

# TEACHING SHAKESPEARE

## A HISTORY OF THE TEACHING OF SHAKESPEARE IN ENGLAND

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### CONTENTS

Introduction	Page 1
Pre National Curriculum	Page 2
The 1980s	Page 5
Shakespeare in the NC	Page 8
Shakespeare in the SATs	Page 11
Key Stage 4 Exams	Page 14
Shakespeare on film	Page 15
Conclusions	Page 16
More information	Page 16
About the author	Page 16

Those who have written about the teaching of Shakespeare in the past century have overwhelmingly encouraged an active approach. It is very rare for anyone with an opinion to advocate that a class of children learn best by sitting at their desks reading through a Shakespeare play. Yet in today's classrooms many children experience just that. Too many of our young people leave school believing that a Shakespeare play is a story to be read, with fixed values to be learned, rather than the dramatically dynamic, emotionally shifting and unstable play text which it really is.

What do you remember of studying Shakespeare at school? My own memories are of the delight my Year 8 English teacher (who happened to be German) took in Shakespeare's word play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I remember being left to work in a small group on the Mechanicals' scenes on the school stage. I also remember a special expedition to the cinema in Year 10 to see an old black-and-white film of *Julius Caesar* starring an allegedly-famous actor called James Mason. Nothing startling, yet a few of the right ingredients were there: enthusiastic teaching, playing the text, and seeing a performance (albeit on rather dodgy celluloid).

Many adults with a professed love of Shakespeare can recall a teacher or an experience that brought the plays to life for them in an active way.

*"Nearly every actor has someone – very, very often a teacher – behind him or her who at some time has influenced them enormously – because of their wonderful enthusiasm,"* said Judi Dench.<sup>1</sup>

For her, a talented teacher, Mrs McDonald, provided an antidote which led her to love Shakespeare after a previous teacher had simply read *As You Like It* around the class in a way which made Dench think: *"This is the most unbelievable and unutterable rubbish I have ever heard."*<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, many people leave school with that feeling. Carol Vorderman, for example, justified her failure to identify Sir Toby Belch as a character from *Twelfth Night* on a celebrity version of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* in 2000, by explaining afterwards that she found the work of Shakespeare, *"Dull as ditchwater."*<sup>3</sup> Of course Judi Dench and Carol Vorderman have different inclinations and talents. Perhaps Vorderman was never destined to enjoy Shakespeare however good her classroom experience may have been, but she and the millions of people with and without an inclination to English or Drama studies are still missing an wealth of understanding and allusion in their cultural lives if the appreciation of Shakespeare is shut down to them by uninspired teaching.

One of Britain's most well-respected and well-loved educationalists, Ted Wragg, agreed that there was no substitute for 'doing' Shakespeare, rather than reading, if you really want to let children access the power of Shakespeare's words. Recalling his own early experiences, Wragg said: *"I remember well studying Shakespeare and finding it excruciating, awful, but then acting it and finding it the most moving experience of my life. ... If teachers were free to teach Shakespeare as they wanted to, youngsters would get so much more out of it."*<sup>4</sup>

We might add that if English teachers were trained in drama methods and given the confidence to teach Shakespeare as a play text, they would get so much more out of it too.

As background to the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Stand up for Shakespeare* campaign, this report examines the changing opinions and policy in teaching Shakespeare through the last 100 years.

<sup>1</sup> In an interview with Rex Gibson in the Spring 1989 edition of *Shakespeare and Schools* (no.8).

<sup>2</sup> As footnote 1

<sup>3</sup> Times Educational Supplement (TES) 3/05/00

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in the TES 19/01/04

At the beginning of the twentieth century when Secondary education was becoming compulsory and English as a subject was taking prestige value from the Classics, attitudes to Shakespeare were very much influenced by nationalist pride. Mr William Shakespeare, an English gentleman, was revered as the greatest poet of all time, whose plays contained timeless characters and portrayed universal values which define our humanity. Matthew Arnold placed Shakespeare in unquestioning pre-eminence in his introduction to T H Ward's influential *The English Poets*, published in 1880.

The Victorians believed that exposure to high culture like Shakespeare made you a better person. In the post-enlightenment age, art became "a humanist surrogate for religion"<sup>5</sup>. A hundred years later, in 1985, Richard Adams<sup>6</sup> decried the static study of Shakespeare, but noted that most students respect Shakespeare even though they may be bored to tears by reading incomprehensible words around the class:

*"They are conditioned to accept that such brushes with greatness, like some potent but ill-tasting medicine, are good for them."*<sup>7</sup>

Clearly in this arena, as in many others, the Victorians had created an enduring concept. Shakespeare plays as texts to be 'read around the class' owed much to the influential critics of the first half of the twentieth century: AC Bradley's character-based criticism; L C Knight's journal *Scrutiny*; and critics like Tillyard, Wilson Knight and Leavis with their concepts of an ordered Elizabethan world from which Shakespeare transmits to us clear cultural values. This 'liberal humanist' tradition of criticism regarded the plays as literature rather than drama and its influence had a long life in secondary schools.

