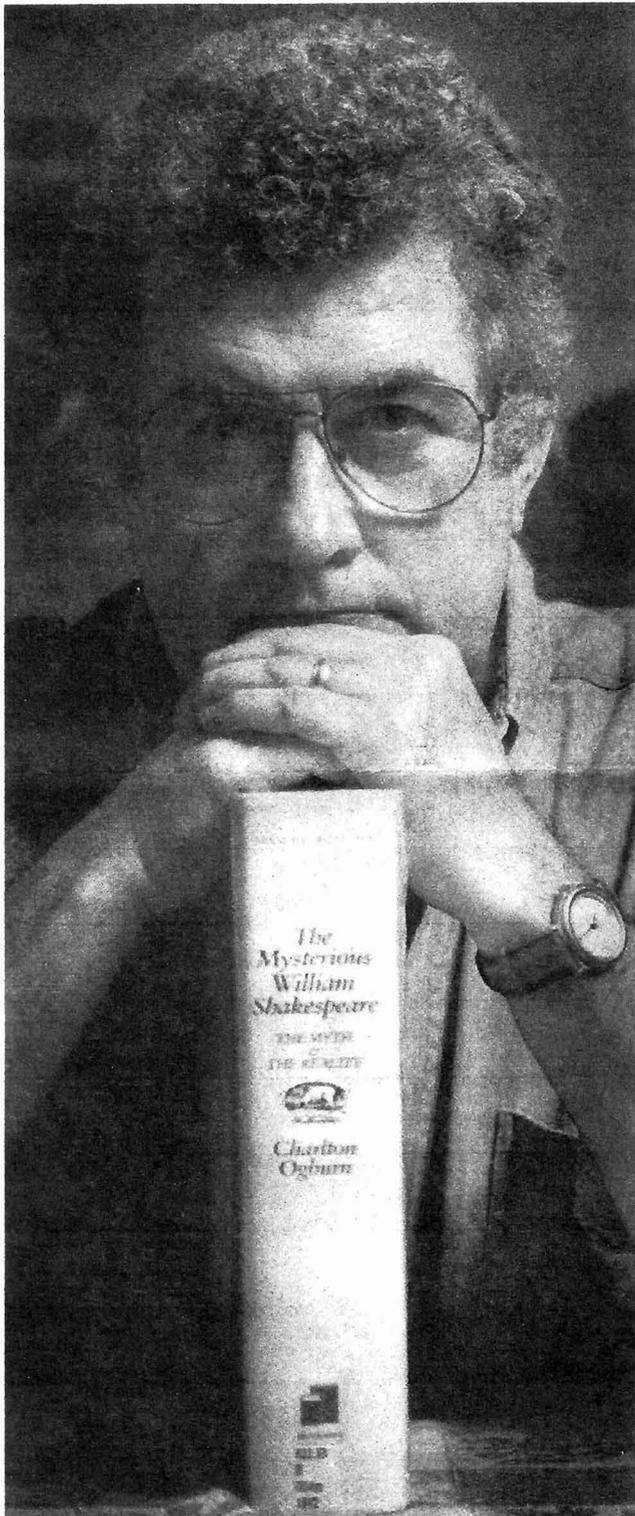


Much Ado About Writing

Literary rebels contend Shakespeare didn't do it



Paul Streit says it takes just a bit of digging to prove Shakespeare didn't pen the works he's credited with

BY BETH COONEY
STAFF WRITER

The next time he produces "Romeo and Juliet" or "King Lear," playwright-director Ron Destro is determined to give writer's credit to the man he calls the "true Shakespeare." His playbill will name Edward De Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford.

Destro will deliberately snub William Shakespeare, the grain dealer from Stratford-on-Avon, who he contends was part of a ruse used to conceal the real identity of the author of the world's most voluminous body of literary classics.

"Some people will call what I'm going to do blasphemy. Some people say it's brave," says Destro. "But I just think it's the right thing to do."

