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CELEBRATE SHAKESPEARE'S 400th ANNIVERSARY AND OUR 10th ISSUE
OPEN *BARDOLPH'S BOX* WITH UP THE ROAD DIRECTOR, NICOLA POLLARD
SEEK SHAKESPEARE IN EAST ASIAN HE WITH CHRISTY DESMET AND RETO WINCKLER
Find this magazine and more at the BSA Education Network's webpage
www.britishshakespeare.ws/education/

A MIGHTY THANK YOU!

The recent British Shakespeare Association conference in Hull marked the departure of the BSA's **Stuart Hampton-Reeves** and **Peter Smith** from their respective roles as the organisation's President and Treasurer. *Teaching Shakespeare* – celebrating here its tenth issue – would never have existed without their leadership and good counsel. Nor would it be such an eye-catching read without Stuart's suggestion to look at the work of our wonderful designer, Becky Chilcott. Stuart and Peter have been responsible for countless initiatives that have made the BSA truly appealing to and inclusive of educators across a wide range of sectors. Additionally, their expansive vision and judicious planning has meant that the BSA has been able to support education-related Shakespeare events and activities, such as Bardolph's Box, which we delve into this issue. A mighty 'Thank you!' to them both from the Editor and the Education Network. We're very much looking forward to working with their successors, Alison Findlay and Marion Wynne-Davies.

BRITISH SHAKESPEARE ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE 8–11 September 2016, Hull

We're always looking to publish your reports on teaching Shakespeare-related conferences, symposia, panels and workshops. Please contact sarah.olive@york.ac.uk if you're interested in contributing one. Perhaps you're burning to write about the bumper crop of education-related panels and workshops at the BSA's recent conference in Hull? These featured the work of Dominic Fitch (Shakespeare Schools Festival); active Shakespeare for GCSE students from Carolyn Booth; a Verbatim Song workshop by Michael Betteridge; insights into the Australian classroom and curriculum from the Shakespeare Reloaded project; performance pedagogy



from Tracy Irish, Jen Kitchen and Lali Dangazele; a panel on *The Tempest* in primary, secondary and university teaching led by Alison Findlay; and another panel, 'Dreaming of new educational spaces', led by Liam Semler.

BRITISH COUNCIL SHAKESPEARE LIVES

The British Council has a new Shakespeare Lives schools' pack created in conjunction with the Royal Shakespeare Company to mark the 400th Anniversary of Shakespeare's death in 2016. Using Shakespeare's plays, many of which feature on the national curriculum, this cross-curricular pack brings Shakespeare's plays to life and celebrates Shakespeare as a writer who still speaks for all people and nations. Exploring five distinct themes – leadership and power, family and relationships, identity and equality, justice and rules, and fate and destiny – the schools' pack provides a safe platform to discuss contemporary issues, helping students think critically and creatively about what it means to be a citizen in the twenty-first century. Find out more about Shakespeare Lives and download a copy of the Schools' pack here: www.shakespearelives.org/ and schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/classroom-resources/list/shakespeare-lives

SHAKESPEARE AND EUROPEAN THEATRICAL CULTURES: AN ATOMIZING TEXT AND STAGE 27–30 July 2017, University of Gdańsk and The Gdańsk Shakespeare Theatre, Poland

This conference will convene Shakespeare scholars at a theatre that proudly stands in the place where English players regularly performed 400 years ago. It ponders with renewed interest the relation between theatre and Shakespeare. Shakespeare has become the theatrical icon, a constant point of reference, the litmus paper for the formal, technological and ideological development of the theatre, and for the impact of adaptation and appropriation on theatrical cultures. His work has informed educational traditions, and, through forms of textual transmit has actively contributed to the process of building national distinctiveness. Papers are invited on the uses of Shakespeare in theatrical cultures across Europe and beyond, with a focus on textual/performative practices, on the educational dimension of Shakespeare in theatre, on the interface between text, film and stage productions, on his impact on popular culture, on Shakespearean traces in European collective and individual memory, and on his broader cultural legacy. For further information, see esra2017.eu/call-for-papers/

NICOLA POLLARD read her undergraduate degree at Homerton College, University of Cambridge, in English and Drama with Education, before a two-year MFA programme in Staging Shakespeare at Exeter University. Now a theatre director, she is Artistic Director of Up The Road Theatre (www.uptheroadtheatre.co.uk). Nicola is also Creative Director of education initiative Bard Boot Camp.

I first conceived the idea of *Bardolph's Box* in 2013. I'd graduated from a Shakespeare MFA programme at the start of the year, a course which had enabled me to direct a variety of Shakespeare projects and complete two residencies at Shakespeare's Globe. I knew his works held a deep interest for me and my undergraduate degree had got me thinking about how I could combine the two. *Bardolph's Box* was initially a response to a library commission for Shakespeare 450 (it now seems apt we created the production to commemorate Shakespeare 400 instead). Needless to say as a green theatre practitioner I didn't get the gig. But an idea had germinated and over the next year or so it took root until I had a particularly inspiring conversation with an Artistic Director from Edinburgh and six months at The Globe working with Giles Block, Head of Text. The time had come to bite the bullet and give the show a shot.