Nevertheless, voices which promoted treating the plays in schools as performance texts did exist. The **English Association** was founded in 1906 and one of its first publications was a pamphlet on *The Teaching of Shakespeare in Schools*, which came out in **1908**. Whilst the pamphlet upholds the established opinion of Shakespeare as "*the supreme figure of our literature*", it has promising suggestions for how to study him:

*"It is desirable that all the Shakespeare chosen for study should be read aloud in class. The living voice will often give a clue to the meaning, and reading aloud is the only way of ensuring knowledge of the metre. In a class of beginners the teacher must take a liberal share of the reading, but the pupils should be brought into play. They can be cast for some of the parts; the forum scene in Julius Caesar comes one step nearer the dramatic if the teacher is Anthony and the other parts are distributed and the class transformed into a Roman mob shouting for the will."*<sup>8</sup>

The pamphlet goes on to suggest that occasionally acting out scenes and seeing a performance of the play would be good practice. It says what so many writers on Shakespeare education would echo throughout the century:

*"There is a serious danger in the class-room, with text books open before us, of our forgetting what drama really means."*<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Peter Widdowson, describing an existential crisis in University English departments in 1981, referred to the traditional concept of Literature in this way in *The Crisis in English Studies*, his introduction in *Re-reading English*, ed. Peter Widdowson, p5

<sup>6</sup> *Teaching Shakespeare*, ed. Richard Adams, Robert Royce, 1985, p2

<sup>7</sup> As footnote 6

<sup>8</sup> The English Association, *The Teaching of English in Schools* (Leaflet No. 7, 1908), p2

<sup>9</sup> As footnote 8, p7

An early advocate of active learning of Shakespeare was **Henry Caldwell Cook** who taught at The Perse School in Cambridge. His book, *The Play Way*, was published in **1917** and strongly put forward the case for a theatrical approach to the study of Shakespeare. His legacy long continued as Peter Hall, a former pupil of the school, testifies:

*"My earliest memory of Shakespeare is of a group of eleven-year-olds, armed with wooden shields and swords and cloaks, shouting Macbeth at each other ... It never occurred to me not to love Shakespeare. He was thrilling and blood-soaked and full of witches."*<sup>10</sup>

We can only speculate, but surely Hall's less dramatically-inclined classmates were also left with a more affectionate attitude towards Shakespeare than their counterparts at other schools, left staring out of the window, only dreaming of swords and witches as a voice drearily intoned *"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow..."*

Despite the strong influence of the liberal humanist tradition in teaching, in **1954** the voices for drama-based teaching of the texts were still calling. In this year **A K Hudson** compiled a book, *Shakespeare and the Classroom* for The Society for Teachers of English, which affirmed the importance of active approaches to teaching Shakespeare.

In his introduction, Hudson wrote:

*"The unsuccessful methods [of teaching Shakespeare] normally display two features: they are non-dramatic and they reflect a tendency to regard school children as textual scholars in embryo.*

*The present book recognises frankly the difficulties which the modern pupil finds in dealing with Shakespeare. It has been written in the belief that the plays can be made intelligible and interesting only if the teaching remains stage-centred."*

The book (highly entertaining and yet sadly still familiar in its account of how Shakespeare is generally taught) gives practical advice and ideas for working with the plays with 11-18 year olds. Notably, Hudson believed that all students can benefit from studying Shakespeare in this way, including those, too often deemed unworthy, at Secondary Moderns.

Government reports also had opinions to contribute. In **1921**, a Government document, **The Newbolt Report** (entitled *The Teaching of English in England*) was published. Generally regarded as a forerunner of the age of child-centred learning, the report stressed the need for English to be enjoyable and promoted the use of drama to encourage imagination and empathy.

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<sup>10</sup> Making an Exhibition of Myself, Faber & Faber, 1993 p37

The report remains traditional in its regard of Shakespeare as "our greatest English writer" and in its tone that exposure to good literature makes for a good citizen. However, it also passionately asserts, *"Anything in our treatment that makes Shakespeare dull or distorted is a crime against his spirit."*<sup>11</sup>

This was back in a time when the Government did not interfere in the 'secret garden' of the school curriculum and so there was no training or support to ensure that children's experience of Shakespeare was not dull or distorted - but at least the report's heart was in the right place.

Forty-two years later in **1963**, the Ministry of Education **Newsom Report** (entitled *Half Our Future*) held firm to the belief that the arts are good for everyone, but with a less exuberant emphasis:

*"All pupils, including those of very limited attainments, need the civilizing experience of contact with great literature, and can respond to its universality."*<sup>12</sup>

Despite this governmental injunction and indeed the decade's reputation for innovation, by the **mid 1960s**, the optimism of earlier educationalists had given way to a more pragmatic view that Shakespeare was just too difficult for the majority of students. Two books influential in the teaching of English in the mid-sixties, *The Disappearing Dais* by Frank Whitehead (1966) and *Sense and Sensitivity* by J W Patrick Creber (1965), both maintain the view of Shakespeare as our

greatest writer but question the suitability of the study of Shakespeare for young teenagers. Up until (and for many people, even after) the introduction of Shakespeare as the only compulsory author on the National Curriculum in the early 1990s, the view that Shakespeare was not for everyone remained widely held. Shakespeare was standard fare for independent and grammar school pupils, but more often than not avoided in Secondary Moderns and Comprehensives. Even those teachers who believed Shakespeare could be accessible for all students often took the path of least resistance by leaving Shakespeare study to O- and A-Level Literature classes. There remained some brave souls and some who were lucky enough to benefit from localised pockets of support, training and encouragement to approach Shakespeare with younger and less academic students, but these were relatively rare and fortunate students.

