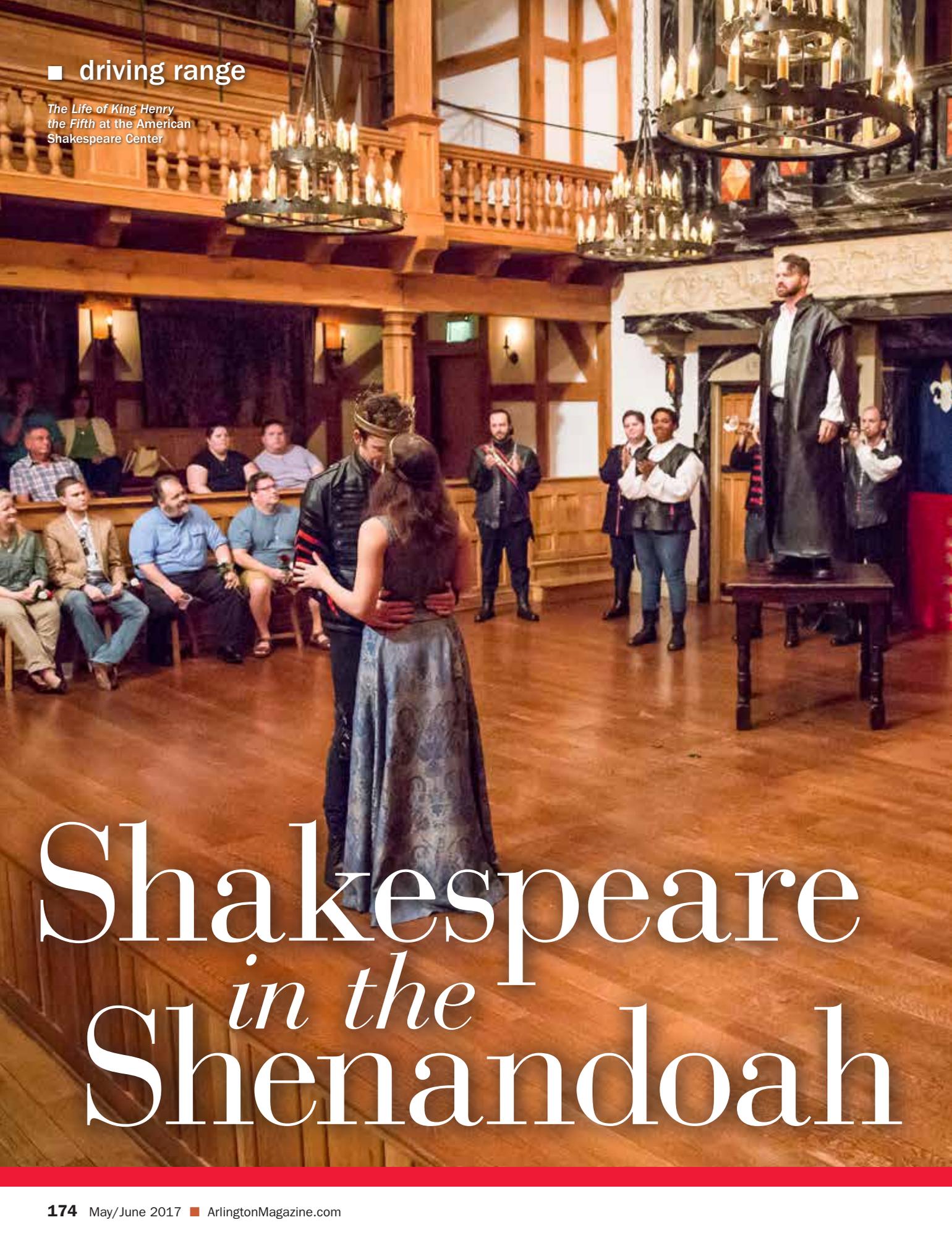


■ driving range

The Life of King Henry
the Fifth at the American
Shakespeare Center



Shakespeare *in the* Shenandoah



You needn't cross the Atlantic for authentic Elizabethan-style drama. Just head southwest.

BY LAURIE MCCLELLAN



“DOWN WITH CAESAR!” reads the sign in the protester’s hand. I’m trying to reach the front door of the American Shakespeare Center (ASC), but some Romans—whose togas look suspiciously like bedsheets—are blocking the way.

