



The Richard Dimbleby Lecture: 2016:

**“Is Shakespeare Chinese?”**

"Open your ears".

That's surely the most arresting first line of any Shakespeare play. Rumour, the chorus figure who introduces *Henry IV Part Two*, tells the audience to listen up.

"Open your ears!"

Ladies and Gentlemen, it won't have escaped your notice, that this year, 2016, is the 400th anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare, and I am delighted and honoured to have been asked to give the Richard Dimbleby Lecture in this great jubilee year.

How is it that Shakespeare's words still resonate, and have the power to grab you, and that his philosophy still has meaning four centuries later.

Ben Jonson addressed his fellow playwright as "My gentle Shakespeare" and I am aware that tonight's lecture is entirely subjective – it's My Shakespeare, the man whose work I have been lucky enough to spend most of my career directing at Stratford-upon-Avon.

I have just returned from China, where the RSC have been presenting both parts of *Henry IV* and *Henry V*. It's the first time the company have ever visited the People's Republic with plays from our main repertoire, and it's the first time that cycle of plays has ever been performed in China.

We were anxious about how they would go down. Would they be perceived as some impenetrable firewall of English History? Wouldn't it have been less risky to take *Romeo and Juliet*, or *The Merchant of Venice* instead? Those plays are well known in China. Indeed the trial scene from *The Merchant* is studied by schoolchildren across that vast country.

There was a moment during the technical rehearsal in Beijing, when I suddenly thought that perhaps, after all, we were crazy to be touring three plays that the Chinese had never seen before.

We had heard troubling stories: about Chinese audiences don't react like audiences in Stratford-upon-Avon, that they spend their time chatting, get up and leave after forty minutes or so, or simply record the show on their iPhones, and worse that ushers stab audience members with green laser beam torches ... but to little effect.

Would they follow the story? Would the surtitles be precise enough?

On the first night in Beijing I held my breath: we were about to find out  
But I'll come back to that.

Shakespeare has been a passport through my life.

There may be Seven Ages of Man, but for me, there are three ages in your Life's journey with Shakespeare.

At first, as a kid, you are grabbed by his stories, tales of fairies and witches, of shipwrecks, and murders and battles. He is, if nothing else, one of the greatest of story tellers.



I first heard Shakespeare on an old 45 rpm record of Mendelssohn's incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which came with a Reader's Digest box set of Beethoven symphonies my dad had ordered. (I must have been about 8) I was drawn into that magical fairy wood outside Athens. There was braying Bottom thumping around in the brass. And in the string glissandos you could picture the fairies scuttling through the forest, like leaves blown across a lawn in an evening breeze.

The music was interspersed with extracts from the play. When Puck (who sounded to me like Mickey Mouse) said he'd put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes, I was amazed. My Dad, a scientist, had told me that just before I was born Sputnik had ignited the space race, by orbiting the globe in an hour and a half. Wow! Puck was twice as fast as Sputnik.

As you grow up, after the stories, it is perhaps Shakespeare's language which intoxicates you next: the second stage of your growing obsession.

Frank McCourt, the author of *Angela's Ashes*, tells how as a child in Limerick in the 1930's, he was stricken down with typhoid fever, and confined to hospital where he only had a volume of Shakespeare to read. But reading it he said, "was like having jewels in your mouth". And that is exactly how I felt.

I've been doing Shakespeare plays, putting them on and being in them since I was thirteen.

I was lucky enough to go to a Jesuit College in Preston in Lancashire, which put on an annual Shakespeare play every autumn term. It was an all boys' school, and though my twin sister went to the convent school across the road in Winckley Square, girls were not invited to participate. So at sixteen, I gave my Lady Macbeth.

I felt empowered by playing her.

Every evening, I used to walk Ben, the family cairn terrier, down a path, along a little brook, that led through the fields to the salt marshes of the Ribble Estuary. Bats would flit noiselessly under the trees past my head. And as light thickened, I would rehearse her lines out loud. "Come you Spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, Unsex me here". Thank god only the cows could hear. But those words, so illicit, so daring, so disturbing, for a young man struggling with his sexuality, somehow whispered of empowerment.