Ironically, outside the world of education, in the academic and theatrical worlds, attitudes to Shakespeare were undergoing a revolution, summed up in the title of Jan Kott's book, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1965). Increasingly, theatres and universities were moving away from the traditional, reverential view of Shakespeare plays as having fixed values and a fixed spectrum of interpretation, and revisiting the fact that the plays are unstable texts, which actors, directors and writers have been playing around with from their first inception. The new attitudes could be seen in, for example, the work of Charles Marowitz and Peter Brook.

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<sup>11</sup> p319, The Newbould Report, 1921

<sup>12</sup> p155, my emphasis, The Newsom Report, 1963

In the mid 1980s, study of Shakespeare was largely the province of independent schools and higher-ability streams. Neil King, an experienced teacher and author of drama in education books asserted that Shakespeare should not be taught below Year 9 as,

*"the language is just too high a hurdle to attempt"*<sup>13</sup>

Even in Year 9, he is highly selective of the plays he considers suitable, considering *Romeo and Juliet* to be,

*"... full of a violence and hatred with which I do not particularly want to deal with thirteen-year-olds"*<sup>14</sup>

Although interestingly, he does advocate *Macbeth* and *Henry V*.

Shakespeare may have lost favour with the general rank and file of teachers in England but where Shakespeare in schools was being analysed, a *"performance consciousness"* was becoming very much the norm.

In 1984, the *American Shakespeare Quarterly* produced a special edition, *Teaching Shakespeare*<sup>15</sup>. In the editorial to the edition, John F Andrews writes:

*"A decade ago performance-oriented pedagogy was relatively unfamiliar among Shakespeareans and was anything but universally accepted as the wave of the future. Now it is difficult to find a dissenting voice: virtually everybody acknowledges the need to approach Shakespeare's plays as dramatic rather than literary works. The only real question seems to be just how to put the new consensus into practice."*

And there's the rub: it is a question we are still grappling with. In his essay in the edition, *Teaching Shakespeare: the wrong way and the right*, Kenneth Muir states the case quite clearly:

*"The most effective way to study Shakespeare's plays in schools, the only legitimate way indeed, is to turn every lesson into a rehearsal."*<sup>16</sup>

While the experts agreed on the best way to actually teach Shakespeare, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw a clash of views over Shakespeare's place in education at all between the left wing cultural materialist academics and the right wing guardians of cultural heritage.

The 1980s heralded the era of **critical theories** which opened up academic Shakespeare study. Of these, the Feminist and Cultural Materialist movements were probably the most influential on Shakespeare teaching. Cultural Materialism strongly attacked the 'bardolatry' that had built up around a Shakespeare taken out of time and place to be a repository of 'universal truth.' The academics provided a theoretical underpinning for educationalists already working with such ideas, and text books in the 1980s dealing with Shakespeare increasingly gave the plays some context.

These days, an awareness of *"cultural, historical and other contextual influences"* is enshrined as part of the examination requirements along with an awareness of literary heritage. However back in 1993, in the waning years of Conservative rule, Shakespeare's position of prominence in the educational agenda owed more to MPs' liberal humanist sense of heritage.

In the summer of 1993 came what the Observer called **'The Battle of the Bard'**, when John Major at his Party Conference railed against 500 academics who had written a letter protesting against the Government's policies on literature teaching, including the introduction of Shakespeare for compulsory study at Key Stage 3. The academics saw this as an ill-thought-through elitist imposition of a dead white male; the party members saw it as an opportunity for the moral fibre of all right-minded inhabitants of this sceptred isle to be strengthened. Teachers, meanwhile, shrugged and tried to get on with their daily business of teaching.

<sup>13</sup> Neil King, 'Starting Shakespeare,' in *Teaching Shakespeare*, ed. Richard Adams, Robert Royce, 1985, p57

<sup>14</sup> As footnote 13, p64

<sup>15</sup> Vol XXXV, 1984

<sup>16</sup> p642

Fortunately there was an oasis of sense for some teachers. Dr Rex Gibson, our greatest Shakespearean educationalist, was carrying out invaluable research. Gibson is fondly remembered for his passion and enthusiasm when working with students. In the midst of the political and academic turmoil of the decade, he was quietly achieving great success with his '**Shakespeare in Schools**' project, which began in **1986**.

Working from the Cambridge Institute of Education, Gibson's team produced a termly newsletter as a focus and support for the teaching of Shakespeare, *Shakespeare and Schools*, containing quotes, articles and information related to Shakespeare teaching - including articles by teachers on their direct experiences with Shakespeare in Secondary and Primary schools. In addition, Gibson set up an In Service Scheme whereby each LEA was invited to second a teacher to be a Teacher Associate of the Cambridge Institute of Education in order to carry out research into some aspect of pupils' encounters with Shakespeare.