I knew Bardolph, of *Henry IVs*, *Henry V* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* fame, could be an ideal central character. I'd directed an abridged version of *1 Henry IV* whilst at Exeter University and our audience of Key Stage 2 pupils had reacted with delight at the foolery of Bardolph. (Due to the youth of the actor we had steered away from the more traditional presentation of Bardolph, and let's not talk about his demise in *Henry V*...) I planned a short show in which other characters from Shakespeare's plays dropped in on Bardolph, in need of a listening ear or a helping hand. This way the young audience could meet a number of characters from different plays but without being overwhelmed by a complex plot. I knew I wanted to include some original language and for there to



Photograph © Brian Roberts

be some audience participation – of the en-masse variety, not the 'I need a volunteer' type. It would be small-scale, for two actors, with no need for stage lights, amplified sound or projection, and easily tour-able to libraries, school halls and other similar venues. That is pretty much the production we went on to make in late 2015/early 2016, except Bardolph now has two friends rather than one and his own story is much more exciting than I initially imagined. Thanks to my wonderful designer, Alice Smith, the show looks far more impressive than I ever envisaged, the backdrop and box in particular are stunning. He has toured to libraries, arts centres, theatres and schools, to over 1700 children in a number of UK towns, cities and villages. This autumn he is due to head out again, to Greenwich and Lewisham, Cumbria, Malvern, Gloucestershire and Harlow, to meet more children and inspire them to engage with the Bard.

"I PLANNED A SHORT SHOW IN WHICH OTHER CHARACTERS FROM SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS DROPPED IN ON BARDOLPH, IN NEED OF A LISTENING EAR OR A HELPING HAND. THIS WAY THE YOUNG AUDIENCE COULD MEET A NUMBER OF CHARACTERS FROM DIFFERENT PLAYS BUT WITHOUT BEING OVERWHELMED BY A COMPLEX PLOT."

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Touring to schools can be problematic. The main issue is usually budget. Companies need to earn an income but we are aware of limitations within schools. Access to a school often lies with that one teacher who believes in what you are doing, or a forward-thinking head who will find the money regardless. Once you have that person on board, and any other people it is necessary to persuade, you can find a time in your tour schedule that fits with their timetable. In all but one case we played in the school hall, which is ideal for our show. *Bardolph's Box* is suitable for years 3 to 6 and we can perform to a maximum of around 90 children. We might do one or two shows at a school, perhaps with a workshop. Up The Road tour with everything we need. Due to our non-existent tech specification there's no need for power sockets or cables a-plenty. When we visit libraries or venues it's exactly the same: we turn up, set up, perform and get out. I wanted to make it simple for schools and it was. You might have enough of a battle getting permission and the money in the first place, the least I can do is make our time with you hassle-free.

If our audience responses and their feedback is to be believed, the production works. Time spent with key stage 2 classes during our Research and Development time was time well spent. I think these children enjoyed it too; one child said to us as we left in January, 'Don't worry, it's not long til March!'. We went into our two weeks of rehearsal confident that we were hitting the right level for our audience, in terms of

their understanding and enjoyment. When we returned with the production, many pupils remembered certain characters or scenes that we had shared in our first visit, and delighted in this.

The aim was three-fold, to introduce children to some of Shakespeare's plays, to illustrate how much joy and interest there is in these plays and to give our audiences an experience of live theatre in their community. Too often Shakespeare's plays are put on a pedestal, as some kind of celestial texts that are only to be undertaken when a person is good and ready. After all, if an adult allegedly needs a degree to understand the plays, what hope can a child have? Or they are deemed complicated, told in a difficult language with big words? Although, as I pointed out to someone the other day, they're not big words, just old, and many of them we still use today. Whilst undertaking research for my undergraduate dissertation, a fourteen year old boy told me that he didn't like Shakespeare because his dad told him it was boring. I don't know if anything will ever change that child's mind, I hope so. As we know from the work of Rex Gibson, Shakespeare's plays were badly taught for a very long time, and in some

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places probably still are. They are plays, texts for the stage, for performance, and that aspect of their nature cannot be ignored. Which is why seeing the plays live, as the RSC and so many others advocate, is vital to engage and interest young people (or, indeed, any people) in the work of the Bard.

So what does Bardolph do to make the plays seem interesting, relevant and enjoyable? Firstly, he uses humour, both in his interaction with the young audience and by his own self-deprecating nature. One of his first challenges is to open this incredible box he's found on the island, and he encourages the children to suggest ideas. One teacher noted: *Previous plays seen have all been 'serious'. This added a fun aspect to Shakespeare.* Our actor, Stuart, has a fantastic ability with physical comedy, his facial expression and ease of movement create the youthful persona that children like. Bardolph himself (and Stuart) are having fun, and this translates to the audience. The scenes were always fun or relatively light-hearted, without doing the plays an injustice. Some of the characters, such as Lance from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, were probably new to the children, but some they recognised. We haven't altered any of the original scenarios, if we felt a relationship or theme had to be dumbed down or changed to suit our audience, we didn't include it.

Secondly, the other two actors multi-role throughout the show, indicating their different characters through costume and props. Our audience experience a range of tones, emotions and literal colours as they witness, amongst others, Ariel,

Prospero, Puck, a Montague and a Capulet. Cleopatra is played by a man, Hal by a woman, an idea that the children had little problem with. As one teacher commented:

"I LIKED THAT THE PLAY SHOWED THAT MALES CAN PLAY FEMALE ROLES AND VICE VERSA WITHOUT IT BEING 'SILLY' FOR CHILDREN."