Then a touring production of the Scottish play came to our school. It wasn't very good. When Macbeth cried "Is this a dagger which I see before me", the witches lowered a plastic dagger on a fishing line in front of his face, and they replaced the porter scene with:

- *Knock knock*
- *Who's there?*
- *Tom.*
- *Tom who?*
- *Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow*

But worst of all for me, (feeling understandably proprietorial about Lady M), was when we got to her line:

*"make thick my blood;  
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature*



*Shake my fell purpose".*

the actress changed the word "compunctious" to "horrid".

*"Let no horrid visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose".*

Well, it didn't even scan!

And though I had little idea what "compunctious" actually meant, my sixteen year old self could hear the word splutter with disdain for petty scruples. Shakespeare himself only uses the word once, in fact he probably invented it, but it prickles and fizzes with plosive consonants, "c", "p", "ti". "Compunctious!": Sound echoes sense...."And "Horrid" didn't do it mate!"

At the talk back after the show, with all the righteous indignation of a huffy teenager, I protested!

When I came to direct Harriet Walter as Lady Macbeth, nearly a quarter of a century later, on the first night, I gave her a photograph of myself in the role. It was, she declared, the weirdest first night card she had ever had from her director.

I joined the RSC as an actor in 1987

My first part, in *The Merchant of Venice*, was Solanio, known as one of the "Salads". They are a gossipy pair of parasites buzzing around Antonio, The Merchant of Venice himself.

Antonio is obsessively in love with the young gold-digger, Bassanio.

The Salads witness Antonio's unrequited love and Solanio (my part) captures his pain, with aching simplicity, saying:

*I think he only loves the world for him.*

As it happened I felt exactly the same. I had fallen in love too ( with Shylock as it happens) And I realized that I had reached the second age of this growing journey with Shakespeare, when you can't believe that he is saying what you are thinking. And somehow as you experience attraction or Love... His words provide the key to your soul.

Who has described the absurd giddiness of falling in love better than Rosalind in *As You Like It* when she cries to Celia

*O coz, coz, coz, my pretty little coz, that thou didst know how many fathom deep I am in love! But it cannot be sounded; my affection hath an unknown bottom, like the Bay of Portugal.*

Is there a more violent descent into morbid jealousy than that which afflicts Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, evident in the line:

*Inch thick, knee deep, o'er head and ears, a fork'd one.*

...a line so fractured and contorted, it might seem to deny immediate understanding, but immediately conveys his nettled jealous state of mind.

Perhaps no one described self-loathing better than the lanky lovelorn Helena, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when she drags herself through the wood and collapses exhausted saying:

*And Sleep, that sometime shuts up sorrow's eye,  
Steal me awhile from mine own company.*

Fantastic, as Sam Goldwyn is reputed to have said, Fantastic and all written with a feather!

But trying to persuade anyone of Shakespeare's genius by dangling quotations before them, is, as Dr Johnson once said, a bit like a man trying to sell you his house by carrying a brick in his pocket as a specimen".

I love words. "Words, words, words...."  
I love them, but Shakespeare invented them.

The English language we are told grew by 10,000 new words during the century in which Shakespeare lived, and 600-2000 of them were estimated to have been invented by him: *Assassination, addiction, bedazzled, lacklustre, moonbeam, newfangled, scuffle and puking!* How's that for a list. Language roiled and boiled in a crucible of invention.

The King James Bible published in 1611 uses a modest vocabulary of about 6,000 words. Shakespeare's vocabulary (depending on how you count the variants) is usually estimated as between 26 and 29,000 words.

Apparently the growth in the language was partially ascribed to the playwrights, searching for novelty. In 1599, the anarchic playwright John Marston, in a play called *Antonio and Mellida*, invents a new word on average every 14 lines. "Fubbery", there's one of his. "Fubbery, Fubbery" a character says in his play *The Malcontent*. Audacious eloquence!