I soon realize the picketers are, in fact, a high school Latin club, and they’re just getting into the right frame of mind to watch *Julius Caesar*. Their rabble-rousing presence turns out to be a good omen. At this theater, everyone has a chance to become part of the action.

Truth be told, I’ve come here on a quest. Just as some fans seek to visit every Major League Baseball stadium, my goal is to see every Shakespeare play performed live and to visit every major Shakespeare theater from Stratford, Ontario, to Stratford-upon-Avon, England, the bard’s birthplace.

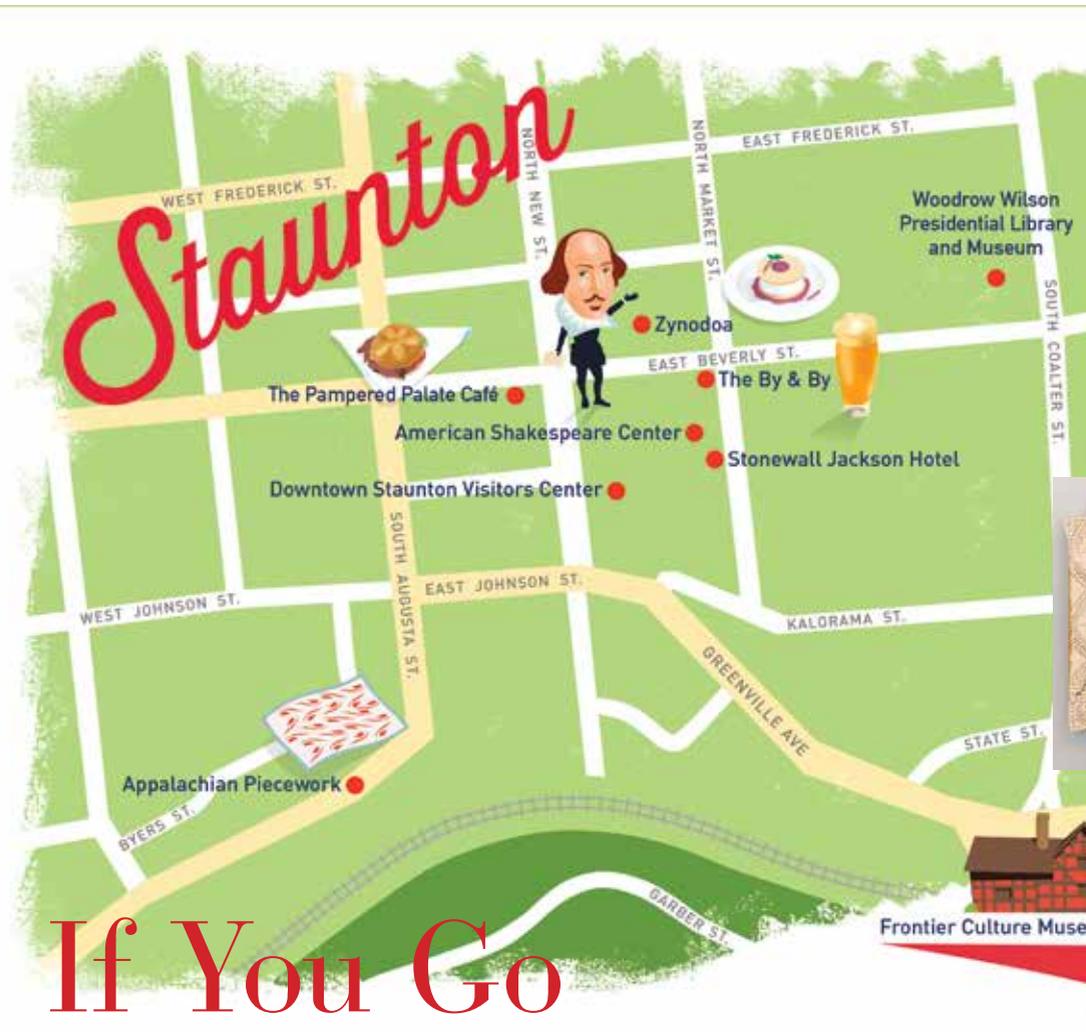
You have to cross an ocean to view a replica of the Globe Theatre, Shakespeare’s famous outdoor venue in London. Yet the world’s only re-creation of his company’s *indoor* theater is tantalizingly close to home—just three hours away in the historic mountain town of Staunton, Virginia.

