

Shaking Up Shakespeare Episode 1: Shaking Up Shakespeare

Marlis Schweitzer: Welcome artists, scholars, bardolators, Shakespeare neophytes, and skeptics alike to the very first episode of *Shaking Up Shakespeare*. I'm Marlis Schweitzer, a Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies at York University in Toronto.

Hope Van Der Merwe: I'm Hope Van Der Merwe and I'm a recent graduate of York University's BFA Acting Conservatory.

Liam Lockhart-Rush: And I'm Liam Lockhart Rush. I'm a recent graduate of York University's Theatre and Performance program with a BFA specializing in Devised Theatre. Both Hope and I have been research assistants on this project for the last two years. This brand new podcast series aims to examine the legacy of William Shakespeare's work, specifically in the context of Canadian theatre culture and Canadian society more broadly.

Hope Van Der Merwe: Building on recent conversations about diversity and casting practices, colonial structures, and accessibility, this podcast brings together the voices of many individuals with diverse perspectives on Shakespeare.

Marlis Schweitzer: The *Shaking Up Shakespeare* team wishes to acknowledge that we are visitors on this land. This project operates with support from York University whose campuses reside in the city of Toronto. The name Toronto is derived from the Mohawk word Tkaranto, meaning the place in the water where the trees are standing.

Liam Lockhart-Rush: This is the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations, who have cared for this land for thousands of years, including the Anishinaabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Wendat, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit, who are the current treaty holders. This area is covered by Treaty 13 and subject of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement to peaceably share and care for the Great Lakes region. This land is home to many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. Living on this territory makes all people treaty peoples, including those who came as settlers or immigrants of this generation or earlier generations, as well as those brought involuntarily to these lands because of the transatlantic slave trade. The history of Canada is a history of cultural genocide and slavery, and it is important to acknowledge this truth as we work towards racial justice, equity, liberation, and community.

Marlis Schweitzer: This podcast is part of a multi-year research project focusing on the politics of representation in contemporary Canadian theatre. In Spring 2021, Professor Jamie Robinson, Marilo Nuñez, and I, Marlis Schweitzer, co-convoked a two-day event called *Resetting the Stage: The Past, Present, and Future of Casting Practices in Canada*. This event brought together actors, directors, and playwrights from across the country via Zoom to discuss their experiences of casting.

Though Shakespeare was not the focus of the event, his name was invoked numerous times. Some expressed frustration, disgust, or exhaustion with him. Others expressed reverence, citing the beauty of his poetry and its complex representation of human experience. Shakespeare haunted the event like a spirit hanging over the conversation, and so this podcast is, in part, a response to that haunting, an attempt to acknowledge, investigate, and query

Shakespeare's enduring presence on 21st-century Canadian stages. Shakespeare remains a staple of most public education in Canada, and Shakespeare is often held up as the pinnacle of cultural achievement. At the same time, as many of our interviewees note, the sacralization, or making sacred, of Shakespeare in Canada played a critical role in the colonial project propping up white, Eurocentric, patriarchal values and aesthetics while diminishing, if not outright excluding other voices, perspectives, and artistic practices.

Between September 2022 and June 2023, our team interviewed over 30 individuals who all have a connection to the Bard or have been impacted by his work in some way. We spoke with actors, directors, playwrights, dramaturgs, some people who are all of the above, as well as intimacy professionals, theatre students, scholars, critics, arts administrators, and educators. You'll hear excerpts from these interviews throughout the series.

Patricia Allison: I am Patricia Allison.

Sturla Alvsvåg: My name is Sturla Alvsvåg.

Cole Alvis: My name's Cole Alvis.

Faith Andrew: I am Faith Andrew.

Roberta Barker: My name's Roberta Barker

Raoul Bhaneja: My name's Raoul Bhaneja.

Dawn Jani Birley (interpreter): My name is Dawn Jani Birley.

Peter Kuling: I'm Peter Kuling.

Adelaide Dolha: Adelaide Dolha.

Miriam Fernandes: My name is Miriam Fernandes.

Karen Fricker: Karen Fricker.

Anita La Selva: I'm Anita La Selva.