And Shakespeare too was a man of "fire-new words". Indeed like Feste, (the fool in *Twelfth Night*) he was a "corrupter of words", making nouns and adjectives press-gang themselves into verbs: *He words me, girls, he words me,* ...says Cleopatra aware that Octavius Caesar is trying to manipulate her to his will.

Words are physical objects to Shakespeare,  
*You cram these words into my ears*  
... says Alonso in *The Tempest*, as if words are portable and have mass and weight.

Words are weapons to Hamlet. He promises to challenge his mother saying  
*I will speak daggers to her, but use none,*  
...and later in the closet scene she cries  
...*these words like daggers enter mine ears.*

No wonder then that Rumour tells us to "Open our ears", or that the chorus at the start of *Romeo and Juliet* begs us "with patient ears attend", or that Elizabethans talked about going to hear a play. We talk of television "viewers", but about theatre "audiences", (from "audire", the Latin for to hear). The spoken word is the medium of Shakespeare's theatre, for the words transport you, carry you here and there jumping o'er time, and for the playwrights of his day, they had to be up to scratch. They had to keep the audiences' attention with those words, and not unsurprisingly, they found novel ways to do that.

Fascinating recent research at Liverpool University has shown that Shakespeare's words have an actual and demonstrable neurological effect on the brain. "Good tickle brain" Falstaff calls Mrs Quickly, and that's exactly what his words do, they tickle the brain and stimulate the neurones of our brains, prompting activation in the visual association cortex. Did you get that? The visual association cortex, or what Horatio in Hamlet calls the "mind's eye". Shakespeare's words set off little electrical charges, light up our minds, and create a theatre of the brain.

So when Juliet says "parting is such sweet sorrow" it surprises us, or so it should, the conjunction of sweet and sorrow startles us. The difficulty for us today, for actors today, is getting beyond the over familiarity with those phrases, and re-coining it afresh as if the thought, that particular conjunction of words has just occurred to Juliet.

But how do you do that? How do you fresh mint some of those famous lines?  
How do you "*look with thine ears*", as King Lear says.

Well the late lamented Roger Rees when he played Hamlet, decided to try to surprise the audience one night with perhaps the most famous line in Shakespeare: "to be or not to be". He would rush forward to the front of the stage, and deliver the line with an urgent immediacy, as if it had just emerged from the quick forge and working house of thought. The cue came and he hurtled onto the stage, and promptly forgot the most famous line in Shakespeare... Not only that, but he was prompted by a member of the audience.

When I did a production of *Hamlet* with David Tennant a few years ago, we discovered a rather unconventional way of fresh-minting another of those famous lines whose fame transcends the play:

As the gravedigger presents Hamlet with the skull of his father's old Jester, he declares:  
*Alas poor Yorick!*

I had heard that in the 1980's, a man had actually bequeathed his own skull, to be used in a production, an RSC production, of *Hamlet*. His name was Andre Tchaikowsky, and he was a Polish composer, living in Oxford. The undertaker had balked at the idea of removing the head from one of his customers as this was not regarded as well normal practice, and quite possibly it was illegal, so believe it or not, permission had to be obtained from the Home Office. Eventually the local hospital had removed it, and the local museum had done the job that presumably the cold clay of the grave did for Yorick.

Whatever the process, one day the skull arrived in the prop department at Stratford in a Delsey tissue box, and when it was opened Rusty the prop master's dog went crazy. The skull still stank, ("Pah!" as Hamlet says "the gorge rises at it") so it was put up on the roof in an onion bag, until the weather, and perhaps the birds had done the rest. Then it was stored in a box on a shelf, and that's where it had stayed: no one had chosen to cast Andre as Yorick.

So on the first day of our rehearsals, as usual, I welcomed the actors and announced the parts they would be playing, and then I said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to introduce you to the final member of our company" and pulled on some purple rubber gloves, I opened that cardboard box, and lifting out the skull, I said "This is Andre. He will be playing Yorick"

A silence fell on the room.

