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PERFORM GENDER WITH ALISON FINDLAY

TAKE OFFENCE WITH PETER KIRWAN

STEP INTO ISABELLA'S SHOES WITH NORA WILLIAMS AND STEPHANIE TILLOTSON

BE PROVOKED ABOUT SHAKESPEARE IN IRAQ, POLAND, PRISONS AND BEYOND

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The pieces in this takeover issue of *Teaching Shakespeare* all stem from last year's *Teaching Early Modern Drama* symposium, which was hosted by the University of Warwick's Humanities Research Centre in May 2019. Back then, my co-organiser Stephanie Tillotson and I could not have imagined how much would change in the space of a year. The closure of the theatres was still historical context rather than lived reality, and the plague doctor costume I wore to scare presenters into staying on time seemed other-worldly, not horribly topical. Nevertheless, many of the questions raised that day have, if anything, become even more urgent as we consider the future of education and the arts in a post-pandemic world.

The issue opens with three pieces based on the symposium's keynote speeches and workshops. First, Alison Findlay discusses the performance of gender in her research and teaching, pairing examples from *Hamlet* and Lady Mary Wroth's *Love's Victory* to highlight how drama can illuminate understandings of both gender and English as a subject. Next, Stephanie Tillotson interviews Nora Williams, whose *Measure (Still) for Measure* project explores how educators can empower students to respond to the disturbingly relevant sexual violence in Shakespeare on their own terms. The fact that Shakespeare is often anything but safe is also addressed by Peter Kirwan, who reframes content notes as a tool through which students can confront – rather than avoid – what is dangerous in Shakespeare. (A fourth keynote, on Shakespeare in East Asia, was delivered by this magazine's very own Sarah Olive, whose work on that topic will be familiar to regular readers.)

These articles are followed by shorter pieces inspired by the symposium's "provocations": mini-presentations in which delegates raised questions about the teaching of early modern drama, and made the case for possible ways forward. Bookending these, Avi Mendelson introduces a mental health-themed adaptation of Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*, and Rowan MacKenzie shares her work with Shakespeare in prisons; in both cases, early modern drama provides opportunities for people to reflect on difficult questions about themselves and



Photograph © Sarah Olive

others. For Majeed Mohammed Midhin, Shakespeare is a lens through which Iraqi teachers and students can challenge negative preconceptions of the West, while for Katarzyna Burzyńska his work can help students challenge the homophobia prevalent in Polish political discourse. Jennifer Kitchen also explores the social justice potential of Shakespeare in education, but argues that this requires more engagement with critical pedagogy and post-colonial scholarship. Finally, David Findlay calls for more academic research on the teaching of Shakespeare in schools (see also his article in the previous *Teaching Shakespeare*, issue 18), while Lindy Rudd and Jessica Dyson address the challenges that early modern drama faces in an increasingly instrumentalised and marketised higher education sector.

None of the pieces in this takeover issue directly address COVID-19, but all argue that Shakespeare and early modern drama can provide tools to help educators of many kinds address questions that will continue to be important, in whatever world comes out of the current crisis. Perhaps the only regret I have about last year's very successful symposium – apart from my plague doctor costume – is that we were not able to attract more delegates from primary and secondary schools. I am, therefore, hugely grateful to Sarah Olive for this opportunity to share these articles with the readers of *Teaching Shakespeare*. I hope they will help to spark new conversations about what place the teaching of these exciting plays from the past will have in an increasingly uncertain future.

DR ALISON FINDLAY is Professor of Renaissance Drama at Lancaster University and Chair of the British Shakespeare Association. Her edition of *Lady Mary Wroth's Love's Victory* will be published by Revels Plays later this year.

Several Shakespeare plays make the performativity of gender on the early modern stage absolutely explicit, with reminders that boys or "youths" (signifying young men) played the women's parts. The references to cross-dressing by characters and/or actors in these Shakespeare scripts alert us to a complex picture of erotic and social relationships at play in early modern theatre. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, for example, Bartholomew the Page, who must obey his master's command to play the deliberately seductive role of Christopher Sly's "beautiful" wife, is immediately commanded by Sly to "undress you and come now to bed" (Ind.2.113), advertising the vulnerable position of boy actors in relation to their masters. In *As You Like It*, the boy actor playing Rosalind claims that a "moonish youth" and a woman are likewise "effeminate" and changeable in their affections and emotions, since "boys and women are for the most part cattle of this colour" (3.2.375–6). These lines exemplify the paradox of gender similarities and differences. The actor speaks both as a "moonish youth", and from the not inconsiderable experience of acting as a woman (Rosalind being the longest female role in Shakespeare).

"the references to cross-dressing by characters and/or actors in these Shakespeare scripts alert us to a complex picture of erotic and social relationships at play in early modern theatre."

Gender fluidity in the theatre and culture for which Shakespeare was writing may be immediately familiar to a generation of students for whom, as Jack Halberstam (2016) has argued, "Transgender is the new gay, the new orange, the new reality show, the newest classification

of exclusion and pathology to be seamlessly transitioned into a marker of acceptance and tolerance" (p. 366). I believe that the embodied knowledge constructed by practical drama work on Shakespeare can illuminate our understanding of gender, both then and now. Gender blind casting in a practical workshop on any piece of Shakespearean text should unsettle norms of identity, space and time productively. Those with cross-dressing are especially useful for interrogating just how "modern" liberal attitudes to gender are. Working on Orlando and Rosalind's wooing (4.1.60–79) and mock wedding (4.1.97–122) in the "natural" world of *As You Like It*, for example, opens up discussions of how multiple sexual identities and orientations overlap, and how or where they are legitimized. Why doesn't the boy actor playing Rosalind, cross-dressed as Ganymede, let Orlando kiss him/her? When Rosalind-as-Ganymede takes Orlando's hands and he asks Celia to marry them, why does she protest "I cannot say the words" (4.1.109–11)?

