

b e l f a s t

It's 1951 and we are in the Mummery, at The Perse School in Cambridge, a large room where there is a stage and we act out Shakespeare a little, during English lessons. I'm looking ahead and I'm anxious. I shall be reading Antony in *Julius Caesar* where in the aftermath of the murder of Julius, Mark Antony agrees that his own sister's son, Publius, shall not live: he utters: *look, with a spot I damn him*. I'm from a Non-conformist, Sabbath-observing background, for which I have every reason to be grateful. It is a non-swearing household, too, so the use of *damn* attacks my childish conscience. I need to ask for help. My beloved teacher sweeps away my fears. I had underlined that word in the text in my anxiety, but Douglas Brown expressed Antony's callous disregard for Publius in no uncertain terms and quashed my fears.

My beloved teacher has programmed me to know that Shakespeare is the master - through his own enthusiasm, his scholarship, his utter certainty that Shakespeare knows, understands and communicates via the stage and through words more than any other human being has ever done.

It is a barren time, when for a few years, I am no longer taught by Douglas, but his influence remains, and one evening, alone at home, I take out my father's complete works. I must act on my mentor's inspiration. The volume opens at *Richard III*. I am fourteen or fifteen. And I am on my own.

*Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York ...*

but oh! the speech is a long one: there are no helpful glosses or notes. I get lost. I give up after the first page.

2.

In the Lower Sixth, Douglas Brown and I reconnect. He senses potential in me. He challenges me to study *Hamlet* on my own. I try - again without a text that contains any help. The title Douglas gives me is *The Poetic Atmosphere of Hamlet*. I struggle to understand this difficult play. After combing the first three acts, I give up. I smartly entitle my essay, *The Poetic Atmosphere of the first three acts of Hamlet*. The essay is returned with the words *first three acts* encircled, followed by two exclamation marks in ink. But I do recall that the circle was not perfectly drawn. But Douglas persevered and helped me win a place at Cambridge.

Cambridge brought its own Shakespearean horrors. The first year exam left me stranded. I was faced with a printed excerpt to explain and analyse, from *Henry IV Part Two*. It began with Falstaff dictating to Mistress Quickly:

Glasses glasses is the only drinking: and for thy walls a pretty slight drollery,

It was assumed I had properly studied this text. Once again, lack of attention to detail had let me down: the hard graft was missing. Goodness knows what *a pretty slight drollery* was. My grade at Prelims reflected my low understanding, though things did get decidedly better in the following years. But *glasses, glasses* still reminds me sadly of who and what I was.

After graduation, there was only one possible route - teaching. So I decided to take my PGCE at Reading University. Why there? Because my beloved teacher had been appointed University lecturer there and I wished to be with him. To learn more.

Which I understood in an instinctive, rather than a cerebral way.

A term's teaching practice at The Priory School in Lewes, then a grammar school, proved a catalyst in my education. Through mix-ups, I ended up in the January snows

of 1963 knocking on the door of one Colin Silk and his wife Beryl, begging for a bed for a night. I stayed with them the term and we became lifelong friends. It was Colin who had initiated some camping holidays at Stratford-upon-Avon, focussed on visits to the theatre - to which I shall return.

My first teaching post was as second-in-command in the English department at the prestigious Glyn Grammar School, Epsom. In my first year there, Colin Silk in Lewes presented *The Tempest*. I travelled one Saturday to watch. I was amazed: *The Tempest* spoke to me as never before! Why, this was the play I had studied woodenly for O Level - (not all my fault, that). It had come alive. I returned to my bachelor pad and took down my Penguin copy (G. B. Harrison, we salute you!) I re-read some passages. The poetry that I had admired, I began to love.

*Merrily, merrily shall I live now,
Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.*

I wrote to Douglas Brown that I had seen the definitive Ariel. I returned to Lewes the following Saturday to watch again.

In my second year of teaching, there came an opportunity. The kindly Head of English felt like a break from producing the Christmas play and entrusted it to me. I - who had never directed anything, knew nothing of movement on the stage, stage pictures, costume, lighting - or anything! I chose *The Winter's Tale*. Why such a difficult play for my first effort?