Duncan Gibson-Lockhart: Duncan Gibson-Lockhart.

Barbara Gordon: My name is Barbara Gordon.

Jeff Ho: I'm Jeff Ho.

Christine Horne: I'm Christine Horne.

Dante Jemmott: Dante Jemmott.

Stephen Johnson: Stephen Johnson.

Erin Kelly: Erin Kelly.

Ziyana Kotadia: My name is Ziyana Kotadia.

Keira Loughran: I'm Keira Loughran.

Jani Lauzon: My name is Jani Lauzon.

Allyson MacMachon: Allyson MacMachon.

Monique Mojica: Monique Mojica.

Yvette Nolan: Yvette Nolan.

Laurel Paetz: Laurel Paetz.

Peter Parolin: I'm Peter Parolin.

Debbie Patterson: Hi, my name's Debbie Patterson.

Eli Pauley: I'm Eli Pauley.

Elizabeth Pentland: Elizabeth Pentland.

Melissa Poll: I'm Melissa Poll.

PJ Prudat: I'm PJ Prudat.

Jamie Robinson: My name is Jamie Robinson.

Nassim Abu Sarari: My name is Nassim Abu Sarari.

Alix Sideris: I'm Alix Sideris.

Sara Topham: My name is Sara Topham.

Jeff Yung: My name is Jeff Yung.

Marlis Schweitzer: We've also included excerpts from the *(Re)casting Shakespeare in Canada* symposium. You'll hear Reneltha Arluk, Kaitlyn Riordan, Erin Shields, and Joseph

Pierre. Please note that actor Dawn Jani Birley is voiced by ASL interpreter, Kate Lewis, throughout.

In an effort to make this podcast as accessible as possible, we have provided written transcriptions for each episode along with show notes on the castingcanadiantheatre.ca website. There you'll also find videos with ASL translations and interpretations for each episode, along with a video of Jeff Ho's full-length interview with Dawn Jani Birley.

Liam Lockhart-Rush: This project springs from a desire to document the 2022 remounting of Why Not Theatre's ground-breaking *Prince Hamlet*, a production adapted and directed by Ravi Jain, which originally premiered in 2017. *Prince Hamlet* is a bilingual, cross-cultural, and gender-bent adaptation of Shakespeare's classic, which centres the story on a Deaf Horatio, played by Dawn Jani Birley. This podcast includes interviews with the 2022 *Prince Hamlet* touring cast, conducted by Jeff Ho, who played Ophelia in the production.

Marlis Schweitzer: As the project unfolded, the research team decided to expand the scope and look more broadly at perspectives on *Hamlet* and Shakespeare in Canada. We began with a seven-week “crash course” in summer 2022, reading books and articles organized around such topics as celebrity and Hamlet queering Shakespeare, women playing Hamlet, and Shakespeare and disability. You can find the full “crash course” syllabus on our project website, castingcanadiantheatre.ca.

We also undertook a series of field trips to see Shakespeare or Shakespeare-adjacent plays in performance. This included a trip to the Stratford Festival in August 2022, where we saw the acclaimed production of *Hamlet* starring Amaka Ume in the title role, the first Black non-binary female presenting performer to play the role at the festival. Other highlights included seeing Erin Shield's new play, *Queen Goneril*, at Soulpepper Theatre, PJ Prudat's *Otîhêw* in Withrow Park, produced by Shakespeare in the Ruff, Anand Rajaram's *As You Like It* as part of Canadian Stage's Dream in High Park and Jeff Ho's *Cockroach* at Tarragon Theatre. We were struck by how many theatre companies were producing Shakespeare or invoking his name as they returned to in-person performances following the pandemic.

Hope Van Der Merwe: Throughout our interviews, we found that there were certain topics which kept popping up in our conversations, ideas that seemed to be central to contemporary conversations about Shakespeare.

Marlis Schweitzer: Rather than celebrating Shakespeare, no questions asked, the series takes a critical perspective, acknowledging a host of issues including gender discrimination, racism, and ableism, both in Shakespeare's plays and in productions of his plays.