"transgender is the new gay, the new orange, the new reality show, the newest classification of exclusion and pathology to be seamlessly transitioned into a marker of acceptance and tolerance." Jack Halberstam

No matter whether cross or same gender casting is used, enacting an extract from Shakespeare – by reading/speaking aloud and using gesture and movement if there is space – educates participants by allowing them to achieve "ec-static" intelligence (being able to stand outside or beside oneself) and inhabiting, by embodying, a different persona. Workshopping sections of Act 1 Scene 3 of *Hamlet*, for example, where Ophelia is given guidance on her romance with Hamlet, by both Laertes and Polonius (1.3.1–49 and 87–135), offers a rich resource for participants to inhabit and so understand the protective roles of fathers and mothers and the desires of children to assert independence and authority. Further insights into gender can be gleaned by comparing Shakespeare's text

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with *Love's Victory* (1617–19), a play written by one of his female contemporaries, Lady Mary Wroth (1587–1651). In Act 5 Scene 1, the heroine Musella complains that her blossoming romance with Philisses has been thwarted by a marriage to Rustic (whom she loathes), which has been arranged by her parents. Her best friend Simeana tells her:

*If you will but stoutly tell your mother
You hate him, and will match with any other,
She cannot, nor will go about to cross
Your liking. (5.1.7–10)*

This advice to speak out, educate and reform mistaken social superiors, illuminates Ophelia's role in *Hamlet*. Ophelia does, after all, remind Laertes of the double sexual standard, warning him against the "primrose path of dalliance" (1.3.45–50). Nevertheless, she dutifully consents to her brother and father's commands to break off all intimacy with Hamlet. Lady Mary Wroth's heroine shows there were alternative possibilities. Musella refuses to be pacified by Simeana, protesting "Rest quiet? . . . Why speak you thus madly?" Her explosive anger supplies us with an alternative, female-centred subtext to fill out the blanks about Ophelia's feelings:

Simeana: *Have patience.*

Musella: *I can not, nor I will not.*

Patient be? Ay me, and bear this ill lot?

No, I will grieve in spite of grief and mourn

To make them mad who now to pleasure turn. (5.1.35–8)

Enacting this short scene alongside extracts from Act 1 Scene 3 of *Hamlet* can be highly informative. The female-authored script expresses passions which are suppressed in Shakespeare's script, but the kinaesthetic (embodied and felt) memory of them can inform readings of Ophelia's relatively silent suffering that eventually erupts in her mad talk.

"the female-authored script expresses passions which are suppressed in Shakespeare's script, but the kinaesthetic (embodied and felt) memory of them can inform readings of Ophelia's relatively silent suffering that eventually erupts in her mad talk."

Running practical workshops and seminars alongside staged readings and two productions have been an invaluable part of my research on *Love's Victory*, informing essays, articles and a forthcoming scholarly edition of the play. Most recently, I have used embodied dramatic practice in workshops to draw parallels between Shakespeare and this "sister" text. My enjoyment of such exploratory practice in teaching ranges from informal 10-minute workshops in the midst of a seminar discussion to practical-based lessons, modules and full productions. Opportunities for the latter are rare since we must all work within the narrow constraints and resources of time and money we are given. Practical drama work certainly costs in terms of the former if not the latter, even in the classroom. In my opinion, the educational value far outweighs that extra investment. The embodied knowledge achieved through practical drama work can breathe life back into the teaching of literature, at a time when overly-prescriptive approaches to learning outcomes and marking are in danger of discouraging students from pursuing further study of English, from GCSE to A Level, and from A Level to degree level. Moreover, it encourages an affective, interpersonal intelligence that has traditionally been labelled "feminine" but should always be encouraged and practised by all.

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claudio must die!

TEACHING MEASURE FOR MEASURE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

DR NORA WILLIAMS is a Lecturer in Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama at the University of Essex. Since 2015, she has been developing a practice-as-research project, *Measure (Still) for Measure*, in which she uses a range of pedagogical tools and classroom exercises aimed at stimulating a creative encounter between students and Shakespeare. STEPHANIE TILLOTSON spoke to Nora about how she encourages students to take personal ownership of canonical texts.

'I began to develop the project in 2015 when I was working on my PhD. I was watching the Cheek by Jowl, Russian-language production of *Measure for Measure*. At the same time I had been reading about Emma Sulkowicz, who was pursuing a case against her alleged rapist at Columbia University. As a protest against the university's handling of her case, Emma carried a mattress with her wherever she went on campus. There's a powerful image of her at her

graduation, in her academic robes, receiving her diploma and still carrying the mattress. Watching the Cheek by Jowl production, something about Isabella's lines, "To whom should I complain? Did I tell this/Who would believe me?" (2.4.184–5) stuck in my craw and got me thinking about what these two young women, Isabella and Emma, would have to say to each other. They are 400 years apart and yet so little has changed in terms of the way we think culturally about sexual violence.

"they are 400 years apart and yet so little has changed in terms of the way we think culturally about sexual violence."

In one iteration of the project, I organized a 6-month residency with a self-selected group of sixth-form students at Nichols School in Buffalo, New York. I felt I needed a formal structure with which to work through this difficult topic, so decided that my primary focus would be a combination of the Viewpoints system and Contact Improvisation. Both rely on a high level of awareness of the other bodies in the room. I wanted there to be a sense of



Photograph © Nichols School

“I wanted there to be a sense of BUILDING OUR OWN BOUNDARIES, OUR OWN LEVELS OF CONSENT.”

building our own boundaries, our own levels of consent. Contact Improv is wonderful for teaching young people about consensual touch that is non-sexual because the participants have to make sure they are communicating verbally as well as non-verbally. Everyone has to be hyper-aware of the group of people they are working with and the space they are working in, trying out ideas, impulses, stimuli for devising that emerge from that particular group of people and that space.

With my work, whatever the group is interested in is the way the project goes. We begin by thinking about what each participant wants to get out of the workshop so that the project speaks to the needs and priorities of everyone in the room. We ask whose story is being told, whose voices are being heard, what questions are being asked? I want the participants to understand that they are at least as worthy of telling this story as Shakespeare was. One of the most meaningful ways that this happens is through participants’ interaction with, and interventions in, the Shakespearean text.

One of very few “rules” for the project is we cut anything that Isabella isn’t in. If you cut the scenes without her, if we only know what she knows at any given point in time, a very different narrative emerges. It’s about centring her experience, her journey through the story. But beyond that, the students can try anything they like: use additional modern texts; cut or add scenes and characters; incorporate bits they have written themselves – the sky’s the limit! This approach allows students to develop a sense of agency over the text and the cultural capital of Shakespeare.

“I want the participants to understand that they are at least as worthy of telling this story as Shakespeare was.”