In his introduction to the collection of papers resulting from this research<sup>17</sup>, Gibson is passionate that active and flexible approaches to the plays allow every student of any age to appreciate Shakespeare:

*"In total, our research reveals an encouraging picture. Teachers increasingly report success as they employ a variety of methods, at the heart of which is social collaborative, imaginative, re-creative activities. Such methods deepen and enhance students' informed personal responses."*<sup>18</sup>

This work was followed up by Gibson's school editions of plays, which first appeared in 1991, published by Cambridge University Press. Each edition provides a wealth of practical ideas facing each page of the text. The editions quickly became a familiar sight in every English stock-cupboard and were timely for the compulsory study of Shakespeare in KS3. Gibson's book, *Teaching Shakespeare* (1998), became a handbook for many new and experienced teachers alike.

In much the same spirit came the **Royal Society of Arts (RSA) project** of the **early 1990s**. Between 1992-3, the RSA worked with Leicestershire Education Authority and a group of schools on the outskirts of Leicester (four secondary schools and 13 primary schools). A number of agencies (including the RSC) provided professional support<sup>19</sup>.

*"The intention of this Project is that Shakespeare is accessible in the original to all age groups from 5 upwards provided that the teaching and learning approach is well prepared and made exciting and enjoyable."*<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Published as *Secondary School Shakespeare* in 1990

<sup>18</sup> p1, his emphasis

<sup>19</sup> Resulting in two books: *Shakespeare for All in Secondary Schools* and *Shakespeare for All in Primary Schools* containing thoughts and practical ideas resulting from the project.

<sup>20</sup> Stated in the Foreword by Andrew Fairburn, Former Director of Education for Leicestershire and Chairman of the RSA Advisory Arts Group

The RSA project wanted to counter the idea of Shakespeare as "a bogeyman," whose work is "too difficult, boring, irrelevant or inaccessible" <sup>21</sup>. Echoing Rex Gibson's words, they wanted to show that a more practical, fun approach was needed rather than a scholarly one, and that it was the standard approaches to teaching Shakespeare that were too difficult, boring, irrelevant or inaccessible rather than the plays themselves.

The RSA project was hugely successful in allowing teachers and students to develop skills and knowledge and share ideas, but its own evaluation acknowledged the problems with the dissemination and sustainability of all this wonderful work when the time and funding accorded by this special project was taken away. Projects and training like the RSA project, the Shakespeare and Schools project, the work of the RSC, National Theatre and Globe education departments and various TIE projects have enormously enhanced the enthusiasm, confidence and abilities of all involved. However, time and funding have prevented this influence being greater. <sup>22</sup>

And now back to the politics.

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<sup>21</sup> As footnote 20, p1

<sup>22</sup> Even in August 2000, Patrick Spottiswode, director of education at The Globe, was calling for Government money for training of teachers in active ways to teach Shakespeare, saying that places on courses at the Globe were filled not by UK teachers but by those from abroad, especially Americans, who could afford them. (*TES*, 7/08/00)

Back in 1976, James Callaghan's Ruskin College speech questioned the quality of state education and brought about a great deal of discussion about the curriculum, including several reports. However ideas remained fairly theoretical and generalised; for example the Department of Education and Science document *Curriculum Matters 1* published in 1984 stated that pupils:

*"should have experienced some literature and drama of high quality, not limited to the twentieth century, including Shakespeare..."*<sup>23</sup>

Not only was it not specific about which Shakespeare, how much and where it should come, but this literary heritage was to be open to *"most pupils"*, not all.

Following his appointment as Secretary of State for Education in May 1986, Kenneth Baker was determined to change this and create specific requirements for all school children. His predecessor, Keith Joseph, had initiated plans for a National Curriculum, which Baker moved forward very quickly. Baker's intention was to tie up all the details for the NC by April 1987 in order to include the proposals in the Party Manifesto launched on 19 May. This gave less than a year to plan the biggest overhaul in education since 1944. However, Baker achieved his goal, announcing in familiar Thatcherite tone in April 1987:

*"We can no longer leave individual teachers, schools or local education authorities to devise the curriculum children should follow."*<sup>24</sup>

Baker undoubtedly had noble intentions. He wanted to open *"doors of opportunity"* for students of all abilities and used Shakespeare to explain his idea: *"One of my favourite quotations comes from Timon of Athens: 'the fire i'the flint shows not till it be struck.' The task of the good school and the good teacher is to find that flint and to strike from it a spark."*<sup>25</sup>

Baker believed that setting targets for attainment in English meant:

*"specifying the range of books children were expected to read and understand. This range should be wide and draw upon the great literary inheritance of our country."*<sup>26</sup>

Baker, like the vast majority of his party, was a traditionalist in the Arnoldian vein. He was very clear that Shakespeare should be a compulsory author for study. His reasons were grounded in his belief that Shakespeare is good for us and represents the 'Best of British.'

