

A special 'As You Like It' coming to Bennington College

By BEN ROTH

In William Shakespeare's "As You Like It" a nobleman, Orlando, is banished from his city and forced to take refuge in a mystical forest.

In the Forest of Arden, his uncle the Duke, banished previously, consoles the agitated young man by telling him of the refreshing qualities of his new home.

"This our life, exempt from public haunt, finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in every thing."

Phillip Kerr, visiting teacher of acting at Bennington College this semester, could not agree more with the Duke's sentiments.

The Shakespearean actor has dropped out — at least for six months — from the hectic routine of the repertory theater circuit.

Instead he's breathing the fresh air of home in White Creek, N.Y. and imparting his love for the stage to would-be actors at the college.

This weekend Kerr will join his students in a production of "As You Like It" in celebration of another rural newcomer — Michael Hooker will be inaugurated as the eighth president of Bennington College. Hooker migrated to Bennington last year from the urban campus of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

"The play has something to say

about going into the natural world and how it changes people's lives," explained Kerr, catching his breath after a late afternoon audition at the college's Lester Martin Theatre.

To further sound the theme of natural change Kerr has transported the setting to post-Revolutionary War America. 1983, he explained, is the 200th anniversary of the end of the country's fight for independence, a time when old world people embarked on new experiment in government.

Kerr, a 20-year veteran of the stage, has earned the right to take a little poetic license with the play's setting.

A graduate of Harvard College and the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, Kerr has played Hamlet opposite Dame Judith Anderson at Carnegie Hall, been in plays by Chekhov and Pinter on Broadway and landed roles at top repertory theatres in Chicago, Minneapolis and San Francisco.

This fall he directed Moliere's "Tartuffe" and Noel Coward's "Present Laughter," at the Loretto-Hilton Repertory Theatre in St. Louis.

"I've had a crack at some pretty nice roles," he said, with Hamlet, Macbeth, and Richard III among his favorites.



Ben Roth

Phillip Kerr rehearses Bennington College students for this weekend's special performance of "As You Like It."

The impressive resume aside, Kerr said he has sacrificed television stardom for the less publicized life of a classical actor.

A distaste for Los Angeles, the home of television and movies, in part played into his decision to avoid the screen.

Mostly it was his commitment to keeping the old plays alive.

"I think it is important to keep old plays a vital part of our life. It's like going to the art museum and not throwing out the Rembrandt's just because they are old," he said.

Shakespeare and Chekhov still have something to say about humanity, he added. Modern audiences are also losing what he calls "a sense of the beauty of language," a quality that comes across best on stage.

Kerr said that going to the theatre, as opposed to sitting at home watching television comedies, requires more audience participation. An uninterrupted time to listen and understand the language floating across the theatre brings more satisfaction to the viewer, he said.

"There is no substitute to actually being there. Just like it's more fun to go to a ballgame than watch it on T.V.," he said.

The actor said that the British have been more supportive of classical theater than have Americans. In the United States money flows into the more marketable commercial productions such as musicals.

The teaching opportunity at Bennington is giving Kerr a reprieve from the gypsy life of a repertory actor. Raised in Albany, N.Y. he

bought a 260-acre farm in White Creek 12 years ago.

Over the years he has come to view the farm rather than New York City or California as home base.

"It's so nice for me to be here. Whenever I've lived in California I never felt at home," he said. He gave up his rented apartment in New York City several years ago.

At Bennington, his first teaching experience, he leads two classes in scene study and two classes in directing. The department is "understaffed but good," he said. Unlike actors at theater schools in New York City, Bennington students get a liberal arts education along with stage training, he said.

Kerr does not offer rosy projections for aspiring actors.

"One always hears about the Robert Redfords. But the greatest percentage of actors spend most of their time unemployed," he said. Luck plays a big part in who gets a job, he said.

Kerr said he has no acting plans for the summer after the semester ends.

After that it will be back to the life of the itinerant actor

Does he think that he is close to reaching the height of his career?

"I don't think one ever arrives at that point. There's always something new to do," he said.