Hope Van Der Merwe: We acknowledge the role of educational institutions and theatre festivals in perpetuating Shakespeare's cultural dominance in Canada and consider how this dominance reflects a larger colonial legacy that continues to harm so many lives today.

Liam Lockhart-Rush: We also shine a light on the artists who are grappling with Shakespeare, reworking, and adapting his plays to meet the needs of contemporary audiences, including those whose stories have existed in the margins for far too long.

Marlis Schweitzer: The episodes are also informed by the Spring 2023 symposium, *Recasting Shakespeare in Canada*, a two-day event held at York University where artists and scholars from across the country gathered to take up a series of similar questions. You'll hear excerpts from some of these conversations in the podcast as well. But first, we wanted to take a moment to share a little bit about ourselves and our own relationship to Shakespeare. Here's a short conversation where we interview one another.

Music.

Liam Lockhart-Rush: I first came to Shakespeare through adaptation. When I was a kid, I watched *West Side Story*, the movie version from the sixties. It was a tradition in my dad's family when he was a kid to watch *West Side Story* on Christmas. I'm not sure exactly why. So that continued, I guess when I was a kid, he introduced *West Side Story* to me and I was very, very much enraptured by the music of it.

But later when I was in high school and we studied *Romeo and Juliet*, I realized that it [*West Side Story*] was *Romeo and Juliet*. And it showed me, I guess, how entrenched the stories are in our culture and in our popular culture as well. When I was in high school, I didn't love Shakespeare. I read *Romeo and Juliet* in grade nine. We did *Twelfth Night* in grade 10. And then I really loved studying *Macbeth* in grade 11. We were reading *Macbeth* and we were about three quarters of the way through the play, and I had read ahead and I had finished it. And I came to class and we were talking about something about McDuff and Macbeth and I spoiled it basically. And I talked about how Macbeth died, and then everybody in the class got so upset at me spoiling this 500 year old play. And I thought it was ridiculous, but now I guess maybe I shouldn't just kept my mouth shut.

Hope Van Der Merwe: My first experience with Shakespeare that I remember was... I knew about it when I was very little. But then I think I was introduced to it through school in grade seven when I was 12 and it was *Romeo and Juliet* and we did a monologue competition. And I did of course "Romeo, Romeo wherefore art thou Romeo," not understanding a word of it, but I was one of those kids who was... it was really important to me that people thought I was smart because that was like my favorite quality about myself. And so I just completely threw myself into it and really, really, really worked so hard on that monologue.

And then I got chosen for the final three, or like the final competition round. And there were others competing. There were grade eights competing. Okay. And I was only in grade seven, so like big deal. And, I had a teacher at the time who was my math and science teacher who coincidentally hated me. And she was very mean and just did not like me at all. And of course the day of the competition, my English teacher, who was lovely and did so much to encourage me, he had to get an emergency root canal. And so he wasn't there to adjudicate the competition. And so I didn't win because this lady had it out for me. I should have won - the girl who won, she bit me once.

Marlis Schweitzer: I would say that my relationship to Shakespeare is complicated. I'm somebody who, as a white settler scholar with a good job at an academic institution like York, in a Theatre department, there's kind of an expectation that I should come to Shakespeare, cause "Why are you in a Theatre department if you don't come to Shakespeare?" And so there is similarly an expectation that that will be on the curriculum,

that that will be something I have at least a familiarity with. But for the most part, I would not identify myself as a Shakespeare scholar. And in this project I come to Shakespeare with some skepticism about what I see as an overly dominant role that he continues to play in Canadian theatre. So part of my impetus with this project is to think through the enduring impact and legacy of Shakespeare on the way that Canadians think about theatre and the way that I myself position my work as a Canadian theatre scholar.

Liam Lockhart-Rush: When I was in grade 10, I went to like arts school high school, a musical theatre program. And when I was in grade 10, we did *West Side Story* for our big musical of the year. And our costume designer wanted all the costumes to be like the Leonardo DiCaprio *Romeo and Juliet* movie. So everybody was wearing Hawaiian shirts and people had like dyed bleach, blonde hair and whatever. So it was very much like nineties Leonardo DiCaprio *Romeo and Juliet*, which kind of added another layer to the Shakespearean-ness of *West Side Story*, I guess for me. I'm coming to realize how inherent Shakespeare is in a lot of western theatre.