At Nichols the group had some really “down and dirty” debates. They decided early on that they wanted to cut Marianna because they felt she was simply a plot device. They also felt the bed trick was difficult in terms of Angelo’s agency and his consent. They cut that too. And they trimmed the Duke’s role down a lot – he didn’t show

“one of very few “rules” for the project is we cut anything that Isabella isn’t in. if you cut the scenes without her, if we only know what she knows at any given point in time, a very different narrative emerges. it’s about centring her experience, her journey through the story.”

up until the final scene. They’d made the decisions and were happy with them, and then, suddenly, you could see it in the room, the realization dawned like a mini ripple through the group that now they didn’t have any way to save Claudio. The rest of that session was about them debating that dilemma. Should Isabella just do it? Should she just say, yeah, sure, I will sleep with you to save my brother’s life? Or is she going to say no, and Claudio actually has to die? In the end one of the students made the point that this shouldn’t be on Isabella at all, it’s Angelo who’s in the wrong. And anyway, this same student said, Angelo goes back on his promise in the play. That swayed the group. They decided Isabella was going to refuse Angelo – and, in the story they wanted to tell, Claudio was going to have to die. That was a really powerful choice that they made: it was amazing to see how empowering it was for them to be allowed to disagree with Shakespeare.

“they communicated a sense that the story was very much their own and the choices that they made were grounded in a rigorous understanding of the issues and of the text.”

The students also incorporated music that meant something to them, like Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* and F.K.A. Twigs. The roles were shared, so each character had a distinguishing costume piece. Isabella had a red hair band, and Angelo had a waistcoat. In Act 5 they cut all but Isabella’s lines which the actors shared between them to give choral power to her pleas for justice. After each performance we invited the audience to a Q & A, which was really valuable. It gave the students a chance to articulate their views, re-hash their arguments and the process by which they made dramaturgical decisions. They communicated a sense that the story was very much their own and the choices that they made were grounded in a rigorous understanding of the issues and of the text. One of their English teachers remarked “Wow, you really know *Measure for Measure*”, and a student responded “Of course. I had to know it well in order to change it”.

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offence and content warnings

FOR PUBLIC RELEASE

DR PETER KIRWAN is Associate Professor of Early Modern Drama at the University of Nottingham. His research interests span contemporary performance, early modern book history, textual editing and Shakespeare on film.

“Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in’t?”
(*Hamlet*, 3.2.226–7)

Claudius’s anxious question to Hamlet halfway through the Players’ performance of *The Mousetrap* comes quite late, as requests for content notes go. Halfway through the action, Claudius realises that he is not adequately prepared to hear what the Players have to say. Following a further speech by the Player performing Lucianus, which triggers something in Claudius – something that Hamlet was looking for – Claudius leaves, removing himself from the presence of the offending play.

Claudius asks Hamlet if there is “offence in’t”, a comment that suggests that offence inheres in the artwork itself. Yet offence is relational, not ontological, and the philosopher Steven Connor (2020) suggests that it rather belongs to the offended party:

[O]ffence, in the sense of a sense of having been offended, is far from being a passive or even reactive state of feeling. Indeed, in speaking of taking offence, our language recognises that offence is not a passive state of being offended, but rather an active seizing of an advantage. When you take offence, you get a golden chance to go on to the offensive.

“IN SPEAKING OF TAKING OFFENCE, OUR LANGUAGE RECOGNISES THAT OFFENCE IS NOT A PASSIVE STATE OF BEING OFFENDED, BUT RATHER AN ACTIVE SEIZING OF AN ADVANTAGE. WHEN YOU TAKE OFFENCE, YOU GET A GOLDEN CHANCE TO GO ON TO THE OFFENSIVE.” STEVEN CONNOR

This repositioning of offence as an active position is, I think, helpful for understanding the potential value for content notes in relation to the teaching of Shakespeare, in repositioning offence as an act of ethical criticism that invites further scrutiny of assumed values.

Content notes – sometimes confused with “trigger warnings” – in education have caused huge controversy, as

discussed by Kirsten Mendoza in *Teaching Social Justice Through Shakespeare* and Ian Burrows in his forthcoming *Shakespeare for Snowflakes*. Ahead of a lecture on *Titus Andronicus* and *The Comedy of Errors*, Burrows informed students that it would include “discussions of sexual violence” and “sexual assault”. The *Guardian*’s report on the subsequent media-stoked controversy (which notably did not consult a single person speaking in favour of warnings), brought together lecturers, directors and unnamed mental health professionals to express concerns about mollycoddling and threatening academic freedom. It quoted the director David Crilly, who saw a desire for content warnings as an indication of a failure on the part of the student: “If a student of English Literature doesn’t know that *Titus Andronicus* contains scenes of violence, they shouldn’t be on the course”.

“THE ASSUMPTION HERE IS THAT KNOWLEDGE OF SHAKESPEARE IS SOMEHOW INNATE, A CULTURAL PREREQUISITE EVEN, AND THAT FAMILIARITY WITH SHAKESPEARE RENDERS HIS WORK SAFE.”

Crilly’s point here is explicitly exclusionary: if they don’t already know their Shakespeare, the student shouldn’t even be studying the subject. The assumption here is that knowledge of Shakespeare is somehow innate, a cultural prerequisite even, and that familiarity with Shakespeare renders his work safe. These assumptions are fraught with problems, but I would resist the notion that Shakespeare is – or even *should* be – treated as “safe”. Shakespeare’s privileged place in the canon, and his repeated deployment in the service of dominant cultural values, has often made Shakespeare a Trojan Horse for problematic ideologies (racist, sexist, classist, ableist, transphobic, xenophobic, and more) that can consciously or unconsciously reinforce cultural violence. This can be the case even in those plays that might be casually dismissed as uncontentious, such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

On the doors leading into Shakespeare’s Globe ahead of performances of Emma Rice’s 2016 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* were displayed notices cautioning “This production contains naughtiness of a sexual nature”. The content note – displayed in the same location as traditional theatre warnings about gunshots, smoke, strobe lighting

“SHAKESPEARE’S PRIVILEGED PLACE IN THE CANON, AND HIS REPEATED DEPLOYMENT IN THE SERVICE OF DOMINANT CULTURAL VALUES, HAS OFTEN MADE SHAKESPEARE A TROJAN HORSE FOR PROBLEMATIC IDEOLOGIES.”

“here, curtis’s problem isn’t with the presence of a content note, but with its insufficiency; whether intentionally or not, the sign risked reducing an act of rape to something “cheeky” or “naughty”, rather than something worthy of interrogation.”

etc – is both flippant and genuine, ahead of a production that staged some disquieting moments of sexual assault, including a moment in which Oberon appeared to rape an unconscious Hippolyta. The critic Rosie Curtis (2016) decried the way in which this moment was treated as unproblematic by the production: “There is a school group that just got told rape is no big deal”. She went on to expound the relationship between this moment and the notice outside the theatre:

If this was a show only for adults – if there was an age guideline, for instance, and not just a cheeky warning for “naughtiness of a sexual nature” – I’d maybe forgive it. I hope that The Globe have something that tells the school groups that walk through their doors to interrogate what they see, that stops it being part of the worldwide conversation that treats sexual and physical abuse like it’s no big deal.