At Hampton Grammar School, Baker was, *"introduced to the serious study of Shakespeare when we read in class Henry IV Part I."*<sup>27</sup>

When he transferred to private education at St Paul's, Baker says, *"We studied Shakespeare in that thorough textual way which meant one really had to know the play backwards. Greater understanding led to greater enjoyment and I still think this is the best way to teach Shakespeare."*<sup>28</sup>

Baker reflects the traditional view that 'knowing' Shakespeare is believed to have cultural and intellectual cachet, regardless of whether the student has understood or enjoyed it. But interestingly Baker too was inspired by an early theatrical encounter (afforded by his privileged upbringing) when he saw Donald Wolfit's *King Lear* on stage.

The Tory view of Shakespeare as the bastion of British culture and values was famously summed up by Nigel Lawson in an interview with the Guardian in September 1983:

*"Shakespeare was a Tory, without any doubt."* For the Tories, Shakespeare was to be celebrated proudly as a stable enduring symbol of Englishness in a shifting world: that was why he belonged on their new national standard of education.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> p11

<sup>24</sup> Kenneth Baker, *The Turbulent Years: My Life in Politics*, 1993, p192

<sup>25</sup> As footnote 24, p165

<sup>26</sup> As footnote 24, p190

<sup>27</sup> p7, my emphasis

<sup>28</sup> p9

<sup>29</sup> In 1991, the cover of a leaflet *Your child and the National Curriculum: A parents' guide to what is taught in schools* showed symbols of school study: a microscope, a globe, a computer etc. English was symbolised by the well-known head and ruff of Shakespeare, affirming his unquestioned position.

In September 1992, John Patten, then Education Secretary, stated the Conservative view quite clearly:

*"It is essential that pupils are encouraged to develop an understanding and appreciation of our country's literary heritage. Studying the works of Shakespeare is central to that development. That is why the study of Shakespeare is an explicit requirement of the National Curriculum."*

Unfortunately for Shakespeare, it was this attitude that alienated many teachers and academics from the prospect of compulsory Shakespeare study. Accusations of elitism were thrown from both sides. Some teachers felt that it was wrong to impose the writings of a white male, whose plays promote questionable values about class and women and whose compulsory inclusion in the syllabus perpetuates a snobbery that to be clever or important you have to know some Shakespeare.

Others countered that to deny students access to a man generally regarded as the world's greatest playwright was simply reverse snobbery. Perhaps ironically for the liberals of the time, Nelson Mandela, who kept his *Complete Works* by his side during his time on Robben Island, would agree with the latter group.

Meanwhile, most teachers stoically did what they had to do with varying degrees of enjoyment and trepidation. It is, however, encouraging to realise that a decade later, in February 2001, when reports reached the press that **Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)** was proposing to remove Shakespeare and other literary heritage figures from the curriculum, there was a widespread outcry from teachers and the proposals were dropped.

**The National Curriculum** was introduced progressively from autumn 1989, putting into practice the legal requirements set out in the Education Reform Act of 1988. Assessment was seen as a cornerstone of the new system and thus SATs were born. If Shakespeare is good for us, the politicians needed to know how good we were. Initially the SATs were to be fairly flexible:

*"Teachers will be able to select from a bank of SATs those which most closely fit the sort of work they have been doing with their pupils."*<sup>30</sup>

The Unions, mindful of what might follow, opposed any national testing and a new Battle of the Bard began. Or rather one more battle in a war which is still raging: the latest QCA consultation report showing how unhappy teachers are with the current SATs system.<sup>31</sup> But back in September 1990, when Year 7 students were the first to embark on the English NC programme, the war had just begun.

The introduction of the National Curriculum stated a requirement for Shakespeare but was not specific:

*"Pupils should be introduced to ... some of the works of Shakespeare."*<sup>32</sup>

Whilst other pre-20th century and 'influential' writers were also required, no other writer was compulsory.

<sup>30</sup> *National Curriculum: From Policy to Practice*, DES, 1989

<sup>31</sup> Published January 2007

<sup>32</sup> DES, 1990, para. 15

In the previous year, the **Cox Report, *English for Ages 5-16***, had been conciliatory in tone towards English teachers sceptical or terrified at the prospect of teaching Shakespeare:

*"In particular, every pupil should be given at least some experience of the plays or poetry of Shakespeare. Whether this is through the study, viewing or performance of whole plays or of selected poems or scenes should be entirely at the discretion of the teacher."*<sup>33</sup>

The report was very positive about Rex Gibson's 'Shakespeare and Schools' project. It said the project:

*"... has shown that Secondary pupils of a wide range of abilities can find Shakespeare accessible, meaningful and enjoyable. The project has demonstrated that the once-traditional method where desk-bound pupils read the text has been advantageously replaced by exciting, enjoyable approaches that are social, imaginative and physical."*<sup>34</sup>

Clearly this approach was what the DES hoped for and a bright new horizon beckoned for Shakespeare teaching.

