

## ***Shaking Up Shakespeare Episode 2: Shakespeare 101***

**Ziyana Kotadia:** My first experience with Shakespeare?

I feel like the name “Shakespeare” is one of those that follows you moving through the world. It's kind of understood to be part of culture.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Hello everyone, and welcome back to *Shaking Up Shakespeare*, the podcast where we acknowledge, investigate, and query Shakespeare's enduring presence on 21st century Canadian stages, taking a critical perspective on Shakespeare's work and influence. I'm Liam Lockhart-Rush, and I host this podcast alongside Dr. Marlis Schweitzer, and Hope Van Der Merwe.

This podcast was written and recorded in Tkaronto, the traditional territory of the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Wendat, and most recently the Mississaugas of the Credit. We would like to acknowledge the ways in which Shakespeare was used as a tool for colonialism and genocide, and encourage all listeners to continue to be critical of this enduring presence in so-called “Canada.”

This is the first of three episodes focusing on the institutional structures that enable and sustain the cultural privileging of Shakespeare, with this episode examining his presence in educational institutions.

Over the course of our interviews, it quickly became clear that anyone who has either grown up in Canada or gone through the Canadian educational system has some early memory of being introduced to the Bard. We began most of our interviews with a variation of the question: “What was your first experience with Shakespeare?”

The responses we received ranged from early childhood experiences with family to elementary school stories, high school English and drama classes, and some memories from post-secondary education. Everyone seemed to have unique stories, some being touching and powerful, though it seems that many people's first impression of Shakespeare was his reputation as a god-like literary figure.

Upon listening to these interviews, we realized that being taught to revere Shakespeare at a young age was a mutual experience. Many people talked about how understanding and liking Shakespeare is often linked to one's intelligence, especially in school.

Whether they directly mentioned it or not, the way that many people spoke of Shakespeare's work and their connection to him echoed his status as the “greatest playwright of all time,” whose stories are quote-unquote “universal.” This idea of universality is a topic that we go into in greater detail in Episode 5.

Though some reflected on powerful and emotional stories of their connection to his works, others recounted experiences where the way they were taught Shakespeare was difficult, careless, and potentially harmful. Later in the episode, educators and students alike critique

Shakespeare's role in education, and offer ideas for how Shakespeare can be taught to students in an inclusive and robust way.

What tools are needed to teach Shakespeare effectively and constructively? What is the role of Shakespeare in education?

Without further ado, let's get into the episode.

**Stephen Johnson:** I vividly remember my first experience with Shakespeare

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Here is Dr. Stephen Johnson, Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto to paint a picture of his first impressions of Shakespeare.

**Stephen Johnson:** I was, I believe, four years old and my parents took me to Stratford and I attended the main stage. And I believe I remember it so vividly because it was also radically new for me. I was four years old, my parents took me, I'd never been to a theatre before, I'd never been to anything like a theatre before except church.

And it was - clearly it was Shakespeare because it was the Stratford Festival in the late fifties. What else was it gonna be?

I have no recollection of plot or voice. Except I remember my father snoring and I know that I became, I don't know if bored is the word, but I just couldn't sit still, and I started crawling between my parents' legs. No doubt aggravating all the people sitting around us, but I don't remember that part.

So my first memory of Shakespeare, I assume Shakespeare, was of this event which was completely outside of my wheelhouse, outside of my world experience and my world view.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Dr. Erin Kelly, Professor of English at the University of Victoria, gives a different early perspective on Shakespeare.

**Erin Kelly:** I think that I got very lucky in having parents who think of theatre and play-going as fun. And so I, from a very early age, along with my siblings, would be taken to lots of, you know, free outdoor performances of... college or university performance of... and that I think my parents very much had the sense that this was an appropriate outing for smaller people and that this was entertaining and fun.

So, I feel incredibly fortunate because I do think my first exposure to Shakespearean performance was not read this for school or we're going on this field trip because it's culture with a capital C and this is good for you with a capital G, but rather this is a fun, this is just as much fun as going to see a movie or a concert or anything else.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Dr. Roberta Barker, Professor at Dalhousie University, gives us a glimpse into her introduction to Shakespeare, where it very much was considered "culture with a capital C."

**Roberta Barker:** So I first encountered Shakespeare as a little, little girl. I can actually, I think I can remember the book that was like: Shakespeare for, you know, “Shakespeare for Kids: The Plays.” And I was probably, I don't know, eight or so when I was trying to force my friends to do these plays with me.

I can remember conspicuously, flashily toting around copies of Shakespeare plays when I was in about grade six to show how much smarter I was than all my colleagues, which probably shows why I was extensively bullied at school around that time. *\*laughs\**

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Theatre artist Rachel Arnold provides a similar memory from her childhood.

**Rachel Arnold:** I wanna say I was probably in the fifth grade or something, and all my siblings were in high school, so they were reading like *R and J* and stuff like that.

