel ridiculous holding this plastic squirt gun.'

"I think as we get older we become more self-conscious," McCabe continues, "and we learn how to duck and cover to protect ourselves from being 'judged.' We develop defense mechanisms. The same holds true for acting. Younger actors typically haven't accumulated their own bag of tricks on stage yet, so in many ways what they have to bring is *themselves*."

Does the "bag of tricks" ever get full? Not yet, says McCabe.

"Every show I am in is an opportunity to develop as an actor," he reassures. "There is always a new challenge that I come up against—a new fear. Plus, here at Shakespeare & Company there are so many talented artists that I can learn from just by observing them—and then stealing from them!

"And I am constantly learning as I work in our Education Program. There is a reason this Program is nationally recognized! Kevin G. Coleman, Jonathan Croy and Jenna Ware possess truly brilliant minds

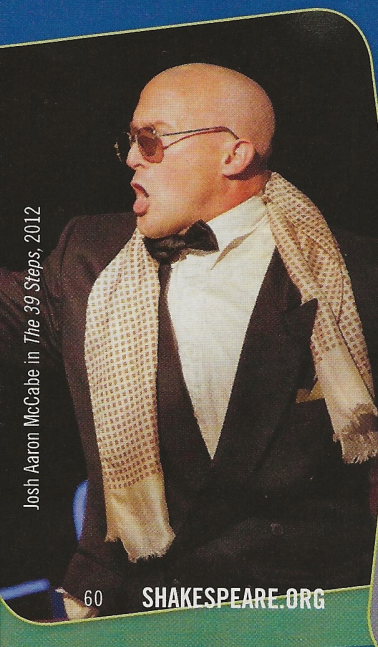
when it comes to engaging students in Shakespeare and in Theatre in general. I am continually cornering one of them and seeking their sage wisdom. The Education Artists are forever asking how to improve upon what we do and put in the hours necessary to strive toward it. I am proud to be surrounded by such a committed group."

McCabe, our Josh of All Trades, clearly possesses more than a little sage wisdom of his own. While his musings center mainly on theatre, most could well be axioms for life. Whether he is juggling two roles on-stage, being the Company Manager AND rehearsing a third show...while directing for one of the Education Programs ALL AT THE SAME TIME...he always keeps his head above water and sails into the next adventure that awaits him as an Artist Manager.

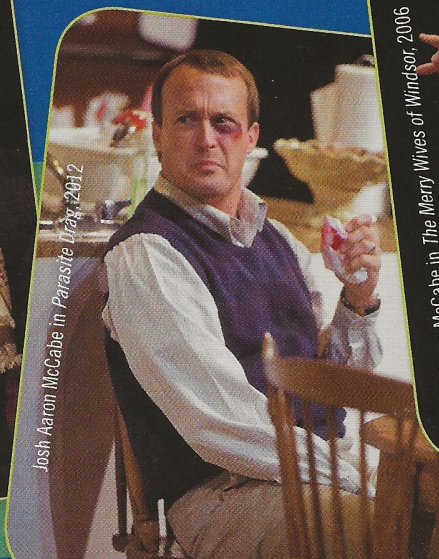
So what does he think about the Artist-Manager model?

"Human beings multi task. Juggling careers and families and relationships and money and dreams and—I believe that every individual aspect of our lives informs the collective. So it makes a certain sense to use this model here as we thread the theatre and the community together. Shakespeare & Company was built on this: Performance, Education and Training all co-existing to become something greater. Part of our endeavor is to keep exploring who we are, not only as artists, but as human beings so that we can continue to bring our full selves on the journey—whether on stage or not.

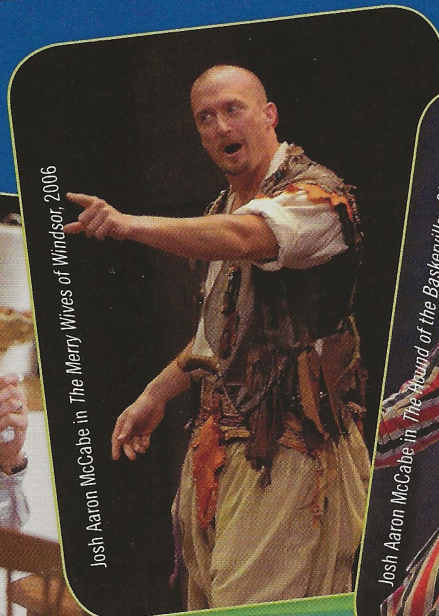
"In the end," he suggests, "I think secretly everyone wants his or her voice to be heard—however mute that they imagine themselves to be. I believe that part of our job is to inspire students of *all ages* to feel confident enough to speak. Our work with them here may *begin* on the stage, but what a contribution to their families and to their communities if they brought their voices to their daily lives as well."



Josh Aaron McCabe in *The 39 Steps*, 2012



Josh Aaron McCabe in *Parasite Drag*, 2012



Josh Aaron McCabe in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 2006



Josh Aaron McCabe in *The Hand of the Baskervilles*, 2011