The Cox Report went on to validate the place of Shakespeare in the NC:

*"Many teachers believe that Shakespeare's work conveys universal values, and that his language expresses rich and subtle meanings beyond that of any other English writer. Other teachers point out that evaluations of Shakespeare have varied from one historical period to the next and they argue that pupils should be encouraged to think critically about his status in the canon. But almost everyone agrees that his work should be represented in a National Curriculum. Shakespeare's plays are so rich that in every age they can produce fresh meanings and even those who deny his universality agree on his cultural importance."*<sup>35</sup>

This paragraph neatly sums up much of the thinking at the time. However, while most teachers may have agreed that Shakespeare should be part of the NC, many also felt daunted, if not intimidated, at the prospect of delivering a worthwhile study. For English teachers struggling to meet all the new demands the NC placed on them and their usually mixed-ability classes, paying more than lip-service to Shakespeare was often too much to ask. The requirement for *"some experience of the plays or poetry"* stated in the Cox Report meant that hard-pressed teachers, dealing with so much change and without extra training or support, could simply show Zefereilli's film of *Romeo and Juliet*, study the witches' chant from *Macbeth* or Jacques' *"All the World's a Stage"* speech to cover the requirement – and gain some good display work in the process.

In 1995, following the Dearing Report, schools were given a new slimmed-down version of the NC to work with. This version stated more clearly that at least two Shakespeare plays should be studied during Key Stages 3 and 4.

<sup>33</sup> DES, 1989: Ch 7, para 7.15

<sup>34</sup> As footnote 33, 7.16

<sup>35</sup> DES, 1989: 7.16

In 1993/4, all Year 9 students had to study *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when Shakespeare became enshrined on Paper 2 of the Key Stage 3 SATs examinations. When it began in 1994, the paper required a student to answer one of two questions on the set scenes of the play they had studied, writing their response in 1 hour 15 minutes. They would be assessed for both reading and writing skills. Questions were traditional literary questions, regarding the play as a story fixed within a range of interpretation rather than a script for performance.

For example: with regard to Act 1 Scene 3 of *Julius Caesar*, the question was:

*"At this point in the play do you support the conspirators?"*

One question for *Romeo and Juliet* acknowledges that it is a play for an audience and asks of Act 1 Scene 5:

*"How are moods of excitement, romance and danger created during the scene? How do they affect the audience's feelings about Romeo and Juliet at this point in the play?"*

But this still regards an audience member as a reader rather than a witness at a performance.

The question that seems most open to allowing a respondent to give a more interpretive response is a question on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 3 Scene 1:

*"If you were directing the scene, what would you tell the actors to help them bring out the comedy?"*

But the notes given for markers seek rewards for answers which point out why the scene is funny rather than suggestions for how the actors could look, sound and behave.

This paper was boycotted by the majority of schools in a general boycott of the English Key Stage 3 SATs, which teachers and their Unions felt had been brought in too quickly for teachers and students to be adequately prepared.

Although the boycott remained in doubt until fairly late on, it meant that for one year, teachers could try out, if not enjoy, teaching Shakespeare with their Year 9 classes without having to drill them in how to pass the test.

I clearly remember my own determination to give my Year 9 English group, renowned as a difficult class in a school of difficult and low-achieving children, an experience to remember. We worked on *Julius Caesar* and my main reason for choosing this text rather than the vastly more popular and in many ways more appealing *Romeo and Juliet*, was that the RSC was touring a production which was not only modern dress but also in promenade. I was determined that my Year 9s, written off as 'rabble' by many of their teachers, would become the rabble at Caesar's funeral and be moved by seeing Caesar stabbed to death only inches in front of their eyes. I was so driven by my mission that I even drove the 50 mile return journey in the school minibus with the 14 out of the 28 students who had managed to find the subsidised fare to come. They loved it, of course. I'd like to think that for those students, this was their Donald Wolfitt moment - but it was not Kenneth Baker's idealism that had helped them to it.

We explored the play in class using drama-based activities and I feel they and I had a very positive experience. I was infinitely relieved not to have to put them through the SATs.

The following year I did not teach Year 9 English, but I suspect I would have felt compelled to teach in a more traditional way, knowing this time there was no escape from the examination regime.

The first year of national tests taken by all Year 9s was 1995 and while the format of the paper remained the same, the questions were designed to be as inoffensive as possible with several questions asking, *"What do you think of..."* a character's behaviour in the set scene, or asking the student to put themselves in a character's place and write a letter or diary as that character. In subsequent years, questions remained largely character-based.

In **2003** came the next battle. In 2002, Estelle Morris vetoed a QCA recommendation that the Shakespeare paper be reduced to 45 minutes and assessed just for reading; the writing assessment element of it was to be incorporated into Paper 1. Morris was worried about upsetting traditionalists by reducing marks awarded on the Shakespeare paper – ironic in view of the outrage her decision actually did cause.

The set plays in 2003 were *Twelfth Night*, *Macbeth* and *Henry V* and each was now on a separate paper with two questions to be answered in the 1 hour 15 minutes. It was the inclusion of the second question, the 'shorter writing task', that caused outrage about 'dumbing down' since this question had only a loose association with the play studied. For example, the question worth 20 of the 38 marks available for the *Twelfth Night* paper asked students for a discursive response to: *"How important is what you wear?"*<sup>36</sup>

The new version of the paper caused so many complaints that QCA ordered a rethink and a survey of teachers on how best to change the paper. It found that teachers were overwhelmingly opposed to the creative writing element of the Shakespeare paper.