So I was like, I wanna be ahead of the class. So while everyone's like in the ninth grade reading *Romeo and Juliet*, I would already have read that. So I started googling all the different Shakespeares and stuff so I could figure it out and get ahead. And then I never read any of them until the ninth grade.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Quite a few of the people we spoke to were introduced to Shakespeare through their parents, who were also teachers of Shakespeare.

Multidisciplinary theatre artist Jani Lauzon reflects on her father's love for Shakespeare and identifies a conflict between how she was introduced to Shakespeare and how the world views Shakespeare.

**Jani Lauzon:** Yeah, so I was introduced to Shakespeare by my foster father. My dad, Paul Kershaw, was a high school drama teacher in Cranbrook, British Columbia, where I grew up, and he loved Shakespeare. And so we would sit around the dinner table and analyze plays, we would read Shakespeare out loud. And then of course, I was a student in his drama class, so we did a fair amount of Shakespeare in his classes as well, which was really excellent because it balanced the way that English teachers look at Shakespeare.

So I, you know, I really developed a love of Shakespeare through his enthusiasm and his love. And one of the things that I didn't realize until after I left high school was that the world looked at Shakespeare differently. So, that was a rude awakening for me in terms of an expectation that transformed and changed once I was out into the industry - or intersecting with the industry.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Dr. Peter Parolin, Professor at the University of Wyoming, speaks about his mother.

**Peter Parolin:** So I, my mom was a very influential figure in my education. She was an English teacher in a high school system, and she loved Shakespeare. I think she would be what you would call a “bardolator.” I mean, she was, she could have been a character and a play.

Like, I always think of James Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* who says, you know, “everything you need to know in life you can find in your Shakespeare.” I don't know if my mother ever said that actual sentence to me, but I remember as a kid, I would memorize some speeches from Shakespeare and I could, if I could really memorize them, I could get a dollar.

And it was so interesting ‘cause I did not grow up in a family where financial incentives were used for us as kids. But that was a way that I could make a dollar.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Artist and educator Adelaide Dolha touches on how her mother teaches Shakespeare.

**Adelaide Dolha:** My mom is huge into Shakespeare. She teaches [grade] seven/eight drama. So she tries to foster an importance of Shakespeare to those kids. And there's a lesson that she always talks about that always brings me back to why Shakespeare's important. She says that Shakespeare wrote to the beat of your heart.

Like the iambic pentameter. She's like: “That's literally the beat of your heart.” So I just thought that was just so cool. So yeah, Shakespeare - huge in my life and I absolutely love it.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Actor, playwright, and member of the creative leadership at Shakespeare in the Ruff, PJ Prudat, speaks about her introduction to Shakespearean themes at a young age.

**PJ Prudat:** I feel like I have a very fluid relationship with Shakespeare. I think the earliest that I ever heard of anything Shakespearean, I was probably about eight and there was a sitcom on TV, and I was visiting my mom. And I had asked - something had come up with Romeo and Juliet, and it sounded really dire in the conversation.

And I, as an eight year old, I thought, what, what does that mean? What's that about? And my mom told me, she said - well, I think she actually probably said: “well, they killed themselves.” And I, I was like, what? Like I didn't, you know, as a child, it just sounded like such a, like a really tragic story that I was like, what is that story?

I wanna know more about that. But, you know, it was a sitcom, so, you know, there was only so much that they could delve into.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** While some were introduced to Shakespeare as something that was fun, or taught about the importance of it in school or by their parents, other people we spoke to, namely Jeff Ho and Dawn Jani Birley, were introduced to Shakespeare as a way of learning English as a second language. Jeff Ho is a theatre artist originally from Hong Kong, and Dawn Jani Birley is a third generation Deaf artist who is being interpreted here by Kate Lewis. Both Jeff and Dawn acted in Why Not Theatre's *Prince Hamlet*, which will be discussed more in Episode 9.

**Jeff Ho:** When I first came to Canada in 2001, I barely spoke English. And so I had a really great ESL teacher who taught us English through musical ways rather than sort of more just like grammar or stuff like that.

A lot of poetry, a lot of watching shows or music. And so we were introduced to some Shakespeare sonnets, just as a way of understanding the iambic pentameter that's inherent in the language. And none of us knew what the words actually meant, but it was something about the poetry of it that was embedded.

And so that was some of my first experiences. Sonnet 18 specifically, like, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" is a piece that has followed my learning in a lot of ways. So definitely in an educational setting as just for speaking English.

**Dawn Jani Birley (interpreter):** I was very fortunate that I had an extraordinary, an extraordinarily talented English teacher.

Paulette Hubs was her name and I remember her well in high school. Much depends, you know, of course on the, you know, course you're taking and the year that you're in. But I was very fortunate to have Paulette for three of my four years in high school, and her area of specialization and passion was Shakespeare.