I offered to hand the skull to any of the team who wanted to touch it. Some recoiled, some were drawn towards it in grim fascination. Cicely Berry, the legendary RSC voice guru ( still working with the company aged 90) Cis was present, and declined the skull with a smile, saying, she was close enough to that state herself, already. Many were disturbed by such a vivid *memento mori*. Folk don't generally keep death's heads on their desk-tops these days. Imagine next to your 2016 calendar, between your laptop and your paperclips.

Whatever the reaction, that line - "Alas, poor Yorick" - never languished into cliché in our production. The skull never became just another stage prop. When David Tennant as Hamlet



peered at the skull, he stared into those hollow eye sockets and saw his own mortality staring straight back at him.  
And so did we.

Shakespeare came face to face with this scoffing grinning antic at the age of 52.

We don't actually know how he died. The vicar of Holy Trinity Church, John Ward, in Stratford-upon-Avon, some forty years later, left the only account we have. He writes in his diary "Shakespeare had a merry meeting with his friends, Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton, drank too much, and died of a fever there contracted". That's it.

Shakespeare's funerary monument in Holy Trinity tells us he died on 23rd April, which is normally accepted as the day he was born. So it would seem, Bill and Ben, went out with Mike, on his 52nd birthday, overdid it, and he shuffled off his mortal coil.

But why are we celebrating this fatal birthday binge? Why are we even still doing his plays 400 years later?

Let me go back to our first night of *Henry IV Part One*, in China:

It was a packed house with a good balance of men and women, of all age groups, with lots of young people. They were quiet in the first scene.

Hotspur broke the ice first. He's the hotheaded action-man of the play. Forbidden by the King even to mention the name of the rebel Mortimer, he swears he will teach a starling to say nothing but Mortimer, and give it to the King to squawk it at him day and night. Laughter! Recognition of the absurdity, of the imaginative brain of that motormouth Harry Hotspur.

But then Sir John Falstaff waddled on to the Chinese stage for the very first time ever. One of Shakespeare's greatest creations, that primal urge, that life force, that gross embodiment of appetite and desire, the irresistible, "Hill of Flesh", Jack Falstaff.

Laughter: at the Gadshill plot, where Falstaff and his henchmen decide to play highwaymen and rob travellers on the London road, only to be hijacked in turn by the dissolute playboy Prince Hal, and his mate Poins.

And then in the Tavern Scene as Falstaff exaggerates his bravery to the Prince, pretending that he fought off assailants in ever increasing numbers: great waves of laughter from our Chinese audience. It was as if Falstaff had always been there in the Chinese psyche: as if he was one of the most ancient of Chinese Folk characters.

At the end of the Battle of Shrewsbury, when Prince Hal kills Hotspur in a duel, Falstaff tries to take the credit for killing him - to Prince Hal's face! The disreputable rogue declares "Lord, Lord how the world is given to lying", and the audience got the laugh even before the punchline had landed. Well of course. The world is given to lying, wherever you are in it.

*"One touch of nature makes the whole world kin".*

I had always been suspicious of the sort of universalising dogma about Shakespeare: the assertion (or perhaps the Great British propaganda) that he is indisputably, unquestionably, the world's greatest writer, and to suggest otherwise is some sort of dangerous heresy. But that first night in



Beijing was evidence, living proof of Shakespeare's genius unfolding before my very ears and eyes.

In truth it would seem Shakespeare has become fashionable in China. Premier Wen Jiabao had started his visit to the UK in 2011 by visiting Stratford-upon-Avon. Last autumn, President Xi Jinping had been presented with a copy of Shakespeare's Sonnets by the Queen. Brush up your Shashibiya and it's an index of just how outward-looking and open-minded you are, proof of your cultural awareness, a lifestyle credential. We just did not know if that would translate into actually enjoying watching his plays in performance, and in English!