For 2004, the same format of paper went ahead as there had not been time to change it. The problems were compounded further by extensive delays in the delivery of papers and marking, which QCA acknowledged caused a great deal of extra work and stress for English teachers, as well as undermining their professionalism in the eyes of parents and students.

In the *Report on KS3 English Review of Service Delivery failure 2003-2004 to QCA Board*, 30/09/04, the review team highlighted the growing divide between the Government's emphasis on the summative nature of KS3 English tests in their desire to publicise statistics, and educationalists' desire for formative assessment. The report highlighted the negative stress factor caused by SATs: *"It is a fact that school-level key stage 3 test results have a significant impact on school with the potential to affect teachers' careers."*<sup>37</sup>

Under Charles Clarke's approval, the 2005 paper reverted to QCA's original plan before Estelle Morris vetoed it. In 2005 and 2006, Shakespeare was assessed by students answering one question on the set play in 45 minutes with the response determining 18% of the marks available for the English papers. But the 2005 Paper 2 was again considered a disaster.

<sup>36</sup> The *Macbeth* paper asked a general question about villains and the *Henry V* paper asked students to write a speech.

<sup>37</sup> p8

In 2004, a question on *Macbeth* for Key Stage 3 was considered more suitable for A-Level candidates:

*"How do these extracts explore the idea that it is difficult to know whom we trust?"*

In 2005, the *Macbeth* question was again criticised when teachers complained that it was worded more with GCSE students in mind and had reduced many students to tears. The question (again following the tradition of treating a Shakespeare play as an academic text rather than a dynamic script) asked:

*"What does Macbeth say to show he is scared, and what does he say that shows he still wants to be king?"*

Following the tests, NATE<sup>38</sup>, deciding that enough was enough, wrote an open letter published in the TES on 20 May 2005 calling for a thorough review of how and why KS3 assessment is carried out. The QCA survey *English 21* was partly in response to this.

For the past few years, Paper 2 has settled down again, but results come after the end of term (unlike results for Maths and Science), which means that although the papers may have been more thoroughly marked, the results remain useful only in a summative capacity. Following a public consultation, the choice of the set texts for SATs has been reduced to two plays for examination from 2009. These will be *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Tempest*. NAA recommended that *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It* and *Julius Caesar* be included on a rolling programme of plays for study at Key Stage 3.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> The National Association for the Teaching of English

<sup>39</sup> *NAA Shakespeare Consultation 2006*, published January 2007: QCA/07/3038

The old **O-Level English Literature** syllabus of the 1960s and 1970s required the study of three texts: a Shakespeare play, a novel and some poetry, all of which had to be known very thoroughly, which included learning quotations. Shakespeare was the only compulsory author; boards were otherwise able to select their texts freely and from any period, though in practice the texts tended to be drawn from the 'Great Tradition'.

During the 1980s, exam boards began to move away from the 'Great Tradition' and away from compulsory Shakespeare. By the late 1980s, it was possible, probably likely, for most students to leave school without having studied Shakespeare at all. As O-Level texts no longer had to be a play, a novel and poetry, students could escape the study of a play or poetry all together. Even the most academically-able could escape Shakespeare during their mandatory school career.<sup>40</sup>

With the introduction of **GCSE** supplanting the old O-Level and CSE syllabuses for first examination in **1988**, all three genres of poetry, prose and drama again had to be covered, but the study of Shakespeare was left to the discretion of the teacher. Many schools took the option to submit 100% coursework and this provided creative possibilities for teachers to assess their students' work in ways other than the O-Level literary criticism essay. Some took the chance to do interesting assignments on Shakespeare, but when Shakespeare plays appeared in the drama section of the set texts along with, for example, Bill Forsyth's *Gregory's Girl*, it was again a case for many of following the path of least resistance. There was a general expectation that more able students would study Shakespeare while less able would study modern texts but since it was possible to get an A grade for a sophisticated piece of writing on *Gregory's Girl* and most teachers were teaching mixed-ability groups, it is understandable why so many opted not to bother with Shakespeare.

In **1994**, the Key Stage 4 programme of study set out in the 1991 National Curriculum came into force to affect GCSE for examination in 1995. The study of a Shakespeare play was required and Shakespeare once again became the only compulsory author on the Literature syllabuses.

A QCA review of standards between 1980 and 2000<sup>41</sup> comments on:

*"... a significant change in demand related to the kind of knowledge of texts required of candidates, reflecting the extended range of texts to be studied."*

While the O-Level syllabuses in 1980 required detailed knowledge of a text, its characters, themes and plot, mainly in isolation, by 2000 there was more focus on interpretation and critical response - more understanding expected that a text exists in time and space, should be compared to other relevant texts and should be considered in the light of the time it was written, and of the time it is being received. Critical theories had filtered down to the classroom.

In 1995, it became a requirement of the exam boards that texts be compared and contrasted and that an understanding be shown of social and historical contexts. Teachers now regard setting a text in its social and historical context and a discussion of its relevance today as second nature.

