

# Over the wall ...

**Alan Maley**  
revisits the relevance  
of Shakespeare.

**T**he most famous British writer of all time, yet the one we know least about. That's Shakespeare. Yet the Shakespeare industry continues to pour forth publications at a rate no reader could possibly keep up with, his plays are still performed worldwide to packed houses and, of course, he is still a staple of literature courses.

## Shakespeare

Bill Bryson's book is a witty yet perceptive take on the bard. The chapters are short, the style accessible and the observations not only acute, but often barbed.

His first chapter shows how very little we know for certain about Shakespeare: '*... he is a kind of literary equivalent of an electron – forever there and not there.*' Only about 100 documents have been found connected with Shakespeare and most of them are legal documents. No manuscript has ever been found in his own handwriting. There are only three depictions of him, none of them authenticated. We are not even sure how his name was spelt. So most of what is written about him is sheer speculation. '*We can know only what came out of his work, never what went into it.*' Yet Shakespeare '*is not so much a historical figure as an academic obsession*'.

In the rest of the book, Bryson introduces us to what *is* known about Shakespeare and the context in which he lived and worked. His linguistic contribution to English is staggering. Of the 12,000 new words which came into English between 1500 and 1650, 2,035 came from him – and 800 are still in use. One tenth of the most quoted quotations in English are from him. Bryson explores the labyrinthine, messy and complicated way the plays have come down to us, with multiple versions, typographical errors and uncertainty as to authenticity of provenance. He discusses the sonnets and their unsolved puzzles, and agrees with Auden's judgement: '*... it seems to me rather silly to spend much time on conjectures which cannot be proved true or false.*'

His final chapter, on rival candidates for the authorship of Shakespeare's plays (Bacon, the Earl of Oxford, Marlowe, etc) is hilariously funny – and damningly dismissive. (Believe it or not, one of the

major supporters of the Earl of Oxford's claim to be the author of Shakespeare's works was a man '*with the inescapably noteworthy name of J Thomas Looney!*') Bryson concludes: '*... it is an amazement that one man could have produced such a sumptuous, wise, varied, thrilling, ever-delighting body of work, but that is ... the hallmark of genius. Only one man had the circumstances and gifts to give us such incomparable works, and William Shakespeare of Stratford was unquestionably that man – whoever he was.*'

## Shakespeare Our Contemporary

Jan Kott was very much the product of his time – growing up under Nazism, then living under Communism in Poland (which he initially supported) – and this is starkly reflected in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. In Kott's bleak vision of Shakespeare's world, we are all caught up in 'the great mechanism', helpless to avoid its indifferent churning, where no one is a winner. And this is the mirror Shakespeare holds up to our own world, where greed, violence, war, corruption, hypocrisy and indifference rule. '*Hamlet is a sponge ... it immediately absorbs all the problems of our time.*'

The book is in two parts: *The Tragedies* and *The Comedies*. The analyses of the history plays, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Coriolanus* are unremittingly raw and black, and Kott draws interesting comparisons between them and the work of Brecht, Beckett, Genet and other contemporary writers of the absurd. *'Tragedy is the theatre of priests, grotesque is the theatre of clowns.'* There is no way out: *'... when all has been lost, only memory remains, but it, too, must be stifled. One must kill oneself or kill in oneself the last vestiges of shame.'* Of *Macbeth*, he writes: *'He knows there is no escape from nightmare, which is the human fate and condition ... There is no other.'* Even the comedies are seen through a jaundiced eye: *'Love tales, stories of lovers and married couples are just as ruthless and cruel as the histories of kings, princes and usurpers. In both, dead bodies are carried away from the empty stage.'* So *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* are seen as visions of a 'bitter Arcadia'.

This book, published in Britain in 1965, had an immediate and enormous influence on Shakespearean theatre, including iconic productions, such as Peter Brook's *King Lear*. And the influence continues. Like Shakespeare, Kott remains our contemporary, and reminds us, uncomfortably, of who we are.