She made us read a lot of Shakespeare. I remember in grade nine, grade ten, and grade twelve I had her. And she was, it wasn't just Shakespeare, but the way that she was able to put it in context of his life, what was happening in the world at the time, really engaged us and created a great interest in him and the plays and literature.

So again, as an ASL user, English is my second language, so perhaps the impact was less on me than it would've been on somebody who had English as a first language. But I didn't realize until much, much later just how much it had impacted me. So for example, reading in Shakespearean text alongside a modern translation, a modern English translation that explained some of the vocabulary, some of the metaphors, my teacher was able to use those tools to make Shakespeare really, really engaging.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Others we spoke to were exposed to Shakespeare for the first time through performance. Here's theatre artist and educator Duncan Gibson-Lockhart recalling his sixth-grade performance.

**Duncan Gibson-Lockhart:** We did *Macbeth* in, in grade six, we did like an abridged version of it. I'm in my house. I won't, I won't die, will I? *\*laughs\**

And I really, and like, which was great, was that our teacher allowed us to perform it. We did like a little production of it on the stage and everything like that, so it wasn't - like a lot of people's first introduction to Shakespeare is reading it and then kind of going at it through the English way, but we did it through the, the drama side, how it's, you know, supposed to be spoken, right? So, I really wanted to play Duncan, because that's my name and that's the only reason why, so I auditioned for Duncan and then somebody else got the role.

So I cried and made a big stink and then he gave me the role and it was really nice. *\*laughs\** But, that was my only child coming in. I think having that like introduction to Shakespeare and performance at that age was really interesting, cause I don't think you really get what's going on too much.

Even in abridged version that's a little easier to consume. It's kind of like, the themes are so huge and almost mythological. I don't know, as a 12 year old, I don't know if I really understood, you know, greed and revenge and murder, but maybe I did.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Theatre artist and educator Keira Loughran, Professor at York University, speaks about her experience as a student in an arts program.

**Keira Loughran:** I went to this crazy school for the arts from the time I was in grade four and it was from grade four to grade eight, we did half our classes regular academics, and half our classes in all four arts disciplines: music, dance, drama, and visual art.

And we worked on speeches, so I did a Helena speech in drama class when I was in grade seven, and I loved it. And then I went to high school and did English class Shakespeare and totally disconnected and hated it. *\*laughs\** We read *Henry IV Part 1*, I think maybe *Mackers*, I've kind of blocked it out.

We did it in drama class as well, but I don't remember what I did with it in drama. And then I didn't come back to it until theatre school.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Before we get into theatre school though, let's talk about high school. For a lot of people, high school English or drama class is often their first introduction to Shakespeare. Here is Dr. Elizabeth Pentland, associate professor of English at York University.

**Elizabeth Pentland:** I think like almost everybody that I teach, I came to Shakespeare for the first time as a high school student.

Reading, I think *Julius Caesar* was the very first play that we read in high school. And we did *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night* and *Macbeth*, and I think *Hamlet* was grade thirteen, when there was grade thirteen back in the day.

So very much a part of the Canadian high school curriculum and the Ontario high school curriculum in particular.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Actor, director, theatre-maker, and co-artistic director of Why Not Theatre, Miriam Fernandes, speaks about how she overcame difficulties reading Shakespeare in high school.

**Miriam Fernandes:** I had some good high school English teachers, but I think for me, reading it was always hard.

But my mom luckily, she always said: "Shakespeare's meant to be seen, not read." So she would always take me to the public library and we would take out a film version of Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* or whatever, and watch that. But it actually helped me understand what was happening, cause I didn't understand the words.

It was so confusing for a high school student. And I was like, I liked language and I liked, I liked reading. I just didn't understand it. So anyway, the videos, the films of the plays really helped me.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Theatre artist and educator Jamie Robinson, Professor at York University, reflects on his high school experiences.

**Jamie Robinson:** When I did Shakespeare in high school, as most stories go, I didn't understand what was going on. The English teacher would, or English teachers would have us do tests where we're just trying to memorize quotes and all that kind of thing. A little bit about themes, but one English teacher in particular did allow us to read it out loud, which I discovered - oh, that's kind of a better way to do it.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Theatre artist, intimacy director, and educator Alix Sideris recounts a regrettable first introduction to the Bard in English class.

**Alix Sideris:** My God, actually, the first time I heard Shakespeare was in grade nine.

And it was like a teacher, an English teacher, put a *Romeo and Juliet* record on the record player. That was my exposure to Shakespeare. And it was a bunch of folks in, you know, British accents and the record was scratchy and you couldn't understand what they were saying. And it was just, it was just [a] terrible first introduction.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Many people we spoke to had the opportunity to interact with Shakespeare by performing it in high school, rather than just reading it. Ziyana Kotadia, whose voice you heard at the beginning of the episode, speaks about her experience directing.

