

BY MATTHEW KEEFER

Tuesday night. The sun is down; it is five past six. A group of seven sits down at a table in one of the backrooms of Redwood Library in Newport. A man in a green and blue plaid shirt goes over the parts. He crosses his khakied legs. The others pull out slips of yellow paper with names.

"You can be Launcelot," he tells me. I am handed a strip of paper.

He introduces me to the group. I ask a few customary questions, where are you from, how old are you, but pretty soon things quiet down. We open the books.

And the play begins.

Across from me is Diane. She is 76 years of age, a veteran of the old The Rhode Island Shakespeare Theatre (TRIST) and Incredibly Far Off Broadway stages, as well as my scene-mate.

"I am sorry thou wilt leave my father so. / Our house is hell, and thou, a merry devil, / Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness." Diane's voice just slightly quivers.

She has been attending "If It's Tuesday, It Must Be Shakespeare" since its inception more than two years ago. She had just spoken to me about being a private school teacher; I was a sub not too long ago. But now we are in the middle of a play. I straighten up my best Shakespearean voice.

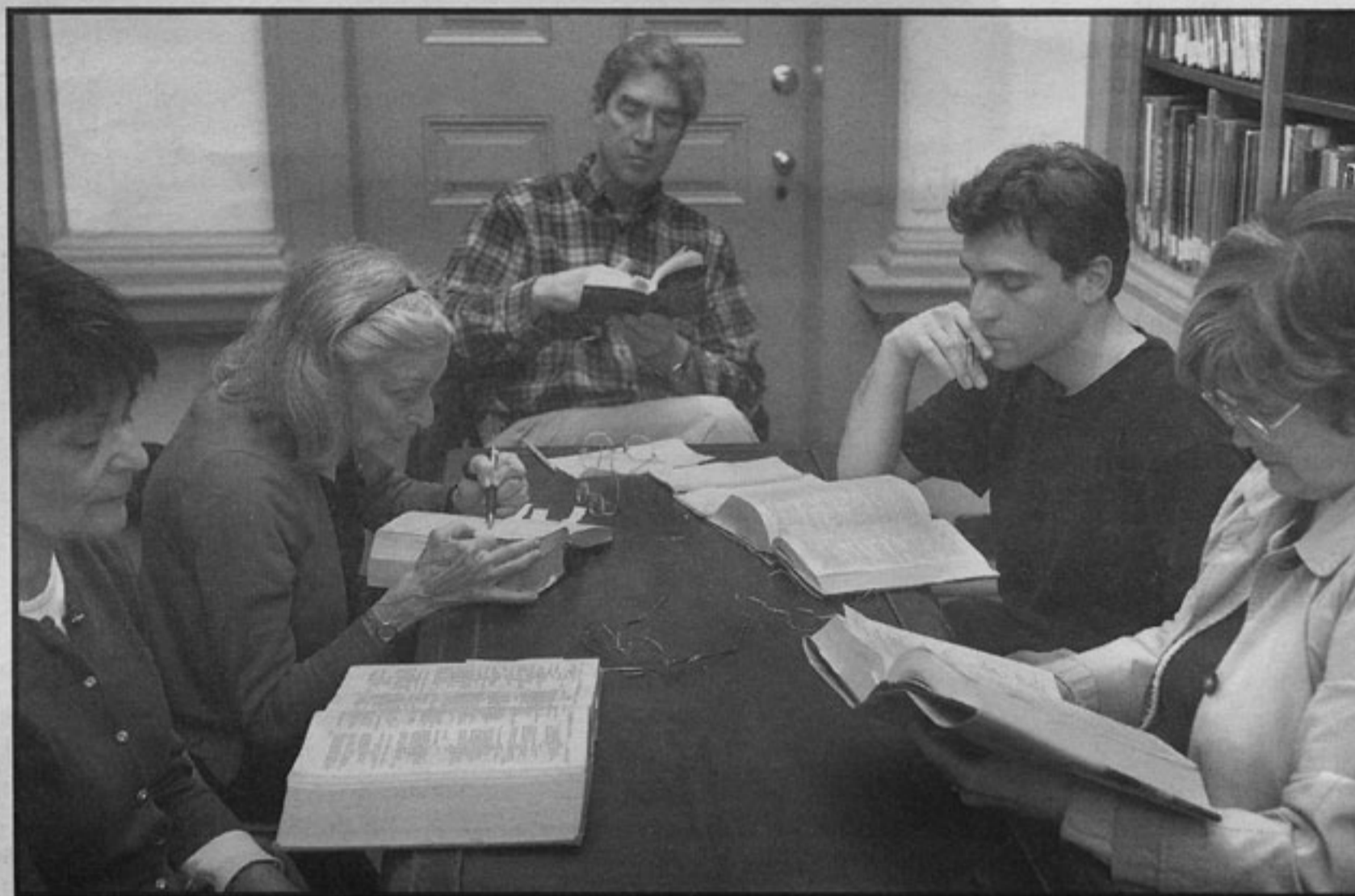
"Adieu! Tears exhibit my tongue. Most beautiful pagan..."