The production makes Shakespeare's language accessible. Usually each character is introduced through dialogue written by me, before slipping into an extract from a scene. We never comment on the language, there are no instances of 'Hark at you!', and we never highlight that it might be difficult or hard to understand. Bardolph understands what is being said, and so the children, by and large, do too. We use prose and verse and the new writing is based on pre-existing speeches from the texts. We worked closely on the text in rehearsal, exploring the intricacies of the words and the form. The actors' delivery is good, the meaning is clear and their intentions are strong.

In addition to providing an opportunity for live theatre and an experience of Shakespeare, many of the performances proved how much imagination children have. For example, when he asks for magic words, the children responded with great creativity and gusto ('potato' is such a word, apparently). This imagination continued into the workshops we delivered, as children portrayed characters or moments through tableaux or mime, often small moments that I wouldn't have thought

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they would notice. Being on their feet, working with different people gave students who might not ordinarily get the chance to shine to be seen and heard. A lad with severe learning difficulties happily presented his turtle on the island, and took great care to consider every detail. Without fail all the pupils we met loved working with my actors. Here were four new people in their hall, working with them to create snippets of theatre.

Our resource pack, Bardolph's Toolbox, aims to continue this work after our visit. In this we include ideas for classroom-based drama, such as tableaux, soundscape and vocal exploration, plus activities involving art, literacy and discussion. These went down well with our teachers, with one emailing us after their performance to say the production had *stimulated all sorts of creative writing by the pupils*. It's hard to be creative without a stimulus, whatever age you are. Live theatre can prove a brilliant stimulus for all sorts of activity, plus personal and intellectual development, and I wish more people realised that. (You probably do, which is why you have *Teaching Shakespeare* in your hand.)

Our production also proved to teachers that Shakespeare can be enjoyed by children, some as young as eight, and they can understand it: 71% of teachers who responded to our evaluation said the show changed their view of Shakespeare, particularly in regard to their pupils' enjoyment and comprehension. Could anything else have had this impact except live theatre?

“71% OF TEACHERS WHO RESPONDED TO OUR EVALUATION SAID THE SHOW CHANGED THEIR VIEW OF SHAKESPEARE, PARTICULARLY IN REGARD TO THEIR PUPILS' ENJOYMENT AND COMPREHENSION.”

“PERHAPS ONE DAY LIVE THEATRE WILL BE AS MUCH A PART OF SCHOOL LIFE AS ASSEMBLY AND LUMPY CUSTARD.”

I wish it was easier for children (and adults) to access live theatre, that companies could visit more schools and work with greater numbers of children of all ages, especially those in more remote or less-advantaged communities. A teacher from inner-city Liverpool emailed me to say that *seeing such a high quality, memorable performance is crucial in helping raise their expectations*, another commented her pupils had *chatted non-stop all the way home about the piece*. I'm not the first person to notice the impact of productions such as *Bardolph's Box*, you yourself might have witnessed it too. There are incredibly strong links between experiencing live theatre, developing abilities with literacy and enhancing social skills. A lot has to change before this will become universally acknowledged, but I believe we can all make headway in our own ways. Perhaps one day live theatre will be as much a part of school life as assembly and lumpy custard.

I'm really interested in exploring what would facilitate easier and better relationships between schools and theatre companies. Every school is different but if we could find some common denominators, such as the best methods of contacting schools in the first place, we could make some progress in what is acknowledged in education and theatre circles as a real challenge. If you would be interested in helping me with this by answering a few simple questions, please do email me on: Nicola@uptheroadtheatre.co.uk

Thank you.

CHRISTY DESMET is Josiah Meigs Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University of Georgia. She is editor or co-editor of *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, *Harold Bloom's Shakespeare*, and *Shakespearean Gothic*. With Sujata Iyengar, she founded and edits *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*. From March–June 2015, she was a Fulbright Distinguished Lecturer at Underwood International College of Yonsei University in Seoul, Korea.

Between March 1 and June 30, 2015, I was a Senior Fulbright Lecturer at Underwood International College, Yonsei University. The College is housed at Yonsei's global campus in the newly-built city of Songdo, reclaimed from the sea and still very much a work in progress. There I taught two classes: a First-year Writing Intensive Seminar and a class in Shakespeare and Media. Both were courses that I had taught before in the U.S., and in fact, I had prepared for the trip by teaching the same texts in Fall 2014 at the University of Georgia, my home institution. The students of Underwood International College are largely, although by no means exclusively, Korean; most of them, based on my sample of thirty-six students, had substantial experience in living and attending school in other countries, ranging from England

and France to India, China, and Los Angeles. All classes were taught in English. My students' oral and written facility with the language was very good, their focused energy for communicating in English inspiring and sometimes daunting. This was a group with whom you could talk about countable and non-countable nouns or restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses as well as Hamlet, Ophelia, and the Trevor Nunn *Twelfth Night*.