**Ziyana Kotadia:** I think the first properly deep dive that I did into a Shakespearean work was with *Macbeth*. Because it was not only a play that I read in those AP English contexts, but also one that I had the opportunity to direct a couple scenes of, in a drama context. And so I kind of got to know better how challenging it is to do Shakespeare in like a high school drama context.

So, you know, a surface level sort of, experience in that sense. But, that was one of the first opportunities I had to grapple with the text.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** In this section, actors and members of the creative leadership at Shakespeare in the Ruff, Christine Horne and Jeff Yung, reflect on their memories of learning Shakespeare in high school, and how their experience of performing it changed their perspective.

**Christine Horne:** I feel like I had a pretty average introduction to Shakespeare, reading it in high school was totally the thing. And I remember my first performing of it was my - it was in a drama class where we got to choose some Shakespeare scene and there was a girl in my class who came from an arts high school, but she'd moved to ours and she was awesome.

All of us were like, why would you make this choice? Cause she left this super cool high school to come to our totally normal public school because she wanted to do social work where the rest of us were like, oh, you're doing this. It was just like, she was awesome.

She was awesome, and she knew a lot about Shakespeare and she suggested this scene for myself and a couple of other girls to do that was, all the queens from *Richard III*. It's a really long scene, it's like twenty-five minutes long, but we were in grade twelve.

But I remember feeling even at that time, not being a real like - I was not a community theatre kid or anything, but just kind of feeling the power of speaking those words, through that. It's a great scene to experience when you're like seventeen playing Queen Elizabeth.

**Jeff Yung:** I think you are either - you fall in love with it, maybe when you first read it or, or you were like me and you were like, okay, I have to do this cause I, it's in the curriculum.

And I think I was very fortunate that in grade ten I had a good English teacher who was trying very hard to show us the value and the beauty of the, the words and the story. But didn't try to pressure us into wanting to love it.

And then in grade eleven we read *Lear* in English and that kind of - Because I didn't know *Lear* as a play, as a story. I had to kind of wrap my head around, oh, there's a lot more to the way he's writing than just what's on the page and just the story. And, you know, I don't think I really fully understood the complexity of how it can be played till my final year of high school where I was fortunate enough to be involved with the school's drama club and the school play that we did in my final year high of high school was *Midsummer's*.

And it's one of those plays that's kind of, you can really understand the, it's an easier to, I guess, quote unquote digest play because it is kind of, it's a comedy and it's kind of lighthearted and it's fun.

And so I was able to kind of better understand just how complex it is to perform.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Actor Sarah Topham shares her experience learning and building a strong connection to Shakespeare's work and characters.

**Sara Topham:** My first real exposure, thoughtful exposure, would've been an English class in grade eight or grade nine. I think in grade eight we did *Midsummer Night's Dream*, with a wonderful teacher, Mrs. Lebedoff at Oak Bay High School in Victoria, BC - oh, now, Mrs. Martin. So I had that exposure, but my first exposure as a performer was when I was in grade eleven.

I played Juliet in the school play. Practically uncut, which was kind of a crazy thing for our drama department to do, but that's what we did. And, I always sort of say that Shakespeare and Juliet in particular saved my life because I was in my journey as a performer, reaching a point. I'd been such a serious ballet dancer and it was becoming evident that because of some physical limitations, that wasn't going to be my path in life.



And that was really hard for me because the piece of the ballet I always loved was the telling of the story. And so what Juliet did for me was, give me an opportunity to do the same thing that I'd always done with the telling of the story in the ballet, with words. And I think part of the reason that was so vibrant for me was because of the classical structure of it.

I recognized that structural component of being held by a structure that appears to be rigid, but that I instinctively found it gave me freedom. So that's kind of my, that's that first pocket of discovery.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** For many theatre artists, the place where they had the most rigorous experience with Shakespeare was often in post secondary theatre school. Here is Two-Spirit Michif theatre artist Cole Alvis reflecting on her experience playing Juliet.

**Cole Alvis:** What I will share around my experience of training in Shakespeare at York - and perhaps further context is, the degrees of privilege that I have, particularly around being white passing, at that time, particularly male passing. And, in the early 2000s, absolutely conscious of the various aspects of my identity that I was not yet confident, or comfortable or even particularly clear on how to, be more vocal and forward with and about.

And all that to say - in a scene study, I was cast as Juliet in “the balcony scene,” and I feel like this was pretty progressive for the early 2000s and unlocked something for me where the task of learning Shakespeare and bringing myself to the text, as you're saying is what, particularly a conservatory training, often demands.

There was an ease because I wasn't also having to pretend to be a boy. That's, that was a real gift, I'll say, to have a teacher offer that opportunity.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Jamie Robinson also shares an experience he had during theatre school.

**Jamie Robinson:** When I went to theatre school at Concordia University in my undergrad in performance, I didn't really get introduced to Shakespeare until my second year, and it was only because we had the fortunate opportunity to work with Centaur Theatre Company in Montreal, where they were doing a production of *Antony and Cleopatra* with a cast of seasoned, Stratford festival actors. Including Seana McKenna and Scott Wentworth as Anthony and Cleopatra and Miles Potter who played Enobarbus. And they're all, they've been in Stratford for years and are still there to this day.