Marlis Schweitzer: I believe it was grade eight or nine watching in our English class, the Franco Zephirelli *Romeo and Juliet* film, which is now subject of much controversy because of more recent disclosures that the young actors had been perhaps coerced or, there had been a lack of clarity around the nudity involved in that production... but at the time I remember seeing it and there was such an excitement around, not only around the nude scenes or the glimpses of buttocks or what have you, the breasts and all the flashing of the nudity, which for, you know, a bunch of 13 and 14 year olds is very exciting and shocking. So for me early experiences of Shakespeare, the shock, the, the, the sex. Wow. But also just realizing, oh, they're young people. And that, the sense that Shakespeare was for young people through a play like *Romeo and Juliet*.

Liam Lockhart-Rush: Everybody has a story with Shakespeare and everybody has a personal connection. When we began the interview process, I wasn't sure quite who to talk to. And so I talked to the people who, like my friends and the people who I knew the most personally. And I think we had a conversation, the three of us, near the beginning where we realized that everybody has connection to Shakespeare regardless of their expert level or their experience. Everybody has some high school story from, you know, English class or, seeing a play when they were a child or whatever. Our culture is just so Shakespeare saturated.

Hope Van Der Merwe: Everyone has a relationship to Shakespeare and a lot of people hate it. And also it can be quite controversial, in the social climate, political climate. I find that conflict really interesting. So if people are mad about why are we still doing this, then that to me is interesting and I think there's something there to explore. I like the controversy (*laughing*). I'm here for the tea.

Liam Lockhart-Rush: At the symposium, a lot of people talked about who has been welcomed into Shakespeare and who has been automatically accepted in Shakespeare, and me being someone who is a white man, I feel like I've always been accepted to Shakespeare. And I think the most exciting part is hearing from people who have not historically been accepted into Shakespeare in the same way and seeing the ways that artists and academics and everyone in between has created ways of working with Shakespeare.

Marlis Schweitzer: I'm really struck by this word, "Shakespeare saturation" in Canadian culture, where is the ground because of the saturation, thinking of ground and groundedness both in terms of, actors in the sense of "you must be grounded to be connected to the text or connected to the material." But also then the sense of Canada as ground, Canada as land, and the sense that Shakespeare as a figurehead, [an] almost God-like poet, brought over as part of the British colonial project. The land has been drenched in Shakespeare. The crops that come up from the ground are Shakespeare informed, and if you produce Canadian artists, they will have this familiarity with Shakespeare. It's just fascinating to think of the whole ecosystem in Canadian culture as it is related to Shakespeare. But also then learning about the artists who are questioning this and reworking Shakespeare and making it into something for themselves. One of the lessons coming out of [the] symposium around [the idea of] "don't bend to Shakespeare, bend him around you," I think is a really powerful idea that resonates with a lot of what we heard from our interview subjects along the way.

Hope Van Der Merwe: That's a really interesting point about "don't bend to Shakespeare, make him bend around you," because that's entirely antithetical to what we're taught in classical conservatory, conservatory being a colonial word. There's all of this drilling into us about... basically almost being made to leave yourself behind a little bit because "You don't, you don't need to add anything to the text. It's all there. It's all there in the text. I hear that all the time. It's all there in the text. You just need to be grounded. You just need to breathe and you just need to speak the words and it, it's all there in the text, so you don't, you don't need to add anything to it." Which I actually don't agree [with] because there's a reason why actors are paid to act because I think anyone can just speak the text. There's more to acting than just standing there, which is a very colonial idea of what acting should be. You know, you stand and deliver - stiff spine. You're taught to stand in a certain way and then this is the way that you say it, and you can't move too much and you can't move your arms and you can't physicalize. But then, "oh, now you're too stiff and you need to physicalize. Oh, but not that way." It's interesting coming to this as someone who has loved Shakespeare my whole life, but who also understands that you can love something and also understand the need to be critical of it, and to put in practice that critique. Also, because of the point that you brought up Marlis about, yes, grounded as an actor, but then like what is the land that we are on and how this has been used as a tool for colonialism and also a tool for excluding so many.