On June 21, fewer than three weeks before returning home, I finally had my first opportunity to see a Korean Shakespeare production in Seoul. *Hamlet Cantabile* was performed at the National Theatre to a full audience composed, as far as I could tell, largely of college-age or youngish people. The Director is O-Seop Bae, the group Tuida, and the piece, which first premiered in 2006, has played in many locales, including the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2007. According to the program, *Hamlet Cantabile* is a "Nanjang," a farcical story, which deals with tragedy with the playful attitude of "Unfortunately,

"USING MASKS, PUPPETS, AND OTHER ASSORTED OBJECTS, WHILE SINGING BIZARRE AND GROTESQUE SONGS, THE JESTERS EVOKE THE INNER WORLD OF HAMLET AND THE PEOPLE AROUND HIM"



Photograph © Gina Smith/Shutterstock.com

I am still alive, in this idiotic world!" Four jesters play with bits and pieces left behind by the dead Hamlet. Using masks, puppets, and other assorted objects, while singing bizarre and grotesque songs, the jesters evoke the inner world of Hamlet and the people around him.

My response, as a scholar and teacher, to this performance of a familiar Shakespeare play in a foreign language was not unexpected. First, I was pleased by my ability to follow the plot, and second, from my position of relative estrangement, I was struck primarily by the aesthetics of the lyrical, aurally and visually-rich drama. At a distance of five months, I still remember particularly a moment when Hamlet's character was transformed as the actor shifted the Hamlet puppet's head to a wine opener, whose wings-arms waved maniacally to signify the Prince's madness, until the head was shifted once more to a watering can and finally, a concertina. Diminutive and dependent for his very being on the availability of common objects, this puppet Hamlet was fragile, indeed.

Within the waning weeks of my Korean stay I also saw a harsher, more opaque drama, "The Lost Tears in *Hamlet*," by the Theatre Group Seongbukdong Beedoolkee. The play's political ethos is conveyed succinctly by a monolithic statue of (presumably) Hamlet Senior that is seen in promotional materials (see also Creutzenberg). Music and dance again were prevalent, with Hamlet's death at the hands of persons wearing different uniforms ritualistically repeated to the accompaniment of songs, of which I recognized the Korean national anthem, familiar in the U.S. as "Auld Lang Syne," and Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody." This time, I could not follow the plot particularly well, and the political message remained merely suggestive. Hamlet and others die in a predictable pattern of slaughter, regardless of the politics of successive regimes. The uniforms may change, but the players and their fate do not (for discussions of Korean Shakespeares in their historical context see Kim Moran and Kim Dong-wook).

"my experience of these two *Hamlet* appropriations was a mild version of Michael Dobson's somewhat exasperated characterization of himself as an 'uninformed spectator'."

My experience of these two *Hamlet* appropriations was a mild version of Michael Dobson's somewhat exasperated characterization of himself as an "uninformed spectator" at the 2012 Globe to Globe performance of the Armenian *King John*. Teaching in Korea also had moments of estrangement, but they were not directly connected with Shakespeare or students.

Learning yet another technology podium (this one with some instructions in English but the buttons in the *hangul* alphabet

only; remembering how to get to my classroom; getting something printed or scanned in the Korean-only copy shop; figuring out what films would be available to me, panicking when a copy of Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, which had been available on YouTube for several years, was pulled by Warner Brothers between my Tuesday and Thursday classes). For the most part, the classroom felt familiar. The students, as well, were used to American and European teachers. Mostly, I remember my experiences within the walls of my classroom to be comfortable, fun, and rewarding.

"NONE OF MY KOREAN STUDENTS WERE FAMILIAR WITH THE EXPERIMENTAL SHAKESPEARES I SAW IN SEOUL. NONE OF MY U.S. STUDENTS, PERHAPS MORE SURPRISINGLY, HAD SEEN ANY LIVE PERFORMANCE OF SHAKESPEARE. WHAT, IN THE END, PROVIDED BOTH GROUPS WITH AN ENTRÉE INTO "SHAKESPEARE" WAS POPULAR CULTURE."

Neither set of students, however, were particularly familiar with Shakespeare, canonical or otherwise. None of my Korean students were familiar with the experimental Shakespeares I saw in Seoul. None of my U.S. students, perhaps more surprisingly, had seen any live performance of Shakespeare. What, in the end, provided both groups with an entrée into "Shakespeare" was popular culture.

Both my University of Georgia and my Underwood International College classes studied *Twelfth Night*, along with the Trevor Nunn film starring Ben Kingsley and Imogen Stubbs. One thing they shared was knowledge of the play's most famous aphorism, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Both groups were surprised to find this saying traced to Shakespeare. "Who did you *think* said that?" I asked my Georgia students. "Someone famous." "It is someone famous. It's Shakespeare." "No," they replied, "it's just Maria." Some of my students in both the U.S. and Korea were more certain. The author of that quote is none other than Coach Dinklage of the Illyria soccer team, played by real-life footballer Vinnie Jones (a fact unknown to all the students). The Andy Fickman film, *She's the Man*, proved to have currency among both sets of students. The knowledge was inflected according to gender – in both countries, more girls than boys remembered the film fondly from their adolescence. And yes, both groups connected "Some are born great" with its second-wave feminist restatement by Coach Dinklage: "In Illyria, we don't discriminate based on gender."