And they'd asked if they could use some Concordia students to play the soldiers. And for me, showing up on that first day of rehearsal and hearing how Shakespeare could be lifted off the page, blew my mind. I had no idea that that's how you do Shakespeare.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Theatre artist, educator, and professor at York University, Laurel Paetz, recounts her experience studying at Studio 58 in Vancouver.

**Laurel Paetz:** In my, one of my last semesters, I played Lady Macbeth in a production of *Macbeth* at the school. I think it's still the same, but at the time the school had a subscription

audience and there was a lovely little theatre, and the productions were reviewed by all of the newspapers, radio stations, et cetera. So before we even graduated, we got some exposure, which was helpful to us as professional actors.

Anyway, this was a very well received production of *Macbeth*. My parents who lived in Alberta surprised me by coming out to see it. I didn't know they were coming one night and Lady Macbeth and Macbeth - the director had chosen to really make their relationship quite steamy and, you know... So little did I know that my parents were in the audience. Anyway, afterwards my father told me a story about when he was young, growing up on a ranch in southeastern Alberta, playing Macbeth and Macduff with his brother - playing the fight scene with sticks in the farm field, "Lay on, Macduff."

And he said that when he saw that scene, it flashed him back to being like a twelve-year-old, fourteen-year-old in the middle of rural Alberta, and playing this. So they had been studying at school, or one of them had been studying it at school. And anyway, so I just thought that was incredible.

And my mom and dad didn't go to a lot of theatre, especially my dad. He was a scientist, a biologist. So you know, he wouldn't have gone to a lot of professional productions at all. So that stuck with me, his exposure to Shakespeare at a young age and how it had an impact on him and how it flashed back to him seeing that.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Playwright, director, and dramaturge Yvette Nolan shares her experience of auditioning with Shakespeare and reflects on how she became hooked on his work.

**Yvette Nolan:** I used to audition, when I thought I was gonna be an actor, I used to audition with Shakespeare pieces.

Interestingly enough, it was *Hamlet*. It was *Hamlet* that I, that I would use the, "I have of late - but wherefore I know not - lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises" - that speech. And of course that was, nobody was expecting that from, you know, me coming in to do an audition.

But it feels like Shakespeare's always been there. Like when I was in high school, I was reading whatever you read in high school, *Romeo and Juliet* or something, and my English prof smartly, brilliantly went: "What about *Othello*? Have you read *Othello*?" And so he was handing me Shakespeares to read and I was like coming back and going, okay, cause he was trying to tie my experience to things in Shakespeare.

I'm starting to see the threads of everything, everybody who, whoever addicted me, the gateway drug, right? To Shakespeare.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Many people we spoke to expressed that the way that they were taught Shakespeare was ineffective and confusing, especially for young students in a classroom. Here's Duncan recounting his English class experience of Shakespeare. Then Alix and Ziyana offer their thoughts on how Shakespeare should be taught.

**Duncan Gibson-Lockhart:** I think Hamlet stuck with me the most. The emotions, kind of having that “in” and feeling like, oh, I've felt these things before, kind of really, really resonated with me.

We also read *Macbeth*, I think *Macbeth* was grade ten and my prior understanding helped out a little more with that, but it was mostly text based. Which I think is, is kind of tough to wrap your head around when you're sitting in a class and you're trying to analyze something - it's not like we had the lexicon in high school either. If you're gonna teach Shakespeare, you should know what you're teaching and like, know - kind of have the tools to understand the words.

So I think it was tough that way.

**Alix Sideris:** But like, I remember being in university and taking a Shakespeare course and the teacher treated it like a piece of literature and I thought, Oh man, no, it's a play. It's meant to be heard. It's meant to be experienced. It's not meant to be dissected and deconstructed. It's meant to be dramaturged, but not in that kind of supra-intellectual -

I just, I got so turned off that I, I dropped the class, but I kept the anthology and I just read all the plays.

**Ziyana Kotadia:** I wish Shakespeare was taught to students as a performance rather than as a text. I feel like I really got a better understanding of what was going on when I was, either acting or directing or like otherwise thinking about it as something that was *alive* and not just something that existed on their page.

Because you can't just read that and know what's going on. Like that's not how Shakespeare, to me, is meant to be understood or is even an accessible way for Shakespeare to be understood. So that's the only other thing that comes to mind is I hope that in the future, people who are teaching Shakespeare think about that as they're kind of trying to impart that to their students.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Actor, director, and educator at York University, Anita La Selva, indicates the importance of connecting to Shakespeare with the body and discusses how she teaches Shakespeare.