The South African actor Sello Maake Ka N'Cube had once challenged me about Shakespeare: we were doing a production of his early tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, just after the ending of Apartheid. Sello was playing Aaron the Moor, Shakespeare's other great black character.

"Greg, he said to me, you told me Shakespeare was English!"

"Yea, I muttered, yeah I think that's indisputable".

"Aha! said Sello, Shakespeare is Zulu!"

On that first night, our first night in Beijing proved that Shakespeare is also ...Chinese.

People sometimes ask me if Shakespeare is still relevant.

To me, he acts like a magnet that attracts all the iron filings of everything that is going on in the world. You don't have to make him relevant. By looking at the world as it is... He just is.

But perhaps this is where we come to the third stage in any progression though an appreciation of Shakespeare: a sense of his contemporary resonance in our world today. What you might call Shakespeare's ability to sound the depths of our existence.

Shakespeare lived through a time of disillusionment and uncertainty. I often feel that he speaks so directly to us today, because his times echo ours. Here's an example:

I did a production of *King John* at Stratford in 2001. One Tuesday matinee in September, shortly, after the play began at 1.30, a plane crashed into a skyscraper in New York.

Some of the company gathered around a small TV, in the crew room. Seventeen minutes later a second plane hit a second tower.

The company didn't know what to do, whether to stop the show or continue. Just before the interval the South Tower of the World Trade Centre imploded - like an Apollo space rocket launch - but in terrible reverse.

Shortly after the North Tower collapsed, one of the characters in the play said:

"Now... Vast confusion waits,  
As doth a raven on a sick fallen beast".

And that's what we all felt, that Vast Confusion, like some great black bird of prey, waited upon the world.

Now perhaps Shakespeare is able to show the very age and body of the time it's form and pressure, because his society nearly experienced its own 9/11: the Gunpowder Plot, when a



terrorist attack nearly succeeded in smashing the whole machinery of State, nearly blowing up the entire royal family, and all the Lords Temporal and Ecclesiastical who would have been present at the State opening of Parliament, on 5/11 1605.

The world must have seemed to have lost its moral absolutes, to have loosed its moorings and be adrift in a sea of uncertainty. And this prevailing sense of doom, of futility, of apprehension is present not just in Shakespeare but in many of the plays of this period. And perhaps that is why we recognise our own reflection in the mirror of his work.

In *Richard III* there's a little scene which is often cut. But John Peter, the former chief critic of The Sunday Times, recalled this scene in particular, in a production of the play which opened at the National Theatre in his native Budapest, just months after the death of Stalin.

It's a little speech by a little guy. Shakespeare often gives potent lines to minor characters. He's a scrivener, a secretary, who has been given the job of writing out Lord Hastings indictment. He is shocked by the speed with which Hastings, the equivalent of prime minister, has been brought down by Richard on trumped up charges.

"... within these five hours lived Lord Hastings,  
Untainted, unexamined, free, at liberty".

But the scrivener can see how evil spreads, by degrees, as individuals recognise it's pervasive power, but do not stand up to oppose it

"Here's a good world the while!"

He says,  
"....Why who's so gross,  
That seeth not this palpable device?  
Yet who's so blind, but says he sees it not?"

In Budapest, at that line, the full house rose to their feet and applauded and applauded. The story of the execution of Hastings was a familiar terror story. A few weeks later the National had to close *Richard III*. The thunderous applause by every audience members every night was too much for the communist government. They were right. John Peter told me that that production of *Richard III* was one of the moving and powerful events that lead the country within months, to the Hungarian Revolution.

But I remember a more personal occasion when Shakespeare seemed to provide the words that none of us could find.

We were on tour with *Macbeth* in Japan. My partner Tony Sher and I went down to Hiroshima to the Peace Park built on the site where the A-bomb was dropped in 1945.

In the museum, there was a melted watch which had stopped at 8.15, precisely the time the bomb, Little Boy, had detonated that August morning.

A piece of granite from the front of a bank, with the brown outline of a man, his shadow, all that was left of him when his body evaporated in the explosion.