I start my pilgrimage by joining a one-hour tour of ASC’s theater, called the Blackfriars Playhouse after its famous namesake. Guide Liz Bernardo explains that the original Blackfriars in London was built in a former monastery, and its name refers to the black robes worn by the monks. Shakespeare’s theater troupe, the King’s Men, began using Blackfriars for winter performances in 1608. Staunton’s version was completed in 2001 as a permanent home for the theater troupe that formerly toured as Shenandoah Shakespeare Express.

Walking into this performance venue is like entering a time capsule. A rustic wooden balcony rises over the small stage, and wrought-iron chandeliers studded with electric candles illuminate seats and stage alike. The exact level of illumination, we learn, is designed to mimic the brightness

PHOTOS: TOMMY THOMPSON (THEATER); WOODS PIERCE (STAUNTON)

■ driving range



The By & By Café



"Broken Dishes" (2014), a work of textile art on display at Appalachian Piecework

If You Go

Staunton is 150 miles south of the Beltway and reachable via Amtrak. Trains stop in downtown Staunton a few blocks from the Blackfriars Playhouse and within easy walking distance of all the attractions listed below, except for the Frontier Culture Museum.

American Shakespeare Center

Take the backstage tour (weekdays at 2 p.m. and Saturdays at 11 a.m., \$7) for an engaging introduction to the Blackfriars Playhouse. Tickets to plays range from \$21 to \$49. www.AmericanShakespeareCenter.com

The By & By

In nice weather you can have breakfast or lunch in the back garden of this laid-back coffee shop. In the evenings it turns into a beer garden with live music and movies. www.thebyandby.us

Appalachian Piecework

Staunton has more than a dozen specialty shops, but people who love fine crafts shouldn't miss this one. Proprietor and "utilitarian folk artist" Laurie Gundersen spins her own yarn on spinning wheels in

the store, weaves place mats and scarves, and restores vintage textiles and quilts. www.appalachianpiecework.com

Downtown Staunton Visitors Center

Start your visit here by picking up maps, information about special events and free tokens to ride the town trolley. www.visitstaunton.com

Frontier Culture Museum

Plan to spend at least three hours walking around this sprawling outdoor park. Kids will enjoy meeting the farm animals at each homestead, and costumed interpreters help explain each exhibit. www.frontiermuseum.org

The Pampered Palate Café

Sandwiches are the specialty at this local lunch favorite. If the first floor looks crowded, head to the upstairs seating

area, and you can look out over the town's main street while you eat. www.thepamperedpalatecafe.com

Stonewall Jackson Hotel

Built in 1924, this elegant historic hotel stands next to the Blackfriars Playhouse. A Shakespeare package starts at \$185, depending on the season, and includes play tickets and breakfast for two. www.stonewalljacksonhotel.com

Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library and Museum

Tour the house where Wilson was born in 1856, then pop into the museum for a look at his restored 1919 Pierce-Arrow limousine. www.woodrowwilson.org

Zynodoa

A farm-to-table restaurant with a Southern accent, Zynodoa is the most stylish place in town to get dinner before a show. The cheese biscuits that arrive with drinks are alone worth a visit. www.zynodoa.com



A musical number by the cast of *Romeo & Juliet*

of the original Blackfriars at 2 o'clock on a sunny afternoon.

Besides precisely re-creating the look of the stage that Shakespeare walked across, Staunton's Blackfriars also strives to reproduce the period's staging conditions. In Elizabethan times, the audience and actors could see each other (before modern electricity there was no easy way to light the stage while darkening the audience), so this theater follows suit. Suddenly, I understand why T-shirts in the gift shop display the cheeky slogan, "We do it with the lights on."

Continuing her tour, Bernardo leads us through a side door for a behind-the-scenes look at how ASC's plays are produced. First stop is the costume shop, where plastic bins carry labels like "eye patches" and "horns." Unfortunately, we won't get a chance to examine the dismembered head—today it's out for repairs. We continue on to the armory, bristling with realistic swords and daggers; take note of props and dressing rooms; and finally

step through a curtained doorway onto the stage itself.

In Shakespeare's day, rich theatergoers brought their own chairs and plopped them right onstage, claiming the best spots to see and be seen. You can enjoy the same privilege at Blackfriars today, our guide says, pointing out a dozen stools where brave audience members can sit during a show.