**Anita La Selva:** So you're talking about the classic sort of “stand and deliver” Where you just stand with your arms glued to your sides and you, you drop your voice and you know everything. Yeah. No, I don't adhere to that. And, and that's something that we never adhere to at Shakespeare and Company in the sense that when -

Finding language inside us on a visceral level requires us to connect viscerally, which ergo requires movement. So for me, finding Shakespeare in the body is - that's what it's about. And so a lot of my approach to doing Shakespeare is finding it in the body, finding the breath, finding the movement, finding the expansiveness of the text.

And, and not like, yes, the text is important, but we also have to take it inside the body because I find that if you don't connect viscerally and if you don't find the physical and emotional connection to the text, then it just becomes a dry intellectual recitation. And I might as well be listening to a poetry reading and not Shakespeare.

Shakespeare was meant to be performed, not actually read, studied. That's, I mean, Shakespeare wrote them for performance and you know, if you look at the whole Elizabethan tradition, those folks were very, very, in their bodies, they were romping around the stage. There was none of this sort of Victorian stand and deliver kind of thing.

So, no, whenever I teach Shakespeare, I really get to the, I really try to get to the emotional crux of it first. And that to me is - that takes precedence over meter and rhyme and the iambic, that will fall into place if you understand the emotional journey and how words affect us. Cause I think a lot of what my approach, which is a Shakespeare and Company approach, is finding how the words resonate inside us.

Like different words like mother, like betrayal, like beseech, like what does that mean on a very visceral, emotional level? And if we can find what those mean, then we can see how then the meter and the rhyme comes into - falls into place. Whereas if we don't really explore that emotional depth, then it, again, it just becomes something that's, you know, pretty to listen to, but boring in the end, quite frankly.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Here's theatre artist and scholar Nassim Abu Sarari to provide a new perspective on why it is important for students to learn the context behind Shakespeare's work. To learn why he is important rather than merely that he is important.

**Nassim Abu Sarari:** To be honest, I do not recall when was my first encounter with Shakespeare or Shakespeare's name. But I do remember my theatre teacher in high school presenting him as this very famous thinker. One of the greatest writers, you know, in the history of English literature and language. All of that wasn't enough to impress me, of course. I was thinking that, you know, this is like an old person from a different generation writing about, you know, something that is so far detached from my culture and, you know, my understanding of social issues or whatnot.

And the first play I read by Shakespeare was *Macbeth*. And I remember reading it, reading a translation of it rather in Hebrew. Again, my mother tongue is Arabic, but I attended a Hebrew high school, so we would read in Hebrew. I remember thinking to myself, geez, this dude is out of his mind I was like, what? What is going on? This is like, *Macbeth* is so dark and miserable and violent. I was like, why would you teach it to fourteen-year-olds, you know, high schoolers, who are already kind of disturbed by so many things that are happening around them. It was just like, a moment of, oh, I don't like that. I don't like Shakespeare. I don't like the idea of it. I don't like, you know, what he's talking about and his writing style. None of it.

And in fact it wasn't until later on in my life that I chose to revisit Shakespeare's work and writing and deepen my, you know, deepen my engagement with him as a cultural phenomenon. I realized that Shakespeare was indeed an important cult figure. And he was important enough, I learned that in 1849, people were willing to die for Shakespeare. And I'm

of course referring to the dispute, which led to the Astor Place Riot. You know, it was a dispute between two Shakespeare enthusiasts, Edwin Forrest, as well as William Charles MacReady. Both of them fought over which one of them did the rules of the rules of Shakespeare better, and it kind of caused, you know, people, to fight and cause people to all of a sudden realize that there's, you know, there's, there's two actors, one representing the upper class, the other is representing, you know, the lower class, and these two clashed. And there was also a cultural tension or cultural alienation, right? Between the two groups.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** The Astor Place Riots of 1849, which Nassim is referring to, were indeed riots caused by fans of two rival Shakespearean actors. Forrest, who was American, and MacReady, who was British. As well as exemplifying the clash between upper and lower classes. This dispute serves as an example of the clash between British and American interpretations of Shakespeare. The deadly riot took place on May 10th, 1849 in and around New York City's Astor Place Opera House during a performance of *Macbeth* starring MacReady. The riot killed almost thirty people. For more information we have linked to sources in the show notes.

**Nassim Abu Sarari:** So that's one example of how important Shakespeare was. And I didn't learn that until later on in my life, right? Had my teacher began with actually talking about *why* is he important and not saying he is important. I would probably find him important or interesting to engage with.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Erin Kelly explains how she likes to approach teaching *Hamlet* to her students and emphasizes *Hamlet* and Shakespeare's influence in Canadian culture.

**Erin Kelly:** Okay, so I think that I'm gonna put on my, how I teach *Hamlet* hat for a minute, which is me saying things like, you know, *Hamlet* is a play that I love to teach by talking to students about textual instability and already starting with the idea that what you think of as *Hamlet* is not a thing, you know that there is a bad quarto, quote unquote, that there is a quarto version and a folio version, and that there are chunks of this play that you think of as this play that appear in only one of those.