Destro, theater director at Norwalk Community-Technical College and founder of a new acting company in New York City, is part of a small but vociferous band of **thespians, academics and amateur literary sleuths** who contend that Shakespeare was nothing more than a decoy. They speculate that the Stratford commoner was probably paid a princely sum to give the aristocratic Oxford cover. The two men, Destro says, shared a distant relative.

A Norwalk resident, Destro is one of two Fairfield County men who have sparked a local renaissance in the decades-old debate over Shakespeare's identity by holding lectures and teaching courses that challenge the accepted wisdom on the prolific writings of the mysterious Englishman. The other debunker is Paul Streit, a struggling playwright from Darien, who teaches continuing education courses in Stamford, Westport and Greenwich that advance the Oxford theory.

As do all of the earl's defenders, the men argue there's ample evidence that Shakespeare was a

bankrupt illiterate whose only claim to fame was an arrest for grain hoarding. They point to five or six known examples of Shakespeare's penmanship, cramped, illegible and inconsistent, that suggest he was incompetent with a pen.

Oxfordians have long argued that his simple, unremarkable life did not provide the depth of experience reflected in the aristocratic tone of the major works attributed to Shakespeare. It would have been impossible, they

say, for a man of Shakespeare's means to travel to places such as Venice or Verona, destinations so richly detailed in his plays.

The debate has raged for centuries with notables such as Mark Twain, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun, Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles and Henry James taking Oxford's side against a much larger band of Shakespeare loyalists.

Shakespeare boosters argue, among other things, that the Oxford theory is an elitist notion perpetuated by literary snobs.

This amuses believers like Streitz, who works for the Metropolitan Transit Authority as a marketing analyst to support his work as an aspiring playwright. He has mounted one Off-Broadway musical that closed after a few performances.

"I think one reason why the subject engages me so is that Oxford's life is actually more fascinating than Shakespeare's plays," says Streitz. "I think it's time for Oxford to get the credit he's deserved for 500 years. I know what it's like to not get recognized for your work."

Not that Streitz thinks he's going to win many converts.

Popular beliefs about Shakespeare, Streitz says, "are like a religion — and old religions die hard." He concedes that his views represent those of a minority. "In academia, I would guess that 80 percent of the professors teaching Shakespeare believe in the Stratford theory," he says.

Destro says one reason why most academics reject the Oxford theory out of hand is that, "they find it elitist. They say to reject Shakespeare as the author implies that only a man of certain means could be that smart. They say the theory isn't very democratic."

Destro understands this point but counters, "If Shakespeare had been a good inventor or a whiz at math or science, I might buy it. But commoners just were not educated in England during that period."

Adds Streitz: "To me, saying these works were written by that guy from Stratford-on-Avon is sort of like saying the world is flat. It's just not possible, not if you bother to do even just a little digging."

Streitz will lecture at the Darien Public Library on Jan. 30 on a topic related to the controversy: his steadfast belief that the Earl of Oxford fathered a child with Queen Elizabeth I. The dalliance and resulting illegitimate child, he says, was De Vere's motive for establishing a decoy.

Streitz argues the deception was necessary to protect the queen's ability to negotiate a marriage with France, thus securing a strong ally against Spain. He says the romantic sonnets and other works would have given their relationship away.

Although they've reached similar conclusions on Shakespeare's origins, Destro is not as convinced as Streitz that the earl fathered the queen's child. "It's certainly intriguing and would explain a lot," he says. "But I still look at that as just an interesting idea."

Rather, Destro says the brilliant earl, who was known for his wit and writer's gift, simply needed cover because of the controversial nature of his writings in autocratic England. He suggests that many of Shakespeare's characters were modeled after contemporary figures in the aristocracy. Gertrude in Hamlet was probably modeled after the queen. Tyrell, the man who murders two young princes in Richard III, was modeled after Charles Tyrell, a stepfather Oxford loathed, says Destro.

"If Shakespeare had been revealed, his true character would have been known," says Destro. "And all of the sudden it would have been more obvious who he was writing about. He would have been in the Tower of London for that."