"ONE THING THEY SHARED WAS KNOWLEDGE OF THE PLAY'S MOST FAMOUS APHORISM, 'SOME ARE BORN GREAT, SOME ACHIEVE GREATNESS, AND SOME HAVE GREATNESS THRUST UPON THEM.' BOTH GROUPS WERE SURPRISED TO FIND THIS SAYING TRACED TO SHAKESPEARE."

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Even within Shakespop, age as much as nationality became important in our shared cache of Shakespeare appropriations. With the Underwood students, I wanted to take the conversation about cross-dressed teens toward other TV shows gleaned from a crash course in K-drama conducted in preparation for the Fulbright. Many of us knew *The Coffee Prince*, where a girl cross-dresses in order to infiltrate an all-boy coffee shop. The students did not seem to know, however, two appropriations of *Twelfth Night* that I had watched on Netflix. The first is *You are Beautiful*, a romantic comedy in which a convent girl substitutes on short notice for her twin brother in a popular boy band. Not surprisingly, everyone falls in love with her. The second is *To the Beautiful You*, in which a girl cross-dresses in order to infiltrate a boys’ school and make contact with an Olympic-quality high-jumper who has lost his nerve for the sport. Again, she becomes an object of widespread desire, but the athlete also regains his nerve and triumphs in his sport. These two shows were produced in 2009 and 2012; most likely, by those years my Korean students were beyond the target demographic for such teen dramas. The year 2006, and its smash hit *She’s the Man*, nevertheless provided a point of commonality between the two sets of eighteen-year olds from different continents.

Critical discussion of what has been called, variously, Asian Shakespeare or intercultural Shakespeare focuses on the political complexities of both creating and receiving productions of the kind I experienced in Seoul (see Kennedy, Bharucha, Trivedi, and Lee Hyon-U and co-authors). At the same time, teen Shakespeare has often been denigrated as part of Hollywood’s absorption of both Shakespeare and indigenous art forms into commodity culture. From my classroom experiences, however, I left Korea with a sense of what Shakespop – Hollywood teen Shakespeare – can contribute, at least within local educational settings, to a common conversation about Shakespeare and the many cultures, East to West and high to low, in which “he” can be located.

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THE XISU SHAKESPEARE SOCIETY, 2009–2013

RETO WINCKLER is a PhD candidate in English Literature at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Originally from Hamburg, Germany, he has been living and teaching in China since 2008. His main academic interests are Shakespeare, Wittgenstein, modernism, European, American and Asian history, and cross-cultural relations.

I founded the XISU Shakespeare Society together with a number of undergraduate students in 2009. Before leaving XISU in 2012, I asked my students to write about their experiences, and in preparation for writing this article I asked them to complete a short survey to see how they remember the experience today. In the democratic spirit of the Society, I give as much room as possible to the students' voices here.

I came to the People's Republic of China in September 2008 after graduating from Hamburg University with an M.A. in English Literature and started working as an English language and literature instructor in the English Department of the Xi'an International Studies University (XISU). Even though Xi'an is one of the cultural centres of China and the major city in the Northwestern of the country, it lags far behind cities like Beijing and Shanghai in terms of economic development. Nevertheless, Xi'an is home to a number of nationally competitive universities, and XISU is one of the top 5 foreign language universities in the PRC.

After my arrival I soon realised what Chen Tianyu, who would later play Titania in our production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, puts as follows: "Students who major in English Language and Literature in China seldom read Shakespeare, and there are very few courses about him and his works." I therefore started the XISU Shakespeare Society as an extra-curricular reading group in fall 2009 to give interested students an opportunity to read and experience Shakespeare's plays in their original English.

At the beginning there were fifteen students in the group. We began by reading *Hamlet* with distributed roles and then discussed the scenes and monologues we had read. However, we quickly came to realise that, as student Li Meng expressed

"students who major in English language and literature in China seldom read Shakespeare, and there are very few courses about him and his works."

it later: "Acting is the best way to study and get close to Shakespeare." It did not take long until someone proposed that we should put on a full performance. A poster, designed by Liu Tian and Zou Siqi, drew new members to the first audition.

We quickly decided on *The Merchant of Venice* as the appropriate play for our first production. The play, as well as the actors and actresses during the rehearsal, were chosen democratically by all members of the Society. I learned that *Merchant* is by far the most commonly read Shakespeare play in Chinese high schools. Students mentioned two main reasons why authorities have students read the court scene of *Merchant* in school. First, Chinese people appreciate intelligence and shrewdness as a virtue, which is seen as embodied by Portia in that scene. As Ren Jiayin put it, in *Merchant* "a good man dodges a bullet and no one gets hurt because Portia is able to cleverly find a logical flaw in the law". Second, and more important, are political reasons, as Song Tingting comments: "Pieces of writing in school textbooks should be firstly politically right, secondly morally good and thirdly have literary value. That is the rule. Conflicts in race, gender and class are seldom discussed in China, but capitalism is frequently criticised. As the play seems to reveal conflicts within capitalist society, a student like me would think a businessman like Shylock must be the product of that "man-eating" economic system and an embodiment of capitalist society, thus proving by contrast that socialism is good. Justice is shown to eventually defeat capitalist evil."

"pieces of writing in school textbooks should be firstly politically right, secondly morally good and thirdly have literary value. that is the rule. conflicts in race, gender and class are seldom discussed in China, but capitalism is frequently criticised."