And that often what you've seen and, and that if you've seen a production of it, unless you've sat through the Kenneth Branagh film version, in which case I will buy you a cookie. That you know it's good that that's out there less, it's fine. But that there's, you know, that *Hamlet* is a made thing.

It is always already an adaptation. It is always already an interpretation. Shakespeare's play is an adaptation. Shakespeare's play may even have been an adaptation of an earlier *Hamlet* that gets referred to as an "Ur-Hamlet." So I am all about taking apart what people think a *Hamlet* is. And there you go.

I mean, I think *Hamlet* has enormous weight. I mean, I can tell you that - So, one of the things I do in Victoria is that I have started going to an Anglican church. I go to an Anglican church where one of these stained glass windows, there is a series of stained glass windows that are supposed to be examples of life and culture in Victoria.

They are early 20th, late 19th century stained glass windows. One of those stained glass windows is “the arts,” the section of that window - I will snap you a photo that says “Theatre” actually has a guy in a sort of doublet and hose holding a skull and staring at it like that is what *Hamlet* is.

*Hamlet* is a synecdoche, is a shorthand for Shakespeare, culture, theatre, Englishness, performances, all those things. And so, what is my relationship with *Hamlet*? I'm swimming in it, and so are all of the rest of us.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Yvette Nolan shares a place she wrote to help young students better understand Shakespeare and similar to Erin, Yvette reflects on Shakespeare's omnipresence in Canadian culture and pop culture in general.

**Yvette Nolan:** I did a, you know, when I went to the Yukon in '95, I did a sort of a melding of four Shakespeares into a primer for young people called *Shakedown Shakespeare*, and it starts using colloquial language and it's *R&J*, *Mackers*, *Hamlet* and something else. Maybe *Lear*, probably *Lear*. But by the end of the piece, it's all Shakespearean text.

So it starts in colloquial - it's just a way of bringing young people along in a way that to make the language not an obstacle, not a challenge. Yeah, but I, it's like, it's always been there. Yeah. It feels like Shakespeare's of course, always been there. Shakespeare's always there, right? Like it's in *Bug's Bunny*.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Quite a few of the people we spoke to identified Shakespeare's enduring and mostly unchanging presence. Once in Canadian education. Roberta Barker shares her thoughts on this.

**Roberta Barker:** I think one of the things that really kind of hit me between the eyes, as a graduate student and early in my teaching career was when I realized, and this, you know, took me a long time. I think a lot of undergraduates today are very aware of this in a way that I certainly wasn't in the nineties.

But how inextricable Shakespeare's cultural position is from the impacts of British colonialism and imperialism. And I think that Shakespeare's massive role that, you know, I was just actually talking on Friday to a first year undergraduate student who was talking about how she had experienced Shakespeare in high school.

And it was, it was very similar to how I had experienced Shakespeare in high school in, you know, the late eighties and early nineties. So with thirty years between. We were still, we had both kind of sat in classes in grade nine, ten, eleven with teachers going through line by line, saying “this is what this means, this is what this means.”

So that there's this kind of sense that for many generations, and we know if we look back in Canadian theatre history and educational history, that this goes back tens and hundreds of years. Shakespeare being this profound part of the kind of dominant, colonial education system in Canada, which means that from an extremely young age, people going through that system are brought up to believe that he is the greatest writer, the definitive writer of theatre,

of theatrical character. The person who kind of shapes how we think of various theatrical genres if we go through that educational system.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Stephen Johnson reflects on his experience studying Shakespeare and identifies issues with trying to teach Shakespeare without the proper tools to teach against the violence, offensive and more problematic themes.

**Stephen Johnson:** I mean, there wasn't a year that went by that I wasn't exposed to Shakespeare the whole time I was in school. And every year of high school there was always, and I'm sure still is though, I haven't been a part of it in a while, but I'm sure Shakespeare's - there's a Shakespeare play every year because why wouldn't you?

And of course there are lots of reasons why you wouldn't, but why wouldn't you? And I have to say, as an aside, some unusual and interesting plays considering the intervening decades since I was in high school. I mean, we took *Taming of the Shrew* and, and I'm thinking why?

I'm not sure they, I'm not sure they've taught that in thirty or forty years. And we took *The Merchant of Venice*. Yeah. So you got, you got your misogyny, you got your antisemitism, you got it all there. And we're, and we're not just taking it, but we're buying into it because the teacher didn't know enough to talk to teach against it.

We got it. And we'd act out scenes. But it was a core value inside the education system. I mean, you know, and I know this is, this may be off topic, but I'm not sure it is because the most vivid memory I have of taking something in high school, was in my grade thirteen I took *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which now of course, has been taught so over taught that everyone thinks, well, you know, why do we still learn that?