Destro also suggests it was simply unseemly for someone of Oxford's status to be associated with the theater. "At the time, that was beneath his class. The theater was associated with prostitutes and low-lives," he says. "It was not considered a gentleman's pursuit."

Destro notes that some of Shakespeare's earliest plays were published anonymously. "I think the earl needed a name as the popularity of his works grew," he says. "Shakespeare was easy. He was an illiterate who could be paid off."

Destro is convinced the earl picked Shakespeare because of his family crest, a lion shaking a spear.

Destro became interested in the debate while studying with acting teacher Kristin Linklater, the author of "Freeing Shakespeare's Voice."

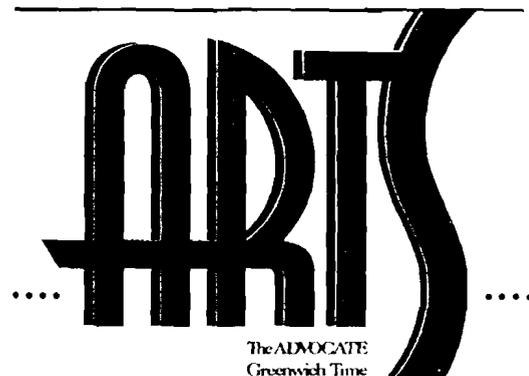
The work convinced him that understanding Shakespeare's roots should play a role in interpreting his

works. "It really influences the way my students interpret the plays and perform them," he says.

Besides finding artistic merit in engaging the debate, Destro says the controversy alone gives Oxford some of the credit he's due.

"Here was the greatest writer of any language, a man who was so perceptive, insightful and smart," he says. "I think he would be very surprised that we haven't figured him out yet."

Destro is so convinced Shakespeare is a fraud he is committed to teaching and performing his plays and sonnets as Oxford's works, although he ventures a good 80 percent of the academic community would label his views as rubbish.



Making the case for Oxford

During a lecture at Norwalk Technical Community College, Ron Destro, the school's theater director, outlined his case that Edward De Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, is the real author of works attributed to William Shakespeare. Here are some highlights of his arguments:

- There was nothing about Shakespeare's life that was remotely literary; his father, wife, daughters and other close relatives were illiterate.

- The spelling of the name on early works was almost always Shake-speare. The use of a hyphen during that period suggested a pseudonym.

- At the time of Shakespeare's death, there was no in the court or notices

in London, although his works were already popular.

- There is no mention of anything literary in his will, although several of his plays had yet to be published or performed.

- The publication of Shakespeare's First Folio of works was dedicated to William and Philip Herbert, the earl's son-in-law and son-in-law's brother.

- The earl, who was a wealthy man, was paid the sum of 1,000 pounds a year by the notoriously stingy Queen Elizabeth I for no specified reason.

- Shakespeare lacked the apprenticeship needed to complete 12 major works by the age of 29. These included five history plays, including "Richard III"; four comedies, including "Love's Labour's Lost"; the tragedy "Titus Andronicus"; the literary poems "Venus and Adonis," "The Rape of Lucrece"; and some of the sonnets. These works required a knowledge of English history, Latin classics, two modern languages, accurate details of war, law, botany, medicine, falconry, bowling and the ways of royalty, court life and the military.

- The earl's childhood tutors included his uncle, Arthur Golding, a translator of Roman writer Ovid's "Metamorphoses," recognized by scholars as a major influence on Shakespeare's work.

- There are striking parallels to Oxford's own life in Shakespeare's play "All's Well That Ends Well": Like the play's Bertram, Oxford was a young orphan who became a ward of the court and was ordered to marry a commoner over his objections. Bertram refuses to consummate his marriage and flees to Italy. Oxford, reputedly, did the same and was ordered to return to England by the queen.

- Elizabethan records suggest it was unseemly for a nobleman to publish under his own name.

- De Vere's family crest was a lion shaking a spear!



Contributed

Edward De Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, left, and William Shakespeare, right, were distantly related.



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Darien playwright Paul Streitz will lecture this month on his belief that De Vere fathered child with Queen Elizabeth I. This portrait by some to show a pregnant monarch.

— Beth Cooney