

# Actress honors playwright in 'Zombie Shakespeare'

**AMANDA SIERADZKI**  
COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS

Actress and theater educator Robin Jackson always eagerly awaited her monthly "American Girl" magazines. Inside were not only a treasure trove of stories, but also an original play. One particular issue featured a girl who worked as a child in a factory. With the help of her mother, Jackson decided to organize that particular play as a neighborhood show, while she performed the leading role.

At the age of 8, she learned that this historic story from the 1900s extended into her modern day reality, with many children still working in factories and sweatshops. For the production, Jackson connected with an organization called Free the Children to raise donations and awareness. Playing such a character opened her young eyes, and nearly 20 years later, she still believes in the power of a well-written play.

"I've always felt very strongly that theater can help people," said Jackson. "It's such an important tool to help change people's outlook on life. There's so much that children benefit from doing theater when they're developing like communicating, teamwork, problem solving, self confidence, and body awareness."

A Tallahassee native, Jackson grew up surrounded by theater via her mother's influence. She belonged to the previous Southern Shakespeare's Young Company, which was directed by another influential mentor, Eden Rush. Jackson became intrigued with the ins and outs of the Bard's language. Soon she understood subtext and how dissecting every line helps an actor to transport an audience into a story.

Those early years also gave her a strong foundation for speaking clearly



SCOT LERNER / ORLANDO HEADSHOTS

Actress Robin Jackson, who plays Goldilocks in Southern Shakespeare Company's "Zombie Shakespeare."



BOB O'LARY

From left, Kate (Erika Stone), Shakespeare (Joe Fisher), and Captain Hook (Lance Felton) in "Zombie Shakespeare."

and pronunciation. Her first show with the group was a children's version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" called "Puck and the Mushy Gushy Love Potion." She was cast in a comedic role as a fairy, and appreciated Rush's creative approach to Shakespeare's material, which has found its way into her teaching philosophies today.

"Eden would create these really amazing characters that would engage us as young people," recalls Jackson. "I think mutual respect and communicating with children in a very loving and honest way is important. If I can connect with a kid then no matter what I'm teaching, and they trust me, then I think that helps to engage them in learning."

Jackson earned her AS in Musical Theater from Florida School of the Arts where she was cast in a leading role as Corie Bratter in "Barefoot in the Park." It was the first time her chops were really challenged as she learned that comedy and drama are really one in the same if they are approached from an honest place. She went on to audition for the Florida Professional Theatre Association where she was spotted by director Lulu Bordelejo and offered a job with Artspot.

The Argentinean theater company performed in over 15 countries to bring one-hour original

musical performances to students learning English as a second language. Jackson worked with them on and off for eight years while simultaneously attending the University of Central Florida for her BFA in Musical Theater.

Their formula took well-known stories or people in history and created a fictitious adventure about them. A portable set allowed the troupe to travel to multiple locations easily, and kept Jackson on her toes everywhere they went.

"We would enter a school and then transform gyms, classrooms, soccer fields, and more into a theater," says Jackson. "Students would receive the music from the show and a workbook so they could practice the vocabulary and learn about the characters and the plot. The most significant thing for me was bringing theater to kids who would have never had the chance to see a play, and have them come up afterward to say, 'we want to do this.'"

During the tours in Asia, Jackson did just that. She developed a workshop that allowed the students to get up onstage and work with the script from the show, becoming each character while improving their vocabulary. She also took part in instructing the "Teaching Through Theater" workshops that gave teachers tools and games to enhance their lesson plans in the classroom. After graduating from

UCF, Jackson realized she didn't want to pursue performance and instead returned to her hometown in March with a renewed focus on education.

Jackson has since acquired her mother's teaching materials and teaches at Grassroots Free School, the Miccosukee Land Co-op Drama Camp, and has partnered with SAIL High School Drama Club. She was given the opportunity to jump back in with the Southern Shakespeare Company and volunteered during their spring season.

Since then, Jackson was hired as the Co-Coordinator for After School Programs, with one of her first projects being to infuse her theater workshops with the Thomasville Center of the Arts academic curriculum.

"I want to help create spaces in Tallahassee for young people to explore theater in a safe, creative, and free way," said Jackson. "For me, it's helped to fill a void because I didn't know where I'd fit in Tallahassee since I had been gone for so long. The fact that this company that I had grown up with in its new form was able to have me join them has been really awesome."

Furthermore, Jackson is ecstatic to be a part of Southern Shakespeare's production of "Zombie

Shakespeare." An original work written by Eden Rush who passed away in 2013, the plot follows a group of fairy tale characters that awaken Shakespeare from the dead to have their stories re-written. Jackson unfortunately broke her leg rehearsing Juliet before the show's debut about a decade ago, but is ever ready to be a part of it now as Goldilocks for the fall and winter season.

"It's really freeing once you put yourself into the shoes of your character," says Jackson. "As Goldilocks I'm starting to discover how she would interact with Snow White and how she feels about becoming a witch in Macbeth. That element of improvisation is also crucial because we'll have to adjust to what location we're in with performances for community centers, school children, and nighttime shows open to public."

She's also enjoying her time as assistant director exploring character development and the improvisational nature of the show. Once adapted to accommodate 40 students, the adult cast of seven has prompted the actors to play multiple roles in the play.

The performances will kick off at the Goodwood Museum & Gardens on Sept. 16 and will take shape in multiple venues for a range of ages, with highlights including a "Zombie Shuffle and Bike Ride" at Gaines St. Fest on Nov. 22.

## IF YOU GO

**What:** Zombie Shakespeare  
**When:** 8 p.m. Sept. 16-17, 2 p.m. Sept. 18, (additional dates through January 27)  
**Where:** Goodwood Museum & Gardens, 1600 Miccosukee Rd  
**Cost:** \$12 (Goodwood Members \$10)  
**Contact:** For more information, please call 850-339-4659 or visit [southernshake-spearafestival.org/zombie-shakespeare/](http://southernshake-spearafestival.org/zombie-shakespeare/).



Jackson is thrilled to continue spreading the words and joy of Eden Rush, and promises attendees will no longer fear Shakespeare in spite of the oncoming spooky Halloween season.

"I'm hoping students and adults who are afraid they won't understand it or find it entertaining will come away thinking that William Shakespeare is cool," smiles Jackson. "If there's any show to be your first taste of Shakespeare or to give it another chance, 'Zombie Shakespeare' is the show."

*Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture ([www.tallahasseearts.org](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).*

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