For our performance, we shortened the Oxford School Shakespeare text of the *Merchant* by more than fifty per cent but did not change Shakespeare's language, a practice that we kept up for the later productions as well. Typically, only the first four lines of a twenty-line speech would survive our ruthless cuts, but the result was a play which even audience members with limited English skills could enjoy.

While reading and editing the text the students quickly came to realise that Shylock in *Merchant* is actually much more complex, profound and human than the caricature of an evil capitalist they had learned about in school. Chen Yuyang



(who played the Duke) describes the process of discovery: “We saw that Shakespeare’s work is not simple at all but that the simplistic version familiar to us veers far away from the original. We re-read and re-interpreted it almost as a completely new story.” In our production, Shylock ultimately emerged as a man at least as much sinned against than sinning. The photo opposite, which shows Antonio looming over Shylock, captures our interpretation.

Our production style and acting focused on making sure that the audience would be able to follow the plot by supporting all speeches and dialogue with stage action. We used a lot of music, both classical and popular, Chinese and “Western”, for emotional effect. In what to me remains the most memorable scene, Shylock walked around the dimly lit stage alone to the tune of Timbaland’s “It’s too late to apologize” shortly before the court scene, audibly whetting his knife on a dagger. While they were happy to use modern music, the students insisted on wearing traditional costumes, which we borrowed from a shop in the centre of Xi’an.

For the leads, the students chose Zou Siqi as Shylock and Xiong Peipei as Antonio, and I was bullied into playing the director, a role that I would later reprise for the following two productions as well. As in later productions, there was a constant shortage of male actors, so that most male roles were played by female students, nicely reversing the situation of Shakespeare’s own day. The only male roles actually played by men in our *Merchant* were Antonio and Bassanio (Huang Yuzhuo).

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During the rehearsals I focused mainly on relaxing students into being comfortable on the stage. Performing and singing are immensely popular pastimes in China, but the idea that strong physical action and actual body contact were necessary to get emotion across to the audience took some getting used to. Still, once initial reservations were overcome, it all worked out beautifully, and the students loved it. Xie Yu (who played one of the fairies attending Titania in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*) captures the atmosphere of our rehearsals well: “Every rehearsal brought new experiences and realisations. For example, we would stand on the stage with our eyes closed and imagine that the room was filled with people looking at us. We would listen to what we can hear and feel what we can feel.” Hao Chenlu (Helena) describes another technique we frequently used during the rehearsals, that of having two actors randomly meet on the stage, in character: “My favorite moment was the coincidental meeting of two actors, because it required a lot of imagination to act, and the sparks turned out to be superbly interesting.”

Huang Yuzhuo captures the essence of the overall experience of the Society’s first production: “From the point when Shakespeare wrote the text of *The Merchant of Venice* to when it had made the long way to us in Xi’an at the present day; from the moment we started reading the *Merchant* to when we finally began to understand it; from this moment of understanding to the point at which we used our bodies and voices to give life to the words on the page; how could this be called anything else but an amazing theatrical journey?”

“FROM THIS MOMENT OF UNDERSTANDING TO THE POINT AT WHICH WE USED OUR BODIES AND VOICES TO GIVE LIFE TO THE WORDS ON THE PAGE; HOW COULD THIS BE CALLED ANYTHING ELSE BUT AN AMAZING THEATRICAL JOURNEY?”

The production turned out to be a big success with the audience. Yang Guowei, who would later go on to act Sir Toby Belch in our production of *Twelfth Night*, watched the premiere of the play: “The performers overwhelmed me. Especially Zou Siqi, whose rendering of Shylock upended the stereotype, was so thrilling to watch.” We also received a lot of applause and support from the School of English Studies and especially its Vice Dean Li Fangjun, and were strongly urged to do another production the next year. While our *Merchant* production had been put together completely on



our own initiative and wallets, during the next two years we were funded by the English department, and my teaching load was lowered to enable me to spend more time on the Shakespeare Society.

In winter 2010/11, we started rehearsing *Twelfth Night*, or *What You Will*. While we had given our production of *Merchant* a rather tragic slant, *Twelfth Night* was all about having fun. About half the roles were played by new members, with the cast again being chosen during auditions by democratic vote, and again being dominated by female students. The cross-dressing of Viola (Liu Tian), who changed from a dress into a military uniform on stage, and of Malvolio, played by the female student Dong Dan, was particularly enthusiastically received by the audience, as were the homoerotically-charged relationship between Antonio (played by myself) and Sebastian (Sun Shangying) and the antics of Sir Andrew (Chen Lin), Sir Toby (Yang Guowei), Feste (Guo Liang), Maria (Yan Yongmei) and Olivia (Wang Huan).

“THE SHAKESPEARE SOCIETY CHALLENGED ME AND I CAME TO BELIEVE THAT SHAKESPEARE IS FOR THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE WORLD – IT IS MAGICAL TO PERFORM SHAKESPEAREAN PLAYS BECAUSE I GOT SO MUCH ENERGY BY PUTTING MYSELF IN HIS MAGNIFICENT CHARACTERS.”