The idea that serious wrong-doing might be forgiven, that there might be a second chance appealed to me; the presentation of Hermione as the embodiment of grace was something to aspire to, however impossible to reach.

Before the curtain went up on the opening night, I paced a school corridor and made

4

peace with myself and sent up a prayer. I can still hear the silken chimes of the piano accompaniment, music written by the son of the head of English, as Hermione comes alive;

Music; awake her: strike:
Tis time: descend: be stone no more: approach:
Strike all that look upon with marvel

On the last night, I was introduced to the lady Chair of Governors, sitting in the front row. She assured me that drama at Glyn Grammar School had now reached new heights. So when the Headmaster, who was good to me, sent for me the following morning, I approached him with a song in my heart. Alas, I was somewhat deflated. Whilst he rated the production somewhat, he chastised me for making Hermione, in this single-sex school, with boys playing both male and female roles, somewhat too obviously pregnant. In 1964! And we all know that sex was discovered in 1963!

That hallmark production set me off on virtually annual productions of one of Shakespeare's plays from then until I retired in 2004. through my positions of Head of English, Deputy Head indeed - and then Headmaster, where of course my position permitted me to behave just as I saw fit.

What a glorious privilege, to be permitted to introduce these young people, embarking on their way in life, to these masterpieces, whilst enabling me to improve my understanding and enjoyment of them. As my outstanding deputy head commented, in another context: Fancy getting paid for a job you love doing!

So the productions flowed, one after another. When I became Headmaster at Ward Freman School in Buntingford in 1975, I was non-plussed when the Divisional

Education Officer told me that I had taken over a school that in its previous incarnation had been the worst secondary school in Hertfordshire, which then boasted 121 secondary schools.

Undeterred, my first Shakespearean attempt was *Hamlet*, with Michael playing the lead, whose parents had tried desperately to avoid Ward Freman, to send him to a grammar school. Because Michael was special. And he was! He made a fine, sensitive Hamlet and became the first student of many that we sent to Oxbridge to read English.

Shakespeare in Buntingford? I imagine the town was perplexed. Torn from its comfort zone. But gradually the tradition became established, so that every December there was a production of one of Shakespeare's plays for nearly thirty years. It became the norm. That was what Ward Freman did!

The school boasted a small theatre seating about 110. The productions ran for five nights and from the outset were always sold out - sometimes with extra chairs squeezed in. *The Shakespeare* represented the school on show in one of its best faces - even if there were those who obviously wouldn't wish to climb the Shakespeare tree.

Often the production chimed with the A Level text being studied, a happy coalition. Over such a long period, some plays were performed for a second time. I began to learn how one's understanding of a play evolved. I recalled that the great Colin Silk told me: if you grew to understand intelligently one play of Shakespeare, you might consider yourself an educated man.

Take that extraordinary creation, Puck. My elder son Edmund played him in the 1980s. He was mercurial: capering and twinkling. there was a brightness about him.

When it came to the epilogue, he was full of innocent mischief:

*If we shadows have offended
Think but this and all is mended.*

Then in the nineties we had another go. Oliver played Puck. We came to the first rehearsal of the epilogue. For some reason I stood myself at the back of the stage - not my usual practice - and suggested a way of communicating that wonderful epilogue. Now Oliver was Edmund's equal in terms of supple movement. I looked at him, drew breath, and sauntered downstage. Not an uplifted face as was Edmund's, but one angled downwards, the right eyebrow raised and the eye looking out slyly at the audience. It was a knowing look.

*If we shadows have offended
Think but this and all is mended.*

Not someone you'd want to mess with.

How does this director explain the difference between these two Pucks? I think you know the answer.

So one Shakespeare followed another. and it is true to say that there was eager competition to participate. Latterly I resorted to the practice of informing all participants by letter as to whether they had a part or not.

Then after the December Shakespeare I became restless. Six months without drama! So in the 1980s I invented the Lower Sixth Classic play. A different ethos. You're in charge, I would tell the students. You make the set, organise the costumes, sometimes write and perform the music, sell the tickets. And so on. You take ownership. I shall take rehearsals and direct. And it worked! June productions of Lorca, TS Eliot,

Chekov, Ibsen, Beckett, Strindberg ... and just before my retirement, John Ford, and his *Tis Pity She's a Whore* were the order of the day.