Here, Curtis’s problem isn’t with the presence of a content note, but with its insufficiency; whether intentionally or not, the sign risked reducing an act of rape to something “cheeky” or “naughty”, rather than something worthy of interrogation. That certainly seemed to be borne out in the reviews – Lyn Gardner had praise for Meow Meow’s Titania “increasingly los[ing] her clothes, her inhibitions and her dignity. It’s nicely done”, while for Paul Taylor she was an “outrageous success . . . losing everything but her tutu in her demeaning pitch at Bottom”. For the professional critics, overlooking the rape at the production’s heart, there was no problem here.

“treating the plays as if they are “safe” risks dissuading students from interrogating the issues that the plays naturally raise.”

The peculiar danger of Shakespeare is that the cultural saturation of these plays has rendered them so familiar that they might be assumed to be safe; yet this familiarity risks leading those who have taught the plays repeatedly to overlook the affective power that the situations and material may have on those experiencing them afresh. Treating the plays as if they are “safe” risks dissuading students from interrogating the issues that the plays naturally raise. Nirit Gordon (2018) argues that “in order to create educational spaces that foster critical thinking, and not mere reproduction of knowledge, the integration

of the dissociated and devalued aspects of the experience is imperative” (p. 204); allowing students to own and experience their affective response, and then to build those into informed critique, is one way of achieving this integration.

The content note, then – as well as doing important pastoral work for students who may have experienced psychological trauma – creates what Mendoza (2019) calls “an environment of care and solidarity” for discussion, precisely by acknowledging the potential un-safeness of the texts being studied (p. 100). By allowing Shakespeare to be dangerous, by flagging up that the plays deal with difficult issues and creating a space for discussion of those issues, the content warning invites students and teachers to think critically about their own assumed values and positions in ways that can challenge a hegemonic Shakespeare. It invites students to “take” offence, and in that active moment of “taking”, to bring their own critical and ethical faculties to bear on the plays.

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teaching early modern drama symposium

METHODS OF MADNESS

DR AVI MENDELSON – a Californian who expatriated himself to the UK midway through his postgraduate degree – recently received his PhD in English Literature from Brandeis University, having finished his dissertation, *Shapeshifting Shakespearean Madnesses*. He lives in North East London, where he teaches early modern drama and works in mental health advocacy.

“I really had one, and it was fine,” said Mental Patient 108 to a pack of eager doctors dressed in Madmens’ pyjamas. It was fine. “It” was shit, or “bowel movement,” as the doctors called it. A meticulous and thorough bunch, the physicians were trying to diagnose Patient 108’s mental illness by discovering the size, colour, and consistency of his stool – and learning whether it was real, or a hallucination. “I really had one, and it was fine” got the biggest laugh during the Arcola Theatre’s recent adaptation of Middleton and Rowley’s *The Changeling: The Pleasure of Your Bedlam*, staged by the theatre’s “Mental Health Group”. I was the dramaturg that year for this rare acting company, whose express mission is spreading mental health awareness and using theatre to

tackle the stigma surrounding psychiatric disorders. We attempted an absurd concept: a fun and funny play about mental illness. And I think, at this moment where the actors threw comic jabs at doctors for professionally dealing in matters faecal, we succeeded; doodie, as Sarah Silverman notes in *A Speck of Dust*, really is “the great unifier.”

For the past few years I worked with this mental health themed community theatre project in East London – initially as an actor, in a play called *No Show*, about a son’s experience caring for his mentally ill father, and in one called *Headlines*, about misrepresentations of mental illness on film and TV. This project not only foregrounds a topic that is difficult to discuss, but also combats the isolation of those who have firsthand experiences with the illnesses. I have been in casts with doctors, teachers, musicians, a journalist, a poet, drama students, practicing actors (one had a film on Netflix!) and those having difficulty managing even a part time job alongside their serious health condition. In rehearsal, the cast and directing crew may discuss their own experience with mental illness; they also may not. The rehearsal room becomes a safe place where people disclose freely as much information about themselves as they are comfortable. And, yet, it is a space where one might be more comfortable talking about



these stigmatised illnesses, as there is a good chance that they will be around peers, rather than just friends, family members, or their doctor.

Our play focused on *The Changeling's* often neglected “subplot”: the hospital plot (McMullan, 2010). In this story, an old, greedy doctor named Alibius runs a madhouse, making vast profits – a living and a thriving! (1.2.50) – charging visitors to see the incarcerated patients as if the hospital were a human zoo, and renting out these inmates as wedding entertainment. Brimming with envy and suspicion, Alibius locks up his young wife, Isabella, in the madhouse, hoping this will prevent men younger and handsomer than himself from seducing her. In our production, the director wanted to interweave the hospital plot with scenes, devised by the actors, that imagine in a contemporary context some of the play’s themes (the relationship between love and madness, money and mental illness, and perceived and actual mental hospital visitation). The devised scenes based on the actors’ response to *The Changeling's* hospital plot were then included in our final play, *The Pleasure of Your Bedlam*.

“By focusing on Shakespeare’s madnesses, theatre not only can help us understand the history of mental health, but also can launch fundamental but dangerous to divulge conversations about mental illness today.”

Though we adapted a drama co-written by one of Shakespeare’s collaborators, Shakespeare’s obsession with madness throughout his oeuvre would make him an ideal playwright for a mental health themed theatre group. To usual suspects such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, we might add *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, both of which may spark discussions about the racialisation of mental illness during the period, and bring up questions about whether this persists today. We can look to *The Taming of the Shrew*, a play that features a “stark mad” (1.1.69) Kate who is “mad herself, [and] madly mated” (3.3.115), for discussions of the gendering of madness. *Timon of Athens* might make us ask whether there is a link between levels of wealth and someone’s mental health. By focusing on Shakespeare’s madnesses, theatre not only can help us understand the history of mental health, but also can launch fundamental but dangerous to divulge conversations about mental illness today.

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SHAKESPEARE AND EARLY MODERN DRAMA IN IRAQI UNIVERSITIES: A PEDAGOGICAL RECONSIDERATION

DR MAJEED MOHAMMED MIDHIN is an Assistant Professor in Literature and Contemporary British Drama at the University of Anbar, Iraq. He also works as a theatre translator, with his current projects including an Arabic translation of David Hare’s *Stuff Happens*.