Liam Lockhart-Rush: The tension between loving Shakespeare and also critiquing Shakespeare or acknowledging the need for critiquing Shakespeare, that's been a large theme throughout the symposium and throughout most of the interviews that we've done as well. If people didn't, if artists didn't have a love for Shakespeare or a love for the words, which is something that quite a few people have talked about, or an acknowledgement of the power of the words, then they wouldn't work with Shakespeare. And a lot of people choose not to work with Shakespeare. But a lot of people who we've talked to who do work with Shakespeare, have time and time again talked about the importance of acknowledging the tension between you can love something or you can acknowledge something's power, but also work to destabilize that power, and how it's important to do both. And you can't just love something without critiquing it.

Marlis Schweitzer: And in the spirit of love and critique, as our conversation continued, we shifted to speaking about the project itself, reflecting on the podcast format in particular, both what it affords and what it doesn't. A main impetus for this project was Why Not Theatre's production of *Prince Hamlet*, which was built around Dawn Jani Birley, an amazing Deaf

artist. And so in some ways the fact that we're creating this podcast seems contradictory to the work that that production sought to do, which was to create a bilingual production that was both accessible and exciting to Deaf audiences and to hearing audiences and podcasts by their very nature privilege hearing audiences. So I think there's something contradictory about this. And yet at the same time, podcasts are a mode of disseminating ideas and research and conversations. It's a newer form of academic scholarship as well. More academics are coming to podcasts. So I was excited to investigate this as a medium for engaging artists and scholars and all kinds of people in conversation. But I recognize that there is something audist, A U D I S T about the podcast project. So I guess a question that I'm grappling with is can we make a truly intersectional podcast? Or is the nature of the technology just, does it stand in the way of that, particularly when it comes to engaging with Deaf audiences, and I think perhaps that's a limitation of the podcast and therefore of this particular aspect of the project right now.

Liam Lockhart-Rush: I definitely agree with you Marlis, as that being a limitation of this project. Something that really excites me about the podcast format and the process of working on these interviews and formatting all of them into this podcast is that the people who we interviewed get to speak for themselves. And the world or whoever's listening to the podcast gets to hear their perspective right out of their mouth, which I think is really important because everybody who we spoke to had a very inspiring and powerful perspective on Shakespeare and have many experiences to share that I think are very worthy of us hearing from them directly. So I think that's one positive about this kind of podcast format as well.

Hope Van Der Merwe: What I've really enjoyed exploring throughout this process is asking who gets to play what role and why. I think that there's been a push in more recent years, especially post 2020, to have people who actually have the identity of the character play the character, which I think, I mean I'm in favour of it because when you are from a marginalized community and you barely get any roles as it is, and then you can't even get the role that you actually have the identity of, it's like, "Well, where do I even fit?" I know that that's controversial, like who gets to play Richard III, everyone in this room knows that I have very strong feelings that I think only disabled artists should get to play Richard III. So yeah, that's what I've been really enjoying.

Marlis Schweitzer: That's a good reminder that a lot of this project is thinking through larger questions around casting and representation: which bodies, which genders, which races have historically had a place, have been welcomed onto Canadian stages and Shakespearean roles and which have not, and what are the steps that people have already taken to address that? And what is the work that lies ahead? There's clearly a lot of work that lies ahead, but at the same time, so many of the artists we've heard from are pushing forward in new and innovative ways, through adaptation, through really new approaches to directing the material and through a willingness to play and to pull apart and to reject a lot of the traditional conventions where Shakespeare's concerned. So that's exciting.

Hope Van Der Merwe: I really love the idea of people who are really unabashedly gungho about Shakespeare and don't see any problems with Shakespeare, with the way it's been used culturally in Canada... I really like the idea of people with that perspective coming to this with an open mind. And then maybe having their minds changed a little bit about why it is important to be asking these questions and why it is important to push for change.