Historians aren't sure how much the actors in 1608 interacted with the people sitting onstage, Bernardo continues, but the soliloquies in *Richard III* and *Hamlet* may have been addressed to them. She also gives us a cautionary tip: If you sit on the stage in this Blackfriars, the actors will consider you fair game and may talk to you during the performance.

I'm not ready to enjoy that audience perk, but come evening, I am careful to arrive at the theater a half-hour before *Julius Caesar* starts in order to enjoy another one: music. In the 1600s, musicians played instruments before, during and after the play. In Staunton,

the actors themselves do the singing and playing, and given that they're not appearing in *Julius Caesar! The Musical*, I'm impressed by how well the cast can sing. Their instruments range from the classical (cello and trumpet) to the kitschy (ukuleles, an accordion and, perhaps for that actor who never got around to music lessons, a cowbell).

Many of the contemporary songs, which come before the play starts and at intermission, wink at the play's plot sequence. Marc Antony belts out a creditable version of "The Times They Are A-Changin'," and an actress—will she be stabbing Caesar later in the evening?—follows up with Mary Chapin Carpenter's "I Feel Lucky."

Quirky and entertaining, the musical prelude gives me a chance to make my Blackfriars theatrical debut. I stride onstage and order a beer from the bar that pops up when the play's not in progress. Then I find my seat on a long bench, which thankfully is equipped with comfortable backrests. (Be forewarned: The benches in the balcony

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Sketches on display in the ASC costume shop

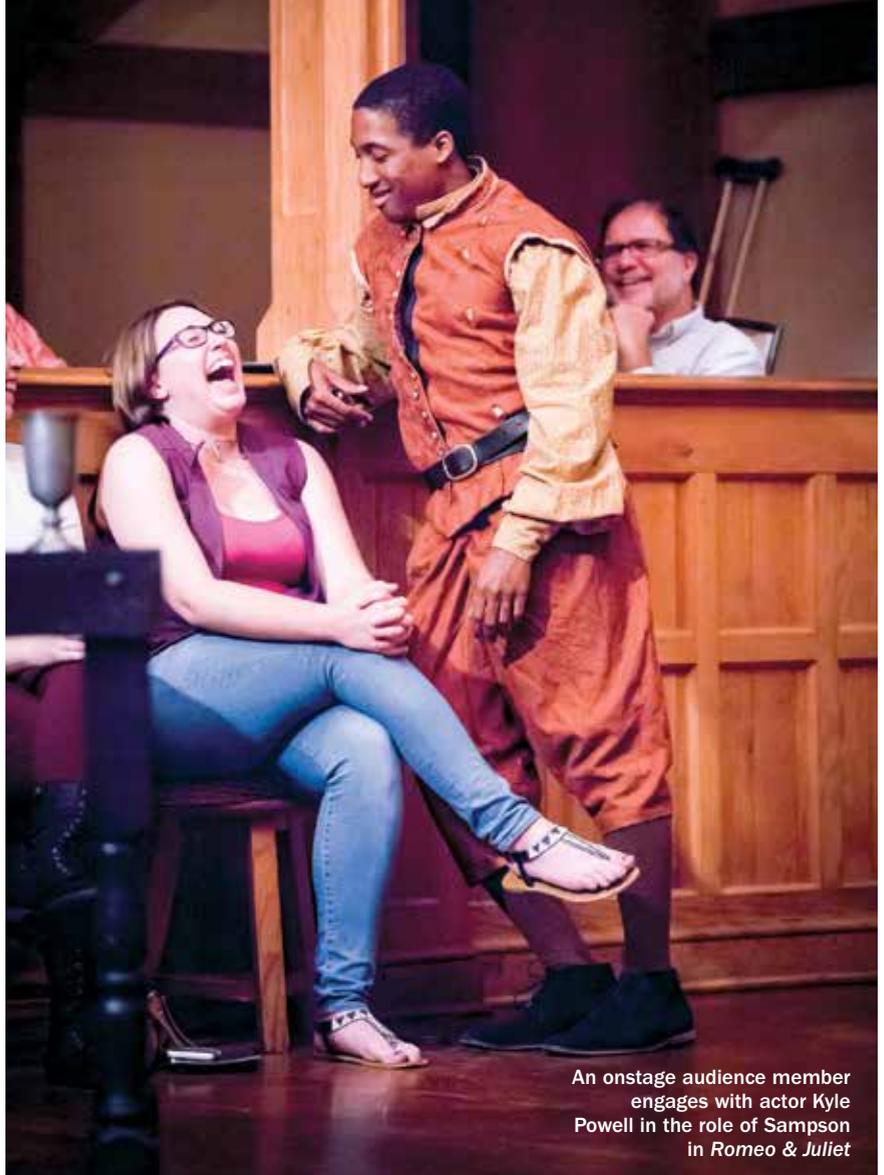


have no backrests. For true comfort, you may want to vie for a Lord's Chair near the stage, which looks like a miniature throne.)