Interestingly, Iraqi scholars and teachers always believe that Shakespeare is more eastern than western.

To understand this, and how Shakespeare is taught at Iraqi universities, it is important to shed light on the history of Shakespeare performance in Iraq. Looking back at this history, we see that Shakespeare’s plays received great attention from those who were interested in theatre. Many of them have been performed in Iraq.

At this point, I cannot fail to mention that the first production was in 1924, when the Jewish Literary Association presented *The Merchant of Venice*. In 1926, the students of a private school in Baghdad presented a play called *For the Sake of the People*, inspired by Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. In 1929, the Jewish School presented *Hamlet*, and in 1935 *Julius Caesar* was again presented by the members of an acting association.

All these plays were presented in Baghdad, but there were other productions in areas such as Basra and Mosul. However, Shakespeare’s plays needed an intellectual and responsive audience, so these early productions were presented to the elite of Iraqi society.

The most recent production in Iraq was of six scenes from different Shakespeare plays by Salh Mansi in 2016. These scenes were presented in Baghdad under the title *Treason*. However, this does not mean that Shakespeare disappeared before 2016. On the contrary, various productions were put on during the late twentieth century, including *The Merchant of Venice* in Mosul in 1971, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* by the Iraqi National Acting Troupe in 1982, and *King Lear*, directed by Salh Al-Qasab for the 1985 Baghdad Festival for Arabic Theatre. In 1986, Dr Sami Abdul Hameed, who directed the 1982 *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, composed a dramatic text based on *Antony and Cleopatra*, presenting this tragic love story in its historical context as a way of criticizing the mainstream commercial theatre of its time.

As we can see from this performance history, Shakespeare’s

plays have a wide resonance among Iraqi people. He has deep roots in Iraqi culture. In the Arab World in general and Iraqi society in particular, early modern drama, especially Shakespeare, also occupies a prominent place in the educational syllabus, not only in secondary schools but also at university level. It plays a vital role in creating a frame or mirror by which students see the Western world. Shakespeare’s plays give them a fruitful source of Western culture. Through these plays, our students have learned the principles of love, sacrifice and forgiveness. The old

“through these plays, our students have learned the principles of love, sacrifice and forgiveness. the old view of a hostile west is demolished with the above themes.”

view of a hostile West is demolished with the above themes. Shakespeare can serve English departments in the area of criticism, especially at the undergraduate level. As we already know, much of the new critical excitement in literary studies has been stimulated by Renaissance scholars re-examining their period and its major authors.

By and large, this tradition of Shakespeare teaching in Iraq has been beneficial to our cultural and intellectual life. Today Shakespeare figures on the BA English Literature curriculum of every Iraqi university. A good teacher does not find it difficult to communicate their joy in Shakespeare to their class, however poor the English proficiency of that class may be. At postgraduate level, the teaching may be much more analytical, speculative and theoretical, but the student’s first and major response must be from the play as acted. As a teacher, no final interpretation or thesis concerning the play is given. This must be discovered by the students themselves.

As far as university is concerned, students at departments of English in Iraqi universities are exposed to Shakespearean drama. Different genres of Shakespeare’s plays are dealt with through deep and close analysis. Culturally, teaching Shakespeare’s plays gives Iraqi students an insightful knowledge about Western society, as mentioned before.

In doing so, students’ pejorative views about this society are drastically changed. In previous times, Iraqi people used to look at Western people negatively, as having no values. Teaching and understanding Shakespeare’s plays and the values presented in them help people think more deeply about the dialogue of cultures, and so for Iraqi teachers and students, while he is a global icon, Shakespeare can seem as eastern as they themselves are.

SHAKESQUEER AT THE BATTLEFRONT FOR EQUALITY IN POLAND

DR KATARZYNA BURZYŃSKA holds a PhD in English Literature and teaches early modern drama at the Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland.

Since the Law and Justice Party’s (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PIS) victory in parliamentary elections in 2015 the situation of LGBTQ+ communities in Poland has been gradually deteriorating, culminating in the establishment of so-called “LGBT-free zones” in various parts of southeast Poland, a traditional stronghold of the ruling party. Although technically unenforceable and mostly seen as demonstratively provocative, these zones are blazing signposts of the stiflingly homophobic atmosphere in Poland. The ruling party has always been openly critical of attempts at legalising same-sex partnerships or extending any rights to non-heteronormative persons. PIS parliamentary campaigning in 2019 presented so-called “LGBT ideology” and “gender ideology” as archenemies of the traditional Christian family and the sanctity of marriage. Conservative politicians and certain Catholic officials even claimed the Polish youth needed state and church protection from what Krakow Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski called the “rainbow pestilence”. Regrettably, this hate campaign, once unleashed, did not halt when PIS swept to electoral victory in October 2019. Attacks on the LGBTQ+ community have continued, and one Wrocław clergyman even preached that the outbreak of the Coronavirus in Poland was God’s punishment for homosexuality and abortion.

Faced with such vitriolic hostility and ever intensifying polarization of social moods, any university teacher is bound to feel concerned for their students’ current and future wellbeing. I have repeatedly asked myself, if and how to address the question of gender identity within the present Polish reality. Like any official in Poland, university teachers are bound by political neutrality, while the space of the university has to be free from any political biases and prejudices. However, it is important to note that such seemingly well-rounded concepts as neutrality may be emptied of their meaning, while the academic disengagement from current affairs may work to maintain the status quo. What is more, as ethicists have demonstrated, the illusion of objectivity and neutrality is

“conservative politicians and certain catholic officials even claimed the Polish youth needed state and church protection from what Krakow Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski called the ‘rainbow pestilence’.”

just that: an illusion, as teachers, especially in humanities, cannot escape from “value-laden reactions” (Kleszcz, 2011). As a consequence, by avoiding political engagement we run the risk of playing into the hands of haters who usually shout the loudest. And here finally, I arrive at the most crucial aspect of my musings, namely Shakespeare and gender identity at Polish universities. I would argue that Shakespeare may emerge as one of the sharpest tools in teaching about diversity and difference in Poland.

Uniquely among foreign authors, Shakespeare has been historically seen in Poland as quintessentially Polish. During the period of Romanticism when Poland did not exist as a state, Shakespearean verse was popularized by Polish national bards who were all either inspired to model their works on Shakespeare’s plays or used Shakespeare’s verse and characters in their poetry. Over the nineteenth century Shakespeare emerged as a truly cult figure, with Hamlet being literally appropriated to voice Polish longing for independence (Burzyńska, 2018).