Liam Lockhart-Rush: I would echo that. Also, I hope that listeners who maybe don't know that much about Shakespeare learn something from the podcast. And I hope people who have very rigid perspectives maybe see a different perspective. And listen to voices that they may not otherwise listen to.

Marlis Schweitzer: I think it's the juxtaposition of so many perspectives that I hope people can also appreciate. There is no one answer. There is no, Shakespeare, good, bad. No, it's Shakespeare. He's here whether we want him to be or not. He is embedded in Anglo-Canadian culture, and we need to contend with that. We need to acknowledge the incredible harm, the violence of the way that Shakespeare has been deployed, and he has been deployed as a weapon in a variety of, you know, colonial projects, residential schools, in the dominance of English as a language in Canada, the way that it has been so deeply embedded in educational institutions, the sense of, you know, you are only a good student if you can quote Shakespeare or understand Shakespeare, that your ability to, to read or comprehend is somehow an assessment of your character, of your ability to proceed into university or to graduate school somehow hinges on your access and comprehension of Shakespeare.

But also then I hope that people, back to that idea of love and critique, that they see that they can still love Shakespeare, that critiquing Shakespeare doesn't mean that they can't still love him, that they can't still go to see Shakespeare in performance, that they can't still support artists and companies who have Shakespeare at the centre of their mandate. And that is not at all what this project is about. This project is not saying no more Shakespeare. This project is shaking up Shakespeare. (*laughing*) So let's shake it up a little bit, shake it up and listen to it, and let's think about that saturation and think about what kind of future can we imagine for ourselves, for our families, for our students, for the next generations to come.

Liam Lockhart-Rush: And to the people who may be saying, "No, don't mess with Shakespeare," who respect the sanctity of the traditional way of doing Shakespeare or whatever. If I can quote one of the *Recasting Shakespeare in Canada* panelists, Shakespeare's gonna be fine. Shakespeare's been here for hundreds and hundreds of years. Shakespeare's gonna be fine if we critique him, you know, he's not going anywhere.

Marlis Schweitzer: He's dead.

Liam Lockhart-Rush: Exactly. Dead and buried.

Music.

Marlis Schweitzer: We begin with a trio of episodes that identify the institutional and cultural structures that enable and sustain the privileging of Shakespeare in Canada. These include education and university theatre training; Hollywood and celebrity; outdoor Shakespeare festivals; and the Stratford Festival. From there, we delve more deeply into the complicated relationship between Shakespeare and colonialism in this land called Canada, with two episodes that both identify the issues with Shakespeare and offer perspectives on adaptation. After this, we offer a pair of episodes zeroing in on questions of gender in Shakespeare, specifically *Hamlet*, and disability and ableism in Shakespeare, with an emphasis on *Richard III*.

We round out the series with an episode dedicated to Why Not Theatre's *Prince Hamlet*, featuring interviews with cast members from the 2022 tour and a final episode that thinks beyond Shakespeare. Collectively, this podcast highlights Shakespeare's enduring influence on conceptions of high art and theatre in Canada and spotlights the specific ways that companies like Why Not Theatre are actively destabilizing white, ableist colonial interpretations of Shakespeare

All three: *Shaking up Shakespeare.*

Marlis Schweitzer: This podcast is part of *Resetting the Stage*, a five-year project that seeks to situate debates about theatrical representation and the politics of casting in Canada within a broad historical context, advancing dialogue with directors, playwrights, actors, educators, students, and other creators who are actively transforming professional Canadian theatre and university level theatre training. For more information on other aspects of the project, please visit castingcanadiantheatre.ca.

Interviews for this podcast were conducted by Marlis Schweitzer, Jeff Ho, Liam Lockhart-Rush and Hope Van Der Merwe. All episodes written and edited by Marlis, Liam, and Hope, with dramaturgical input from Jeff. Sound mixing and levels by Maddie Bautista. ASL Translation by Dawn Jani Birley. Original music by Faith Andrew. Special thanks to Charles Ketchabaw and Will Innes at Fixed Point for support with training, development, audio equipment, and software.

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Thanks for listening to *Shaking Up Shakespeare.*