A photograph of a young woman with the pattern of her kimono seared into her naked flesh by the nuclear flash.

At the end there was a visitors' book - a visitors' book - for you to comment. Tony and I couldn't find the words.



And then a speech from the play we were touring occurred to us, a speech which we hadn't really registered until that moment.

Macbeth has returned to the weird sisters, demanding (whatever cataclysm may ensue), that they tell him more of what the future has in store.

Though you untie the winds and let them fight  
Against the churches; though the yesty waves  
Confound and swallow navigation up;  
Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down;  
Though castles topple on their warders' heads;  
Though palaces and pyramids do slope  
Their heads to their foundations;

Then he declares:

Even till Destruction sicken; answer me  
To what I ask you.

Even till Destruction sicken. As if Destruction was a greedy living entity, with a seemingly limitless capacity for catastrophe. Well here in Hiroshima, Destruction herself had surely sickened, clutched her stomach and cried enough.

"Even till Destruction sicken" and that is what we wrote in the Hiroshima Peace Park Visitors' Book.

Of course Shakespeare couldn't know how the words he wrote in a play 400 years ago might help to articulate our own comprehension of the world, when our own words failed to help, but his capacious imagination, what Thomas Hardy called his "bright baffling soul", with his compassion for our fragility, and his understanding of the powerful forces that motivate us all, and his 360 degree view of our frail natures, somehow all this allows him to say what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed.

Well, I was describing how Shakespeare has been a passport through my own life. How as a kid, I was lucky enough to be given that passport. And now in Shakespeare's jubilee year, it's one of my priorities as Artistic Director of the RSC, to see that I can do all that I can for children at school today, are given access to that same opportunity.

As well as bringing our productions to new audiences in China and across the world, we are keen to extend the reach of Shakespeare into our own communities at home here in the UK, and it is one of the aspects of our work of which I am most proud.

We now film every Shakespeare play we do, broadcast it live, and provide screenings for free into classrooms around the country.

I can think of no better witness of the power of Shakespeare to transform lives, than the evidence presented to us by the head teacher of a school on the coast of Kent, King Ethelbert School in Margate.

A few years ago, King Ethelbert School was the fifth worst performing school in the country. Two years ago the Headteacher, Kate Grieg, decided to take part in our Education Department's long term partnership programme with schools. Some of her parents said "the RSC are posh people, they aren't going to come to Margate". Another said, "Shakespeare is for clever people. He



used a lot of long words, I felt left out at school". So Shakespeare had become a metaphor for the divide between them and us. But Kate felt that Shakespeare belongs to everyone.

To cut a long story short, after two years of working with the RSC, teachers and pupils at King Ethelbert School are getting excited about Shakespeare.

They got a bit of funding to bring the whole of year 8 to see *The Merchant of Venice* at Stratford-upon-Avon. One of the mothers rang to say her son couldn't do the trip because he didn't have a passport. Kate persuaded her to let her son go on the trip, and he loved it. Not only that, but he persuaded his mum to take him back to the theatre to see it again. Afterwards, the mum rang Kate and said "now I get it!".

And now the whole school gets it. This summer they are taking part in our Dream project, mounting their own production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in a community promenade production around Margate. But they are also taking part in our touring production of the play, across the nation -in which local schoolchildren play Titania's fairy train, and local amateurs join our professional cast to play Bottom and the rude mechanicals.

But the benefits of opening up to Shakespeare at King Ethelbert School have been great and most importantly the shift in the level of aspiration of the whole school community has been massive. Now parents say to the head teacher, "it is my right to learn about Shakespeare" ,[ and perhaps most illuminatingly one said "I am going to vote because I feel we are important now" .]

Now that is what I call cultural ownership.

I was very lucky to have been offered the passport that the arts give to enrich your journey through life. In his jubilee year, there can be no greater legacy of Shakespeare's ability to enhance our lives than to grant every child that passport.