“BY AVOIDING POLITICAL engagement we RUN THE RISK of PLAYING INTO THE HANDS OF HATERS WHO USUALLY SHOUT THE LOUDEST.”

Similarly, under the communist regime Shakespeare’s works helped to bypass censorship and comment on Polish political reality. Bearing this in mind, Shakespeare’s works cannot, in my view, serve any other purpose nowadays than to tackle the burning questions of identity politics in Poland of 2020. Ironically, as a canonical (also “ancient”) author so often utilized to express Polish nationalism in the relatively remote past, Shakespeare for many emerges as a politically and ideologically neutral author. How shocked conservative politicians would be if they knew that Shakespeare’s works, along with other early modern playwrights, intensely interrogated the illusory stability of gender categories! As I see how proudly more and more of my students sport the colours of the rainbow pride flag, I feel hopeful despite the present difficult situation. If my students can see their “rainbow-selves” in Shakespeare’s centuries-old texts, I am sure, they will finally feel at home in their own country.

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CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND ACTIVE APPROACHES TO TEACHING SHAKESPEARE

DR JENNIFER KITCHEN is an Early Career Fellow at the University of Warwick, where she currently contributes to the MA in Drama and Theatre Education. She is a strong advocate for the social justice power of creative education and has worked as a theatre education practitioner with a variety of clients, including a year’s residency with Shakespeare’s Globe.

My provocation grows from experiences during my PhD research, which focused on the democratic and social justice claims of active “ensemble” approaches to teaching Shakespeare (Neelands & O’Hanlon, 2011). My observations of Shakespeare School Foundation Festival rehearsal rooms reinforced these claims, demonstrating how the empathetic pedagogy of active Shakespeare supported a recognition and valuing of students’ holistic gender, racial and religious identities. My analysis explored how this encouraged students to actively draw on these identities and experiences in interpreting and performing the plays; and how this in turn facilitated students’ “active citizenship” within and beyond the classroom.

But there was another strand to my research findings: throughout the case studies, I repeatedly came across individuals expressing ideas of EAL (English as an Additional Language) and working class students as suffering from an inherent deficit – “They never experience . . . any form of cultural experience” was a typical statement – and that Shakespeare was therefore first and foremost morally “improving” for these students.

Through witnessing these perspectives, I had to allow that there was perhaps something in the critiques levelled against active Shakespeare approaches, that far from being a force for inclusivity and social justice, they were in many ways actually perpetuating a conservative status quo by invoking the *idea* of active and egalitarian engagement with the texts, whilst still positioning students as culturally inferior within that interaction. As a field of scholarship and practice, is active Shakespeare guilty of flaunting its social justice potential without doing the necessary critical work to make it a lived reality?

It was the work of critical pedagogy theorists, and critical and post-colonial Shakespearean scholarship, which helped me recognise and call out these issues during my doctorate. My provocation is therefore on the need for active Shakespeare practitioners and scholars to lean into the intellectual and practical work of these social justice claims by more directly combining active Shakespeare

with critical pedagogy research, theory and practice. When school teacher Harriet Finlay-Johnson (1912) spoke a century ago of the active teaching of Shakespeare it was as an engaging way of ensuring her pupils “store up [the] sunshine” of such literary greats to see them through the inevitable hardships of working class life with moral fortitude. However as critical education scholars have observed, for every “light” of powerful Western knowledge there is a colonial “shadow” (Rudolph, Sriprakash, & Gerrard, 2018). Active Shakespeare must explicitly recognise and deconstruct those shadows if it is to genuinely make good on its offer of egalitarian and accessible learning spaces where diverse students can bring their own cultural positionalities to bear on interpreting Shakespearean texts.

“as a field of scholarship and practice, is active Shakespeare guilty of flaunting its social justice potential without doing the necessary critical work to make it a lived reality?”

I am currently writing a book aimed at teachers and cultural education practitioners, with resources to support this critical and social justice-focused approach to active Shakespeare within the classroom. In it, I explore how the underlying basis of “the plays as scripts” within active Shakespeare shares two core assumptions with critical pedagogy: of knowledge as socially constructed and of learners’ diverse identities and existing knowledges as having value within the classroom. I extend the premise of these core assumptions by drawing on critical pedagogy research and practice to argue we have to let go of the certainties and universalities with regards to Shakespeare in order to see both the “light” and “shadow” of Shakespeare’s cultural locations, and our own positionality in relation to them. On this basis we can begin to make more informed and robust claims of the social justice power of active Shakespeare as a shared narrative for social hope (Green, 2008) and aim to foster more egalitarian spaces in which to explore, study and create with our students on more culturally equitable terms.

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PRIMARY SHAKESPEARE: “LET THERE COME A TEMPEST OF PROVOCATION”

DAVID FINDLAY has been a primary school teacher for over 20 years. He currently teaches Year 3 at St. Bernadette’s Catholic Primary School in Lancaster.

About a year ago, it was suggested to me that I write a “provocation” for the *Teaching Early Modern Drama* symposium at Warwick University. My proposal was entitled “Why do we feed kids rubbish?” and was designed, primarily, for classroom teachers.

There has been a boom in what I call “colouring book Shakespeare” resources for the primary sector, which I find disturbing as it lowers the expectation of the possibilities and abilities of primary pupils (and teachers). My feelings were formalised into the article “Too Long on trifles”, *Teaching Shakespeare*, Issue 18.

At the Warwick symposium, I had hoped to share with other chalkface workers the way Shakespeare *could* be taught in a standard classroom; that children *could* experience Shakespeare’s language as part of a school day. To this end, I had assembled some videos of my Year 3 kids doing scenes from *Macbeth* around their desks and some examples of written work that had emerged from that experience.

I thought the symposium was great, I thoroughly enjoyed myself – but it became apparent, fairly early on, that there were few delegates with full-time teaching commitments in schools. I got to chat to my fellow provocateurs – mostly young academics, hoping to make their mark by sharing their research. I knew that my provocation would have to change.

Of the places in which Shakespeare and the Early Moderns are most important, our universities and colleges must be near the top. I’d guess that there is more money involved in the heritage industry, but tertiary education is where you can earn a living from this area of study. The quality of research into the literature of this period was evident in the symposium.

Our academic establishments are also powerful in other areas when it comes to this period. Academics are sought to comment when Shakespeare or his contemporaries are on the news; they influence theatre production and fight the corner of Shakespeare in our schools. Surely they should also be asked to confirm the educational importance of resources given to those same schools for the teaching of Shakespeare?