## Teaching Shakespeare

With the last two books, I am departing slightly from my original intention: only to discuss non-teaching books. Both titles discuss how to teach Shakespeare – but they do far more than that, offering a rich and accessible way into a deeper understanding of Shakespeare's work.

Rex Gibson's *Teaching Shakespeare* is a fabulous resource, as might be expected from the director of the *Shakespeare and Schools Project (1986–94)*, and editor of the *Cambridge School Shakespeare* series. His approach is based on 'Active methods' – *'Shakespeare is not a museum exhibit ... but a living force inviting active, imaginative creation.'* *'Active methods dissolve the traditional oppositions of analysis and imagination, intellect and emotion. They encourage informed personal responses which are both critical and appreciative.'* Chapter 1, *Why Teach Shakespeare?* sets out his rationale: the enduring relevance of the themes, the power for personal development, the

importance for language development: *'The language ... is energetic, vivid and sensuous. Its difficulties are enabling difficulties.'* In Chapter 2, he establishes the principles underlying the approach. Paramount among these is the need to treat Shakespeare as a script: *'A script declares that it is to be played with, explored ... brought to life by acting out. A text makes no such demand.'* Chapter 3 clears away some of the theoretical thickets: Tradition v Post-modern, Feminism, Psycho-analytical, Deconstruction, etc. He is remarkably tolerant of theory but, on page 44, sets out a list of practical questions to help teachers navigate through it.

The remainder of the book examines various aspects of the bard's work. Chapter 4 looks at Shakespeare's language and reminds us of the



importance and vibrancy of Elizabethan English: *'The human voice was held in high esteem ... The vigour of language, its sound and evocative power, mattered as much as its logic.'* And language substituted for elaborate scenery and lighting effects. The chapter deals with imagery, personification, repetition, rhyme, prosody, puns and all the tropes Shakespeare so extravagantly deployed. Along the way, there are concrete suggestions for activities related to each category. And on pages 90–91, he draws attention to the way Shakespeare's language evolved over his lifetime. The succeeding chapters deal with story, character, themes and their relevance for our time, and dramatic effect, including using stage directions, critical incidents and opening scenes. Each chapter is bubbling with ideas for activities.


Chapter 9, the longest in the book, is wholly devoted to 'Active methods', including the teacher's role and attitudes and the organisation of the classroom. Most space is given over to suggested activities for speaking, improvisation, warm-ups, tableaux, choral speaking, insults, video work and writing. These could equally well be used with any theatrical script, not just Shakespeare. Chapter 10 suggests ways into Shakespeare for younger learners through storytelling,

puppets and set design. The final chapter, on assessment, offers a sensible and humane set of varied ways of assessing the work, ranging from self-assessment and assessment through performance, through to tasks and examinations. His principles for assessment are particularly important in our measurement-obsessed age. Sadly, there is no bibliography.

## The North Face of Shakespeare

James Stredder's book can be treated as a companion volume to Gibson's. His main concern is to de-mystify Shakespeare, regarded by many as being more unscaleable than the North Face of the Eiger. He draws on the work of key figures in theatre education – from Viola Spolin, through Cicely Berry, Augusto Boal and Keith Johnstone, to Patsy Rodenburg – and offers a rich variety of classroom activities focusing on Shakespeare's language, narrative and character. Part II concentrates on activities for practical drama workshops, including group formation activities, theatre games and drama exercises. The two books together form an invaluable resource for any teacher wanting to work with Shakespeare.



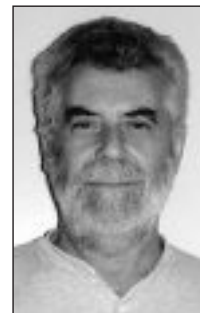
Even if Shakespeare does not figure in our teaching programme, he is ever present, both in the language and in the relevance of his themes for our troubled times. We cannot ignore him. Neither should we wish to! 

Bryson, B *Shakespeare* Harper Perennial 2007

Gibson, R *Teaching Shakespeare* CUP 1998

Kott, J *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* Methuen 1965

Stredder, J *The North Face of Shakespeare* Wincot Press 2004



**Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the Oxford Resource Books for Teachers.**

yelamoo@yahoo.co.uk