Liu Tian reflects on her experience: “Before I joined the society it seemed unimaginable that I could act Viola, a lead character in *Twelfth Night* who has so many lines. The

Shakespeare Society challenged me and I came to believe that Shakespeare IS for the people and for the world – it IS magical to perform Shakespearean plays because I got so much energy by putting myself in his magnificent characters. I guess that’s why I picked up the lines without much difficulty.” Song Tingting, who played the Captain, remembers the flash mob we organised on campus in full costume to promote our production: “What I remember most distinctly is the costume show as promotion of our play. We got ourselves dressed in costumes and paraded around the campus. It was really post-modern, a collage of a modern background and us as Elizabethan figures.” Once again, the production was very successful.

Now firmly established, we began rehearsing for our third production, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, in winter 2011/12. This time, almost all the students were new to the Society, which made rehearsing with them a very fresh experience. Notable features of the production were the very spirited catfights between Helena (Hao Chenlu) and Hermia (Wang Wanyun), the marital quarrel of Oberon (Zhang Nan) and the supreme Titania (Chen Tianyu) and of course the rude mechanical’s performance, led by a perfect Bottom (Lu Wei) and rounded off by what must have been the best Lion performance of all time, by Liang Yan.

“IT REQUIRES PROFESSIONAL AND INSPIRING ACTING TEACHERS TO GET STUDENTS INTERESTED AND SCHOOLS HAVE TO OFFER TIME, MONEY AND OPPORTUNITIES.”

Yang Qing (Demetrius) describes how experience was passed down from the first Society generation to her own: "I remember that the older student Zou Siqi told me: if you want to act your role well you have to devote yourself to it heart and soul. So what I first had to do to act Demetrius was to understand him well. Apart from reading his part in the play, this meant for me to watch movies, look up pictures and photos and read every bit of information about Demetrius I could get my hands on." And Ren Jiayin reflects on the amazing process in which the students found that Shakespeare's language was actually accessible to them: "I never imagined that a group of Chinese students could speak such beautiful English; how we could remember all these lines and all this poetry in Early Modern English is amazing to me, but we did it." Once again, we played to a packed house and received a lot of applause.

I would like to give special mention to Cai Shuo here, who was the showrunner on the Dream, and who tried (unfortunately unsuccessfully) to keep the Shakespeare Society alive after I had left Xi'an. He and a number of students began working on a production of *Much Ado about Nothing*, but due to a lack of funding from the school and a lack of interest on part of the students it never saw the lights of the stage. Cai Shuo ultimately found, what he sees as, a lack of awareness of how important Shakespeare can be on part of the university after I had left: "I know that Shakespeare is still a huge thing in the UK, but I didn't feel the culture in the English department I was in at XISU. Here Shakespeare was just a name... What the plays could bring to the learning of English is limitless, but it was ignored because it was "hard" and not a single teacher in the school knew much about it. It's sad. All in all, being in the Society was a good experience, I just wished it had lasted and that we as an English school had more studies and lessons on it."

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Hao Chenlu would later draw similar conclusions about the state of Shakespeare teaching and performance in China: "In China, Shakespeare is still a name too far to reach in many developing areas. The acting club can be a really good way to introduce Shakespeare to the students. But it requires professional and inspiring acting teachers to get students

"BEFORE, SHAKESPEARE FOR ME WAS A NAME THAT WE LEARNED FROM BOOKS, I KNEW THE FAMOUS STORIES, AND I HONORED HIM. BUT AFTER OUR PERFORMANCE, I FEEL HE'S LIKE A FRIEND, LIKE WE SOMEHOW ARE CONNECTED... I KNOW HIM NOW."

interested and schools have to offer time, money and opportunities."

To conclude, I would like to share what some of the students said when I asked them, three to five years after their Society performances, what they think they had learned from the experience and how it influenced what they think of Shakespeare:

Xiong Peipei: "In reading and acting Shakespeare's works, I discovered that however the world develops and changes, some basic principles of humanity and human society are here to stay, such as love, friendship, hatred, discrimination, human bonds, etc."

Liu Tian: "I think Shakespeare is never outdated and the subversive post-modern spirit embedded in his plays could even get a wider reception and an opener interpretation today."

Ying Yuezheng, (Lorenzo in *Merchant*): "Before, Shakespeare for me was a name that we learned from books, I knew the famous stories, and I honored him. But after our performance, I feel he's like a friend, like we somehow are connected... I know him now."

Huang Yuzhuo: "After the performance, I found that I liked reading a lot more. Whenever I read a story now I will have a vivid impression of how it might be played on a stage. Whenever I see a movie I pay attention to the dialogue and the acting and think about how I once did that myself. In combination with performance, literature becomes way more interesting!"

Yang Guowei: "I now know this: Shakespeare is approachable."

Li Meng: "Finally I propose a toast for Shakespeare. He is the real Oberon in our life, who uses his magic to bring us together and adds bright color to my life and to this wonderful world."

**COMING IN TEACHING SHAKESPEARE ISSUE 11:
Vox pops from Vietnam to Birmingham**

'I NEED TO COOL IT WITH THE CLOSE READING ALREADY'

fAYAZ KABANI has an MFA in Creative Writing and is currently working on his dissertation in Renaissance Literature at the University of South Carolina. He is an English instructor at Allen University, teaching freshman composition, oral language, creative writing, British literature, Chaucer, and Shakespeare.