The Shakespeare and Early Modern departments in our universities and colleges, which provide employment for these important people, would not exist without students. Students must make a choice to come to that institution, to choose those courses. How are they going to make that choice unless their experience of Shakespeare in school is a positive one?

On being introduced to my first Shakespeare play, *Julius Caesar*, at 14, my attitude was like that of most of my classmates – “too hard”, “too posh” and most commonly “not for me”. Eventually that would change (not in school, however), but to me that was an opportunity lost.

When I started teaching in primary, Shakespeare was on the curriculum, and luckily for me Cambridge’s *Shakespeare in Schools* project had been running for some time. Rex Gibson (1998) had published the results of the project and given teachers an excellent philosophy and methodology:

The task for Shakespeare teachers is to make “studying Shakespeare” equate with “enjoying Shakespeare”. Treating the plays as scripts for active, imaginative and co-operative inhabitation is the key to successful school and college Shakespeare in which enjoyment goes hand in hand with insight and understanding. (p. 25)

Armed with this, I set out to give the kids in my class an ownership of Shakespeare: to let them stand up and say the text, to have them feel the words in their mouths, to get them excited by the language. And, as a general rule, they went for it – they enjoyed doing Shakespeare and saw it as a productive part of their school experience. I have done the same for every class I have had for over 20 years.

My hope was, and remains, that when the children are confronted with Shakespeare in high school, they will have a more positive attitude than I did. But I appreciate that this is a hope. Children do forget things as they move on in education, but even if only one or two come to high school study of Shakespeare with a positive, accepting attitude, it is still a contribution to the future of Shakespeare – and consequently early modern – scholarship.

My provocation from schools to the academic establishment is: *this is what we are doing for you. What are you doing for us?*

“CHILDREN DO FORGET THINGS AS THEY MOVE ON IN EDUCATION, BUT EVEN IF ONLY ONE OR TWO COME TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDY OF SHAKESPEARE WITH A POSITIVE, ACCEPTING ATTITUDE, IT IS STILL A CONTRIBUTION TO THE FUTURE OF SHAKESPEARE – AND CONSEQUENTLY EARLY MODERN – SCHOLARSHIP.”

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KEEPING SHAKESPEARE IN A JOB

LINDY RUDD has recently left teaching and is now a bitter and twisted PhD researcher in English & Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick.

Since the introduction of tuition fees, free market ideology has permeated higher education. Reporting now is solely designed to attract new consumers to universities with market structures being imposed in the belief that “competition to recruit students leads providers to improve the experience they offer.” This quote is from the Office for Students (OfS) (2019) who, using the vocabulary of market-fundamental orthodoxy, claim to protect students’ interests. Here’s just one example from their website: “We have three strategic outcomes under this strategic objective, and four key performance measures (KPMs) to help us demonstrate progress against them. [. . .] Qualifications hold their value over time, and students are able to use them long after leaving higher education.” All well and good, except the OfS’ “target measure” for holding value over time is “Students achieving 1sts.” This is *not* a measure of the strategic outcome it’s supposed to be attached to: does it mean a 2:1 or 2:2 becomes worthless within a few years of leaving university?

I’m sure there are readers who have witnessed first-hand the changes enforced on educators to meet this target. Or measure, whichever it is: it can’t be both. Pressure to meet “target measures” belies the reality of the situation: that actions designed to attract more students with the promise of “good” degrees conferred results in mediocrity; assessment requires less rigour and disciplines are redefined. To illustrate this, in some institutions – and this is not uncommon – degree classification is calculated as a mean of the best module results for half of the degree. Yes, the best of half. As social psychologist Donald T. Campbell (1979) said: “The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort the social processes it is designed to monitor” (p. 85). It’s worryingly Orwellian: the figures for “good” degrees invariably demonstrate that everything is getting better and better . . .

What happens, then, because of the way we have steeped universities in the philosophy of business, is rather than

concentrating on the longer-term issue of providing graduates who are responsible and productive participants in society, we have, instead, promoted illusory short-term performance measures. The student, buying into this, becomes a “consumer” of education, developing the belief that they are buying a qualification. This is perpetuated through the quality mark of “student voice”; students become co-creators in the way the course is delivered with a consumer-led focus on passing assignments.

The risk then is the perception that expertise is saleable and depends on the effectiveness of transmission of the teacher’s knowledge. When it comes to selling Shakespeare – which still features on most university curricula – its level of complexity means that there is no motivation to commit to learning. Students can simply do enough to pass the module without it affecting their overall degree classification. “Enough” can be as low a mark as 38%, making opportunities offered through the teaching of Shakespeare difficult to sell as increasingly, a utilitarian attitude creeps in. A second-year student admitted: “I just read plot summaries of the plays I was going to write on in my essays.” And they were not alone.

I’m not saying this is always the case. Every year I’ve had delightful students who fully engage with Shakespeare and take pleasure in exploring the plays. But these are increasingly in the minority.

“as educators, it’s vital that we do not buy into meaningless short-term performance targets but continue to provide the liberal arts education that produces thinking, reflective individuals.”

Shakespeare’s education – even without a work experience module – was instrumental in him becoming the most commercially successful playwright of his time. In his plays we see the true power of language and social insight; this surely is where we find the means to make our students more critical readers, so that they, the consumers, can help to shape the role of universities instead of blindly accepting a poorly designed business model that risks shutting down a more complete model of learning. There’s a risk that young people are being mis-sold a qualification with the promise of a graduate-level job at the end of it that simply doesn’t exist. As educators, it’s vital that we do not buy into meaningless short-term performance targets but continue to provide the liberal arts education that produces thinking, reflective individuals.

‘Tis true that we are in great danger;
The greater therefore should our courage be.
(*Henry V*, 4.1.1–2)

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WHAT’S THE USE OF STUDYING EARLY MODERN DRAMA?

DR JESSICA DYSON is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Portsmouth. Her research focuses on representations of authority, justice and madness in early modern drama.

In the continuing devaluation of Humanities subjects in favour of STEM, and the increasing demand for career-focused courses, I have often found myself frustrated by calls to demonstrate the *usefulness* of studying literature, which is abundantly clear (British Academy, 2020). Beyond utility, early modernists face an added burden of defending their *relevance*. Why study old stuff and historical contexts? Aren’t contemporary texts more relevant to students now?

But why does something have to be immediately *useful* and *relevant* to have value? Why can’t we teach early modern drama just to introduce students to witty writing? Why not teach our students to analyse imagery, consider dramatic structure, and understand how playwrights explore the social and political contexts of their own time? There is value in just learning something interesting.

