Biggs on Ensemble: “very satisfying”

By Kathy Hardis

“The Shakespeare Ensemble has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life,” Murray Biggs said when asked to speak on his feelings toward the group. “I’m rather overwhelmed by the fact that next Sunday’s performance of Love’s Labour’s Lost will be the hundredth performance of the Ensemble since its foundation. It’s been very satisfying to me and to other members of the group to see us come from nothing three years ago to a position really quite well established both on and off campus.”

Biggs conceived and created the idea of the Shakespeare Ensemble at MIT. “When I started the group very informally in the fall of ’74, I did so as a kind of IAP activity. I thought it was possible there wouldn’t be enough interest to do a major production, that we’d have a play reading society and get up a few scenes. But there was, from the beginning, an overwhelming interest in acting Shakespeare at MIT.”

“I had, for a long time, been academically engaged in Shakespeare. I suppose it’s my main line of academic interest, but I also had a strong interest in the practical theatre. With the Ensemble, Biggs intended to bring his academic knowledge together with his experience of theatre, to try to ‘offer MIT students an in-depth experience of Shakespeare on the stage.’

The Shakespeare Ensemble is one of three major undergraduate drama groups on campus. “I think some people felt that to have another drama group on campus would dilute the already strong supply of MIT acting talent,” said Biggs. “And if the Shakespeare Ensemble has done anything, I think that it has demonstrated that there are a lot of MIT students who want the chance to be on stage.”

“It’s been very satisfying,” Biggs said. “It has been demonstrated that there are a lot of people who want the chance to be on stage.”

Looking back on the production, Biggs said, “I’ve found them all very, very satisfying. Looking at all the Shakespeare plays on a stage is, in itself, very satisfying experience.”

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“The Ensemble is a company; we’re very much aware of that feeling of togetherness, and that is only possible because we have people working with us for long periods of time. Performing Shakespeare is uniquely difficult; it can’t be done unless the students and the director are prepared to be unusually committed to it. That’s why in the Shakespeare Ensemble we don’t take people on for less than a year, because it just takes time to learn the particular skills and idioms of acting Shakespeare. Shakespeare is, after all, a foreign language.

One of the things that most people find unusual about the Ensemble is the large time commitment given by its members, mostly MIT students with busy academic schedules. According to Biggs, “We do believe in discipline, and we hope that the seriousness of our work comes from an inner dynamic which isn’t imposed externally by a credit structure or by exams. If you haven’t got the inner motivation and the resolve to go on with what you’re doing, no amount of people telling you what to do is going to make it any better.”

Biggs sees directing as essentially an ...eclectic business—you have the text, you have the actors, you have the physical materials, including the space you perform in. And every play requires a different approach to those things and trying to build a play from scratch.”

“When directing Shakespeare, I do give, perhaps, primary importance to language. I want the students to understand what the lines mean—every single word—and try to project that meaning, both vocally and physically, to an audience that may not be familiar with that particular play.”

“I think that one is better off staging Shakespeare rather simply. We play in the Salon of the Student Center, and there we have no choice; safety regulations prohibit us from anything but the simplest non movable scenery, very limited lighting, and so on. We try to make a virtue of the necessity, it gives us an opportunity to use our own specially built thrust stage, which makes the action very fluid and fast.”

“Once a week, the Ensemble members have what is referred to by Biggs as ‘...movement sessions. It’s about two hours which begins with physical warm-ups, and then most of the time is spent with exercises of one kind or another. They may be improvisational, they may be prepared, they may be mimes, they may involve song. They’re different every week.”

Although they perform an average of two major productions a year, most members feel the “heart” of their activity lies in the Ensemble’s standing repertoire of...