Since **1999**, the study of a Shakespeare play has been a requirement of GCSE English Language to assess the NC requirement that a play be studied at Key Stage 4<sup>42</sup>. For the first time, all students, regardless of ability, had to study a Shakespeare play for their all-important 16+ exam in English, something not even Kenneth Baker had called for.

<sup>40</sup> CSE Literature syllabuses included Shakespeare but did not require a study of a play.

<sup>41</sup> Published in March 2004

<sup>42</sup> While QCA no longer requires a Shakespeare play to be studied for GCSE English Literature, in practice, writing produced on Shakespeare for GCSE Language is often used as a crossover piece with GCSE Literature.

The well known Shakespeare films, especially Zeferelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, have always had a place at the heart of students' school experience. However Baz Luhrman's *Romeo + Juliet*, first released in cinemas in 1996, had a profound effect on the teaching of Shakespeare in the classroom. In early 1998 after the video was well established in English classrooms, the TES reported that it:

*"Is being credited with the huge improvement in 14-year-olds' performance in Shakespeare tests."*  
(62% of 14 year olds studied *Romeo and Juliet*.)

Baz Luhrmann was hugely successful in targeting today's youth and he is passionate about reaching out to contemporary teenage cultures and all abilities. He went into schools himself to promote Shakespeare and 12,000 study guides were sent out to UK schools to support the film.

Gemma Warren, a PGCE student with a regular column in the TES, spoke for many teachers more experienced and cynical than herself when she wrote in March 1998 of using the Luhrmann film:  
*"I've never had 100% attendance and total punctuality for three consecutive days [before]. It makes me remember why I love teaching."*

Nowadays, teachers and examiners are growing increasingly weary of reading,

*"When Romeo first sees Juliet through the fish tank..."*

Or: *"When Romeo shot Tybalt..."*

They feel that the visual imagery takes over from the language too much, but an editorial by Peter Hollindale in the TES in 1998 is still valid. He heralds the film,

*"...not only as an ideal teaching resource but as a valid goal of Shakespeare teaching in itself."*<sup>43</sup>

Hollindale was reviewing new practical resources for Shakespeare teaching and assuring his audience that all students can enjoy Shakespeare if a practical approach is used:

*"Shakespeare is not a book but a stage action, where linguistic complexity, inevitably toughened by four centuries of separation, is easily reduced by experiments in enactment. All Shakespeare teachers can be their own Luhrmann, given the nerve, the keenness and the opportunity."*<sup>44</sup>

Simply showing the film is not enough - it is our job to give today's students the opportunity to explore contemporary symbolism just as Shakespeare in his time was using his language to create images in the minds of the more aural society he lived in. The excellent films available and teachers' access to new media technology have become an important part of today's students' experience of Shakespeare.

<sup>43</sup> TES 16/01/98

<sup>44</sup> As footnote 43

Teachers, increasingly in Primary as well as Secondary Schools, continue to be creative and innovative in their approach to teaching Shakespeare, and a wealth of literature, websites and resource packs is now available to help teachers with active approaches. But many teachers remain sceptical about Shakespeare's value and/or are intimidated by how to do him justice. Many also just find it hard to accommodate a practical approach to Shakespeare because of pressures of time, space or both.

Two postings on the TES forum represent the spectrum of feelings:

*"Why oh why do we make all kids try to understand Shakespeare?? It is simply criminal."*

And in answer to a question posed about whether teachers could cope if all writing in lessons was banned for a month:

*"I would do Drama and Speaking and Listening the whole time. We could actually make Shakespeare fun and treat it like Drama rather than writing silly essays."*

English teachers today are generally at peace with Shakespeare on the curriculum but not with the necessity of studying him for the SATs.

As Ted Wragg eloquently puts it:

*"At its best the examination process is a check on what people have learned, a valuable tool for pupils, teachers and society at large. At its worst it can comprehensively and irrevocably hammer the life out of something, however magnificent or dynamic, so that children never want to see it again as long as they have breath."*<sup>45</sup>

There has certainly been a massive shift in the reasons behind our methods for teaching Shakespeare. While his work is still regarded as the 'industry standard' of literature, he is far less likely to be perceived as a distant authority figure of cultural heritage but more as a resource to explore, experiment and play with.

As Sue Gregory, a Leicestershire teacher, says in her essay, *Making Shakespeare our contemporary*:  
*"We want our students at high school level to feel that studying Romeo and Juliet is relevant, indeed important, to their growing knowledge of the world,"*

not for its cultural iconography but because art:  
*"helps us to understand our lives a little, and maybe helps us to cope."*<sup>46</sup>

## MORE INFORMATION

To find out about the *Stand up for Shakespeare* campaign, read the manifesto and sign up in support, visit:

[www.rsc.org.uk/standupforshakespeare](http://www.rsc.org.uk/standupforshakespeare)

To find out about the work of the RSC Education department, visit:

[www.rsc.org.uk/education](http://www.rsc.org.uk/education)

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<sup>45</sup> TES 11/06/04

<sup>46</sup> Published in *Shakespeare in Education*, ed. Martin Blockside, Continuum, 2003