All the world’s a stage, wrote William Shakespeare, and the Baylor Theatre Arts department is finding inventive ways to take advantage of it—hosting performances in campus parking garages, Waco's Cottonland Castle, Cameron Park, and even the Student Living Center swimming pool.

Baylor's state-of-the-art Hooper-Schaefer Fine Arts Center hosts the university's major dramatic productions in its Jones and Mabee Theatres, but with the theatre department's impressive growth—it has tripled in size in recent years—existing theatre space has proven insufficient for performance demands. Rather than cutting back on student engagement, department chair Dr. Stan Denman turned a challenge into an opportunity. In 2009 he decided to offer students in his Advanced Directing course a chance to produce scenes from various Shakespeare plays at different locations around campus and in downtown Waco, in what thespians refer to as “found space theatres.”

Forty-minute “found space” adaptations of Shakespeare scenes directed by students are now regular exercises in Denman's Theatre 4365 course, “Advanced
Directing: Shakespeare on Location.” A particularly memorable performance of a scene from Titus Andronicus took place in one of the parking garages on campus. Since the adaptation was set in the modern world, vehicles were incorporated into the production, and at one point a character was thrown into the trunk of a car. Her realistic screams were overheard by individuals not viewing the production, prompting several 911 phone calls. (Students now post informational signs around their performance space and alert the police department in advance.)

Denman views these short productions as important learning opportunities for his students that would be difficult to achieve in traditional theatres. Directors are challenged to envision a performance from new perspectives. Working within an environment rather than in front of a background, they experiment with the aesthetics of space, depth, and angles. Additionally, performers must focus in spaces that often include unexpected noises, frequent passersby, and other unforeseeable distractions. Being heard clearly without the support of microphones or theatre acoustics forces them to hone their vocal abilities. All in all, students learn creativity and resourcefulness while preparing for a wide range of production scenarios, including film.

Moving from traditional theatres to open environments for these exercises has also altered the dramatic experience for audiences. When Denman’s students performed a scene from Hamlet in the Student Union Building, the audience followed Ophelia’s movement through a hallway, hearing her mad ravings echoing as they reproduced her wanderings. In another instance, audiences watched an adaptation of Macbeth while standing inside the tunnels near the bear pits.

Embracing the concept of “found space,” theatre students focus not on facility limitations but on new and exciting possibilities. That’s how an awed group of viewers found themselves in a torch-lit cemetery at night watching Romeo advance from a distance holding a lantern. By staging a scene amid the bamboo of Cameron Park, students producing a scene from The Tempest immediately transported an audience from Central Texas to the fantastic and exotic realm of Prospero. This willingness to consider new possibilities even led to some very brave actors to perform an unforgettable scene from The Taming of the Shrew in the SLC pool.

What began as an experiment in flexible learning environments has become a highlight of the theatre department. The creative performances Baylor has witnessed over the past several years affirm that the best teaching and learning occurs in a wide range of spaces—even those without walls.