Rip Irving looks on. Apparently he doesn't mind my poor French accent, but certainly he must notice, having been an actor for TRIST and 2nd Story Theatre. He teaches English at Salve Regina University, is working on a doctorate, and is the director of our little version of "The Merchant of Venice." That was Act II, Scene iii, by the way.

As the leader of "It Must Be

WILL POWER

Libraries are supposed to be quiet. So what's all that poetic commotion on Tuesday nights at the Redwood?



Band of the Bard. Rip Irving, in plaid shirt at center, leads a Tuesday night reading of 'The Merchant of Venice' with newcomer Matt Keefer, seated at upper right. Roles are chosen at random from strips of paper with character's names. PHOTOS BY JACQUELINE MARQUE

Shakespeare," Rip has seen his group perform all of Shakespeare's plays twice through. He is the man wearing a green and blue flannel shirt. Of the Bard's plays, he enjoys "Twelfth Night," but I see he is at home in any of Shakespeare's plays.

I ask him before we begin: "Falstaff is my favorite Shakespearean character. Who's yours?"

He answers with a studied pause. "I don't know, it changes as I get older. Right now I'd have to say 'Lear,'" he laughs. "Comic character: probably

Malvolio (of "Twelfth Night"), at the time."

Soon his voice belts out inside the small room.

"In faith, 'tis a fair hand, / And whiter than the paper it writ on..."

I study Rip. He is tall, serious, at 56 years of age, calm and controlled. He stumbles a bit on a line, carefully goes over it again. And his French accent is better than mine.

"Adieu..."

His group brings together a mature crowd, many people are in their fifties. They are diverse in their experiences; there is a

man, Peter, who has improved his speech in this group after a stroke. I have to be told to notice a difference. There is also Rory, who has theatrical credits to his name. He makes a delightful Shylock.

"You knew... of my daughter's flight!"

He makes a jowl-shaking deep baritone vibrate throughout the room. My chair is shaking with the merchant's famous anger. I keep my eyes fixed to the page, too cautious to miss a word, but I am blinded by the vision of old Shylock standing there, quivering with rage,

garbed in gentleman's attire, shaking his fist at a poor servant. I humbly piece my words next to him, my tenor somewhat shy next to his deep voice.

"Out upon her!" Rory pants in anger.

He's really good.

Two women stop into the room. We all pause, but Rip is calm, collected.

"Does anyone have more than one character?" We go around the room to find them a both a part, but there is only one part extra.

The play continues.

After the hour is up, Rip introduces me to the women who had just arrived. "This is Matt from the Mercury."

I introduce myself to them, exhausted from the reading. For most of the players, this group is their first time getting to act out Shakespeare's plays, and a welcome reprieve from their exhausting schedules.

"It's a wonderful group," says Karen, the woman next to me, and I agree. She offers that I come again.

"We're looking for some younger members," says Rip.

The other members motion for me to come back.

Hmmm.

A nice quiet group. Shakespeare for an hour; no talent necessary.

I think I'll give it a shot.

Matt Keefer is currently embroiled in a comic sub-plot involving a faerie-queen, cross-dressing and bears. He will be at Redwood Library until the fifth act.

e Amateurs and thespians are invited to participate in informal readings of Shakespeare scripts and poetry every Tuesday at 6 p.m. at the Redwood Library and Athenaeum, 50 Bellevue Ave., Newport. For more on "If It's Tuesday It Must Be Shakespeare," visit www.redwoodlibrary.org or call (401) 847-0292.