I should add that in these endeavours, I was lucky to enjoy the loving support of several Heads of English. That support was vital.

In the nineties, I was privileged to receive the support and blessing of Rex Gibson, series editor of the Cambridge Schools Shakespeare, whose advice and encouragement I found invaluable. He became a regular spectator at our productions. As I was on the point of discarding the choice of *Loves Labours Lost* for the December production, Rex rejoined: *No, Roger, I'm sure you can do it!* And so we did. Rex celebrated our productions by letter in the press.

We come to our annual camps at Stratford-upon-Avon. In the 1960s, Colin Silk had invited me to join a small group of adults to camp at Tiddington, just over a mile from Stratford, for a holiday that included visits to the theatre in the evening. The seed of Ward Freman Stratfords was sown.

In the first full year of my headship, the Head of English kindly gave me the top set in the Intermediate Year (Year 10, to you!) In the February, I took my courage in both hands and talked to my students about spending some time with me and my family at Stratford. I seem to remember that most of them - 19, I think - accepted the challenge. A great tradition was born. It meant purchasing tents for the students, a marquee, where we might congregate, cooking facilities and so on. We needed crockery, and since the school possessed a kiln, we had plates on which short quotations from Shakespeare were etched, and others with stage instructions. Mugs were

embellished with a portrait of Shakespeare, and the legend *This was a Man*.

We bought tables and chairs, augmenting them with school issue.

That first summer at Stratford was pretty basic. Students were packed in old-fashioned patrol tents, 4 to a tent with all their luggage. We were all sorted into duty groups, looking after three full meals a day. In hot weather, milk was cooled in pails of water. There was a seminar each morning, notes were taken and reviews penned.

That first year it rained nearly every day. We were all in unknown territory, but it worked! Yes, I remember crawling from my bed very late one evening and shouting *Michael, if you don't stop the noise, I shall put you in the isolation tent*. Yes, the same Michael who went on to play Hamlet. Nearly all those who attended the first camp signed up for the second.

As the years went by, things became more sophisticated. We acquired fridges and even an oven. Two deputies regularly drove the school coach to Stratford for many years.

So how is today's camp structured? Cooked breakfast is available from 8am, which means the duty team reporting for service by 7.30 at the latest. But breakfast was, and is, optional. This is a liberal camp!

At 9.30, in the only compulsory activity of the day, the entire camp assembles in the marquee. There is a seminar on the play to be seen that evening. Latterly, someone introduces and reads a sonnet of Shakespeare's. Since 2012, I read on a daily basis from a novel by that Shakespeare of the genre, Charles Dickens. There is always a

quiz element, to lighten things. And fun: people embarked on a common pursuit: to explore, to understand and to enjoy.

When I retired, I was determined that these unique camps continue. So I bought a marquee, which has the legend *arielstratford*, emblazoned on it in rainbow colours. The camp lasts for sixteen days and people come and go for different lengths of time. Former students turn up with their own children taking their A levels, young newbies turn up out of the blue – and so on. Last summer we numbered over one hundred. Some things do change: a few of our older loyalists take a chalet, or B & B. Personally, I love closing the day by lying down on the greensward after some post-show repartee in the marquee.

What do I treasure most about these camps? Obviously the camaraderie, the sense of everyone wishing to contribute, people looking after each other, looking out for each other. But above all, the focus on Shakespeare. As one struggles to understand the meaning of our existence, there is no place better to go, whether for *Tragedy, Comedy, History, Pastoral, Pastoral-Comical, Historical-Pastoral; Tragical-Historical; Tragical-Comical-Historical-Pastoral*.