There is also demonstrable benefit for students in writing traditional, academic essays, learning to provide evidence, engage with others’ arguments and synthesise complex ideas to present a coherent, logical argument of their own. However, the hard push towards relevance and utility has pressed me to think about new ways to teach and assess learning on my “Dangerous Desires: Renaissance Revenge Drama” module, encouraging students to use what they learn to think through current social issues. During seminar discussion, I asked students to make parallels between play action and contemporary events; in assessment, I introduced an option asking students to produce something creative, based on the texts they study, to provide a starting point to engage young people in discussion of current issues of consent, authority or justice.

Consider this: in *The Spanish Tragedy* (3.12) Lorenzo ascribes madness to the grief-stricken Hieronimo in an attempt to discredit him and so prevent him from revealing Lorenzo’s part in Horatio’s murder. This – like Feste’s claim that “madmen’s epistles are no gospels” (*Twelfth Night*, 5.1.284) – might offer opportunity to think critically

“most of all it shows that early modern drama can be important in producing informed, responsible, socially ethical graduates.”

about contemporary social media activity and political discourses: it's a salient parallel to Andrew Neil's tweet describing investigative journalist Carole Cadwalladr as a “mad, cat woman”, but also offers a starting point for discussion of socio-political discourses that allow those in power to ignore the concerns of the ill or disabled.

Middleton and Rowley's De Flores in *The Changeling* (3.4) demands Beatrice-Joanna's virginity as payment for the murder of Alonzo De Piraquo. It's a scene that explores early modern patriarchal constructions of female chastity (is this really only “old stuff”?), but also one that provokes but does not answer questions of twenty-first century concern: could Beatrice-Joanna say “no” to De Flores? Would agreement to this “deal” constitute consent? Could we read agency in trading her body for her desired future? These questions provide roads in to thinking about topics like the Weinstein scandal and the #MeToo movement. Frances Dolan's (2011) essay “Re-reading Rape in *The Changeling*” provides legal, historical contexts for the play that could feed into contemporary discussions of feminism, coercion and consent. *The Changeling's* bed trick that substitutes Diaphanta for Beatrice-Joanna in Alsemero's wedding bed also led some insightful students to consider issues surrounding men's consent.

This kind of discussion is not easier than, or a replacement for, studying these brilliant plays in their cultural context or

engaging in detailed close analysis. What it does is offer “free-standing interpretive approaches to complicated social issues” (Eklund, 2019, p. 194). This is *useful* and *relevant* for our students as individuals navigating a world of judgements and inequalities, and for universities attempting to engage local community groups in outreach work. Most of all it shows that early modern drama can be *important* in producing informed, responsible, socially ethical graduates.

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THE GALLOWFIELD PLAYERS

ROWAN MACKENZIE is a prison Shakespeare practitioner working across multiple UK institutions to facilitate workshops, rehearsals and performances. She is also writing up her PhD on *Creating space for Shakespeare in non-traditional and applied theatre settings*.



Prisons education facilities are provided by organisations such as Milton Keynes College and Novus, offering a range of academic and vocational programmes to inmates. Prisons are required to seek to progress all prisoners towards functional skills level 2 Mathematics and English (the equivalent of GCSE Grade C or above). *The Prison Education & Library Services Policy Framework* (April 2019) confirmed requirements to encourage all prisoners to further their education, meeting the needs of prisoners with special educational needs and the criteria for applying for undergraduate and postgraduate education through distance learning. Further responsibility and autonomy for education was placed with Governors with the Dynamic Purchasing System implementation in April 2019.

“For a few short hours every week we are free; although physically we remain within the boundaries of the prison our spirits soar far above the walls and fences. Our minds are so involved in what we do that we could be in any room, on any stage in the world. This is a true sense of freedom, one that is rarely found anywhere in life, let alone within the high security estate. It offers each of us a few brief moments of Nirvana.”

I began voluntary work at HMP Gartree in early 2018 and over the course of eight months we built up a core of men who wanted to work on Shakespeare's plays with our first performance in October 2018 – a much edited *Macbeth*. Initially it was difficult to engage the men and often they would miss sessions for a variety of reasons. However, by late summer 2018 their commitment had deepened and they put their all into the first production – an event they were too nervous about to invite more than a handful of inmates to watch. The Governor announced at the end of the performance that the drama group was to become permanent rather than a temporary project. This was a real turning point for them and when we debriefed their thoughts and feelings they asked if we could form a Shakespeare group inside HMP Gartree – which is when the Gallowfield Players were born. It is, I believe, the only prison run theatre company in the UK where it belongs not to “me” but to “us” – a group of equals working to produce theatre.

“The weekly group provides a safe and supportive space in which we can express ourselves. It is a space in which honesty exists and the truth is not used as a weapon to beat us down but instead to empower and encourage each and every one of us that is involved. We get the

“for a few short hours every week we are free; although physically we remain within the boundaries of the prison our spirits soar far above the walls and fences.”

“It is a space in which honesty exists and the truth is not used as a weapon to beat us down but instead to empower and encourage each and every one of us that is involved.”

opportunity to be occasionally irreverent without the fear of institutional retribution. Our combined coping mechanism of gallows humour is appreciated as humour and not some manifestation of criminal deviancy.”

More men joined through invitation and the company now numbers sixteen; fifteen inmates and me. The choice of play, script editing, casting, props and costumes are organised by the actors themselves – an opportunity for them to have autonomy which is usually denied. I believe the work we do as a collective gives them a far broader set of transferable skills than much traditional education does – it facilitates and nurtures empathy, responsibility, public speaking, memory improvements and can also offer a lens through which to reflect on their crime if they choose to do so. Our second production, *Julius Caesar*, was performed in June 2019 to an audience of inmates and staff, followed by an afternoon performance where their families were invited. And then it was straight onto rehearsals for a greatly adapted *The Merchant of Venice*, which was performed in January 2020 to a larger audience of inmates, staff, families and invited guests over three days of performances, tackling the stigma and familial impact of incarceration. Work is now underway on *Sycorax's Storm*, adapting *The Tempest*.

“Our weekly sessions allow us to have an opinion and a voice so that it can be heard. Not all of our ideas are achievable but in the group they are considered and this alone helps build confidence and raise self-esteem. We are treated as equals, as people.”

I'm not convinced education always needs to be in a classroom setting, with defined learning outcomes and a curriculum. This works so well.

“our weekly sessions allow us to have an opinion and a voice so that it can be heard. not all of our ideas are achievable but in the group they are considered and this alone helps build confidence and raise self-esteem. we are treated as equals, as people.”

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