Apologies for rehashing what may be obvious to many of you who read this publication, but I have only recently discovered that college students aren't turned on by intensive close reading!!! Who would've guessed?

I suppose my blindness to this issue stems from my own background. I assume many of my fellow instructors can relate. I was considered a good writer and reader all through K-12 and took Honors and AP courses in English. I was "college-ready". On top of being the stereotypical "good student" and majoring in English, I earned an MFA in Creative Writing with a focus in poetry. I have been trained to revere the magic of the

written word. Since graduate school, I have taught exclusively at the college level, and I'm working on my dissertation in Renaissance Literature. I teach Shakespeare the way I was taught to read him. I had always assumed "the way" to teach these plays centered around close reading.

Given the changing demographics in American colleges, many students, if not most, don't have this level of ease with the comprehension of centuries-old works of literature. They haven't had the same privileges we, or at least I, have had. Perhaps due to our obsessions with the written language, our young adulthoods shaped by our quietly devouring novels and single-author poetry collections in our bedrooms as young adults, we assume our students are as fixated by words on a page as we are. No matter how much I "ground" Shakespeare at the beginning of the semester, stressing that he was a playwright and actor (disreputable

"ON TOP OF BEING THE STEREOTYPICAL 'GOOD STUDENT' AND MAJORING IN ENGLISH, I EARNED AN MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING WITH A FOCUS IN POETRY. I HAVE BEEN TRAINED TO REVERE THE MAGIC OF THE WRITTEN WORD."

Photograph © Christian Bertrand / Shutterstock.com



“PERHAPS DUE TO OUR OBSESSIONS WITH THE WRITTEN LANGUAGE, OUR YOUNG ADULTHOODS SHAPED BY OUR QUIETLY DEVOURING NOVELS AND SINGLE-AUTHOR POETRY COLLECTIONS IN OUR BEDROOMS AS YOUNG ADULTS, WE ASSUME OUR STUDENTS ARE AS FIXATED BY WORDS ON A PAGE AS WE ARE.”

professions at the time) who wrote to get butts in the seats for monetary gain and that the Globe had to compete with bear-baiting houses, bars, and brothels for customers, I end up re-mystifying Shakespeare’s work by trying to show my students all the wonderful ambiguities of his language.

While we literary professionals have become addicted to ambiguity like beer drinkers crave hops, our students have simpler tastes and understandings. I remember I got into reading “Literature” in high school because I thought I could find “Truth” there. The puzzle to reality could be solved if I could just find enough of the pieces. Now, I read to get as confused and befuddled as possible.

The obsession with close reading has to do with the way literature has been taught predominantly since New Criticism. Shakespeare, by virtue of its being *Shakespeare*, increases the burden on teacher and student of focusing on language. Even those of us equally or more interested in Shakespeare’s contemporaries recognize that, on a language level, Shakespeare surpasses them.

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In addition to teaching students close reading (because that’s what English majors do) and in preparation for exams, I think we focus on this act of intensive analysis of diction, allusion, metaphor, etc. because we want to show our expertise to heighten our credibility. Lastly, we want to take some of Shakespeare’s glory for ourselves. If Shakespeare’s awesome, we’re awesome. We love his work and want to show our students how amazing it is, but we do so by showing how dense and indeterminate the text is. This turns Shakespeare into a multi-faceted diamond that blinds students with its brilliance, impossibly hard to penetrate, let alone scratch the surface of.

As a high school student, I understood Shakespeare a lot more watching it acted out. I couldn’t catch all the words or

“AS A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT, I UNDERSTOOD SHAKESPEARE A LOT MORE WATCHING IT ACTED OUT. I COULDN’T CATCH ALL THE WORDS OR OBSCURE CULTURAL REFERENCES BEING MADE, BUT I COULD TELL A LOT BY THE ACTORS’ DELIVERY.”

obscure cultural references being made, but I could tell a lot by the actors’ delivery. Thus, I plan to incorporate more video into my pedagogy this fall. I’ll teach fewer plays, go slower, and worry more about if students have grasped the central conflicts and motivations of the characters rather than if we marched through all the “important” passages.

“HAVING TO PLAY THE CHARACTERS THEMSELVES, PUTTING THEIR OWN FEELINGS INTO THOSE WORDS (AND THOSE WORDS INTO THEIR OWN FEELINGS), WILL GIVE STUDENTS AN AVENUE INTO THE THIS WORK WE VALUE SO MUCH.”

I will also include more student performance throughout the semester. I benefited from those monologue memorization exercises. The words, thoughts, and feelings of the characters became a lot more real when I had to say them myself. Drama is an art of performance. Having to play the characters themselves, putting their own feelings into those words (and those words into their own feelings), will give students an avenue into the this work we value so much. Once they have a grasp, once they can relate to the humanity in the plays, maybe then they can bust out their OEDs or have their minds blown by Harry Berger, Jr. Until then, our mission should be the same as Shakespeare’s: getting our students *wanting* to engage with more plays.

Is Shakespeare best experienced by students on stage? Page? Or both? Contributors to this issue have championed teaching Shakespeare using performance – live or filmed. Email sarah.olive@york.ac.uk if you would like to share your thoughts on, experiences with and ideas for close-reading.