Now: let us leave aside those central questions that have haunted mankind for four hundred years and will continue to haunt mankind for evermore: Is Hamlet a good man? Is King Lear truly *more sinned against than sinning*? What are Audrey's prospects of a happy life with Touchstone? Let us move to what most people might agree upon – the sheer magic and uniqueness of Shakespeare's ways with language: those words that stick in the mind; that come upon one in our daily routine unexpectedly; those words that in their expression penetrate life so as to yield a fresh

insight into things; above all, to register the spiritual nature of man's existence.

Let's take that inspired movement, before the battle of Agincourt in *Henry V*.

Shakespeare has Hal, now King Henry *in disguise*, moving amongst his troops, encouraging and persuading them of his own integrity. This is described by the Chorus, as – in that sublime phrase

A little touch of Harry in the night (Harry, not Henry).

The king's understanding and knowledge of human affairs have had their growing in earlier days. The disguise he adopts recalls the highway adventures of his youth, with that doubtful friend Poin. Now I love that word *touch*: it's physical. When one human being touches another, it can arouse all sorts of reactions: the touch can be predatory, accidental, jocular, sympathetic: what we know from the way Shakespeare expresses it in the flow of the verse, is that this *touch* is gentle and reassuring, as well as fun, as King Henry sits down with his suspicious men before the frightening battle: *a little touch of Harry in the night*.

What about the mock marriage of Rosalind and Orlando, conducted by Celia?

Rosalind registers her undeniable, world-without-end commitment: *I do take thee, Orlando, for my husband*. Perhaps her anxiety pricks in as she asks: *now tell me how long you would have her, after you have possessed her?*

There has never been anything more triumphant, than Orlando's reply: *For ever and a day*: sunny, confident ... cocksure? Shakespeare has articulated what we all want in love: that it will last *for ever and a day!*

But the practical, infatuated, charismatic Rosalind plants us in – perhaps? – the real world: *Say a day without the ever: no, no Orlando, men are April when they woo,*

December when they wed. The mix of heady hopefulness with the practical is caught in the most memorable prose: *Say a day without the ever ...*

On occasion, Beatrice lets us into her inner world. Don Pedro is charmed by her wit and claims she was *born in a merry hour*. Typical Beatrice – she refutes Arragon’s compliment! *No sure, my lord, my mother cried* – well undeniably, childbirth causes pain – but how does Beatrice know for a fact that her mother cried? Then having forcefully put down her social superior, she turns the tables and acknowledges the specialness of her own existence: *but then*, she adds, after her mother cried, *there was a star danc’d and under that was I born*. Stars may shoot or twinkle, but they don’t dance – but the idea that they might is infectious – and Beatrice’s belief that a star danced at her nativity registers a spiritual dimension to her being. Beatrice recognises, amidst the fun, that the life that has been bestowed upon her is special.

Let me conclude with a reference to the sonnets, and in particular, the charting of Shakespeare’s extraordinary relationship with the fair youth over the first 126 of them.

A relationship that is a-sexual but extraordinarily intimate, where humdrum life intertwines with elevated feeling. Quarrels and misunderstandings take their place alongside everlasting commitment. (108) begins by seeming to excoriate everydayness between those who love each other. What’s new to say? Nothing!

*Nothing, sweet boy; but yet like powers divine,
I must each day say o’er the very same
Counting no old thing old, thou mine, I thine.*

That’s the crux. We are two people committing to each other. I have to remind myself

of the relation between us every day and our love is always fresh and newly minted.

Counting no old thing old. What a phrase! *Old things* are the stuff of everyday existence – what we take for granted, what we don't think about – but here, those experiences form the crux of this special relationship: what happens on an everyday basis is never taken for granted, but always fresh. And counting? *Counting no old thing old* ... here there is an element of measuring, tracking the relationship. After this, Shakespeare claims that You are mine and I am yours. Notice that he puts himself first and claims possession: you are mine: *thou mine*. But then he gives himself away: *I thine*. I am yours. As if the final power lies with the fair youth. Listen to the words once again: *thou mine, I thine*.

Mine, I, thine: those long repeated i-sounds suggest perhaps the lulling of consciousness and the willing giving of each to the other in peace. In the sonnets, of course, it's a peace that comes and goes because of the fitful nature of most human relations. But at its zenith, it expresses remarkably in this human world a quasi-divine contentment.