Like the kids at King Ethelbert, they not only deserve that, it's their inheritance.

Our provision of access to Shakespeare, to drama, to literature, to music, to art, to culture, is an index by which we judge ourselves to be civilised, to deny that, to disregard that, to under-fund that, is to cheat ourselves and our children and deny them their birthright.

I have been privileged enough to direct three quarters of the plays in the canon, at Stratford-upon-Avon. But I have never tackled *King Lear* until this summer.

I began tonight by saying there were three stages in your life's travel with Shakespeare. But there is perhaps a final stage. It's one I feel I have only just begun to discover. Shakespeare encompasses a vast panorama of human experience, and that includes the clear and unsentimental way in which he addresses our fear of Death. How he recognises our puzzlement as Hamlet puts it "by the dread of something after death, the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns".

In truth, *King Lear* is a play I could not watch for over a decade, as before he died, my own father declined into dementia. Dad wasn't violently irrational or susceptible to fierce rages, like Lear is, but his awareness of his fading memory, and his attempts to hide his incapacity, and his occasional moments of lucidity echoed Lear's journey too acutely for me to watch. It was too painful, too accurate, too damn true.



When mad Lear meets the blinded Gloucester in the fields near Dover, he has one of those sudden rare moments of clarity which I recognised in my own father:

*"I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester:  
Thou must be patient; we came crying hither:  
Thou know'st, the first time that we smell the air,  
We wawl and cry.*

And then he says with bleak and desolate simplicity:

*When we are born, we cry that we are come  
To this great stage of fools*

Understand that, the absurd existential joke that we are required to play a part on this great stage of fools, that indeed all the world's a stage as Jaques says, and that we all have our exits and our entrances; that life is but a walking shadow, as Macbeth discovers, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more, or if you prefer, more gently as Prospero suggests, that we are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep. Then our fear of death seems easier to bear.

So *King Lear*, we start rehearsals in three months' time... a thought-provoking and nerve-wracking thought, thrilling too.

Someone asked me "How are you going to do Lear?" (as if you have to do something with Shakespeare to make him work). I answered, I am going to try and do it, as well as Shakespeare wrote it. That is challenging enough.

Now, centenaries seem to demand redefinitions.

Here in this most iconically contemporary of buildings, the Shard, the Bard's crusty heritage associations must be shaken off. This vertical city is the perfect location to celebrate Shakespeare as robustly and defiantly our contemporary. Today he is translated into every language from Armenian to Yakut, from Hip Hop to Klingon. He has been excitingly appropriated and reinvented by different cultures all over the world, now we reinterpret him, relocate him, rewrite him, regender him... All fine...He's tough: he can take it. He is for today and for everyone. So a new definition?

Shakespeare requires none - mainly because his mate Ben Jonson has said it all first.

In the dedicatory epistle he wrote for the publication of Shakespeare's First Folio, Jonson called his fellow playwright, "Soul of the Age", "Sweet Swan of Avon", and (one of my favourites) "thou star of poets" but perhaps most memorably Jonson said "He was not for an age but for all time". As Shakespeare roars into his fifth century, that assertion seems pretty indisputable.

As for "My Shakespeare": I guess it is the way he maps our hearts, which keeps me returning to him- even if, in a play like *Lear*, he provides a sort of spectral analysis of our capacity for cruelty and violence, that can be challenging to face. In the end, for me he is (as someone once said) the prophet of the soul. And I find more sustenance, more profundity, more compassion, more philosophy, and more simple truth in Shakespeare than I have ever found in the Bible. Sartre said that in a secular age, most people feel a God-shaped hole in their consciousness. I here declare that I filled mine with Shakespeare.



On the other hand, the late great actor, Donald Sinden once quipped "Man cannot live by Bard alone", but it's given me an immense amount of joy to do so, and to deliver tonight's lecture...

As Shakespeare said, and (we should give him the last word) to him:  
*To business that we love we rise betime,  
And go to't with delight.*

Gregory Doran  
15 March 2016