Soon, the singers exit the stage and an actor delivers the first line of the play. At his words, some theatergoers scramble into seats near the front. Though each ticket includes an assigned seat, an unusual rule at this modern-day Blackfriars holds that after the first words of the play are spoken, you're free to claim any empty seat.

With the lights on and the people around me sipping wine and munching Gummi Bears, the performance in this intimate 300-seat theater feels relaxed and lively at the same time, like seeing Shakespeare performed in your living room. The lack of real sets—actors may add a simple chair or table to the scene when needed—reinforces the illusion. The bare-bones staging puts the focus squarely on the young cast members, who hail from points all across the U.S. and fizz with energy. Soon, I notice that some of the Roman senators are being played by women.

In Shakespeare's day, the program explains, small casts meant that actors took on multiple roles. Although Blackfriars doesn't re-create the Elizabethan custom of having all of the female roles played by men (real women



An onstage audience member engages with actor Kyle Powell in the role of Sampson in *Romeo & Juliet*

didn't routinely appear on the English stage until 50 years after Shakespeare's death), the theater does try to capture the same spirit by sometimes casting women as men, and vice versa.

By the end of the performance, Caesar is buried, Marc Antony has triumphed on the battlefield, the actors have taken their bows and I'm eager to see what kind of fun this cast might have with a comedy. Happily, Blackfriars makes that kind of binge watching possible by staging an average of four to six plays during each repertory season. On many weekends, you can catch three different plays over two days. With four seasons per year, Blackfriars will mount 15 different productions in 2017, including Shakespeare, other classics and the modern comedy *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*.

If you're filling a weekend with mul-

tle shows, you'll find plenty to do between curtain calls in Staunton (which, incidentally, is pronounced "Stanton"), a friendly town in the Shenandoah Valley. The Blackfriars Playhouse sits at one end of a walkable downtown that's chockablock with restaurants and shops, including many selling vintage and home goods.

Staunton itself is known for its architecture, and with more than a thousand historic buildings, makes an outstanding place to just stroll around and admire the stately homes. President Woodrow Wilson was born in one a few blocks from the theater. His home and presidential library make an inviting stop for history lovers.

Visitors who want to stay in a Shakespearean mood can get another 17th-century fix at the Frontier Culture Museum, a short drive from downtown. The



LAURIE MCCLELLAN (FRONTIER CULTURE MUSEUM)

outdoor museum showcases the types of homesteads that emigrants from different countries left behind when they moved to the American frontier.

According to the museum, some 120,000 people left England for its

first North American colony, Virginia, in the 1600s. (Virginia is named for Queen Elizabeth I, Shakespeare's most important patron, who was known as the Virgin Queen.)

The half-timbered farmhouse representing Elizabethan England is not a replica, but rather an authentic home dating to 1630 that originally stood in Worcestershire, England. The house was taken apart, shipped to Staunton in 1992 and then put back together again at the museum in 1993. Woolly white sheep graze in the farm's meadow, hissing geese with neon-orange beaks wander its gravel path and ducklings float past on a little stream. Squint a little and you can imagine yourself in the English countryside of four centuries ago. Other exhibits at the museum include a 1700s Irish cottage, a German farmhouse, a West African village and Shenandoah Valley homes from the 1820s and 1850s.

The next morning I'm eating a bagel sandwich in the garden of the By & By coffee shop next door to the Blackfriars Playhouse when I hear someone speaking in what sounds like Shakespearean English. With the theater clearly in my line of sight, I can actually hear the bard's words floating through the air.

Glancing over at the next table, I'm relieved to spot an actress from the night before, script propped open in front of her, sipping coffee and practicing her part. Turns out I wasn't daydreaming in iambic pentameter—although in Staunton, steeping yourself in Shakespeare is so much fun that it just might happen. ■

To date, Laurie McClellan has seen 24 of Shakespeare's 38 plays performed live. She would like to give a shout-out to theater buddy Kristin Frey for dreaming up the Shakespeare quest.