But I only realized recently that I took it when it was new. *\*laughs\** I didn't realize that I probably, that it had kind of only come out a couple years before and there I am reading it in school and that was really unusual.

So Shakespeare was the standard and every now and again there'd be an escape valve where you took something that was truly unusual.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Keira Loughran pinpoints the harmful consequences of Shakespeare's elitism that has been felt throughout this entire episode and will be felt deeply in other episodes as well.

**Keira Loughran:** I think in colonial Canada, the problem with Shakespeare is that it's introduced, it has been introduced so much as an elitist, cultured experience, which is ironic because his actual theatre was the most public theatre that crossed all classes of society.

And so there's a disconnect there from the plays as written in their time to how they were introduced to, you know, a new burgeoning country. And so when you learn it in English class, I think it is sort of coupled with, you know, if you're smart, you'll like this.

If you're cultured, you'll like this and you'll get it. And, I just don't think that's necessarily true, as opposed to approaching it as an exploration of language, as an exploration of the English language and an articulation of the human experience.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Many of the people we spoke to discussed recent calls for curriculum changes in schools, which have at the time of recording, been implemented in high schools in the Toronto District School Board where Shakespeare and other classical works have been replaced with Indigenous literature in grade eleven classes. In this section of the episode Elizabeth Pentland, Peter Kuling, Duncan, and Roberta leave us with their thoughts on Shakespeare's place in education.

**Elizabeth Pentland:** Well, it's interesting, you know, cause I think a few years ago there was discussion about replacing Shakespeare in the high school curriculum with Indigenous literatures and with other, you know, kinds of literatures and sort of taking away the sort of primacy of Shakespeare in our school system.

And I'm not sure that I entirely disagree. I think that Shakespeare has had a very privileged place, in the way that we learn about our culture as Canadians, and learn about the history of our literature. And that's not always, necessarily, I don't know, the best thing. I think there we should be learning about a lot of different literatures and a lot of different cultural, sort of, voices.

So part of me thinks that Shakespeare has an outsized place in Canadian culture, that he's been associated with colonialism and colonial culture in particular.

**Peter Kuling:** There's more interesting things than just Shakespeare. Recently family members said, "how do you feel about them taking out Shakespeare in part of the Ontario High School curriculum?" I'm like, well, they can put something Indigenous in. I think they should have done that a long time ago. But you know, he'll still always sort of be there, or the work will always sort of be there.

**Duncan Gibson-Lockhart:** I always think as a drama teacher. I think it's important to have - students have the tools to go and do well in the profession. And when the largest festival in Canada is the Stratford Festival, I think we still need to teach Shakespeare in that regard. I think we have to go about a different way of teaching Shakespeare in English classes, especially.

And especially if we're looking at trying to decolonize the classroom, which I'm not sure everyone is.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** For more information on these changes in curriculum, please see our show notes.

**Roberta Barker:** I personally think that although there is so, you know, and this is also true, for example, a lot of actor education that Shakespearean texts, as you know, are some of the first texts often that actors are trained with. This is true in Canada and in many other countries that are predominantly English speaking.



And although I do again, think that there's so many riches there, there's wonderful things to explore. They're undoubtedly wonderful plays. And also plays that have a fascinating accretion of different cultural meanings and different ways that they've been appropriated and played with.

So they're a language. And I think we've certainly seen that in Canadian theatre, for example, some of the great classics of Canadian theatre, more contemporary theatre like Djanet Sears, *Harlem Duet*, or Anne Marie McDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona, Good morning Juliet*. Important, you know, oppositional works that have kind of taken these plays up and played with them, so that sense in which they've become a dominant language that then can be appropriated and played around with. I think that's really important and, and powerful.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Tune into episode six of this series when we take a closer look at recent Shakespeare adaptations.

**Roberta Barker:** But at the same time, I personally do tend to feel that Shakespeare retains this massive power. That again, not only is denied to a lot of contemporary authors, but also is denied to many, many historical authors whose work we just never access. So I would personally really love to see more variety, both of plays from the past being performed and plays from the present being performed rather than, for example, many, many of our dominant theatres in Canada performing, especially a small group of Shakespeare, plays on a rotation, over and over again every few years.

I think there's a lot of riches out there that were missing due to Shakespeare, having become the “lingua franca” of so many theatres of which the Canadian theatre is one.

**Liam Lockhart-Rush:** Through hearing the perspectives of the many amazing people we spoke with, it is clear that Shakespeare has been a significant part of their education and remains in a privileged place in the Canadian educational system and the cultural zeitgeist.

Some people also touched on Shakespeare's relationship with colonialism and the consequences of that regarding its place in education. This is a topic we will be investigating in greater detail in episode 5 and episode 6 of this series.

If you're going to teach Shakespeare, it should be done with intention, and with an effort to make it accessible to your students, whoever they may be.

This can mean choosing carefully which plays get taught, and having the tools to teach them in a way that is constructive, deliberate, and addresses any of the potentially problematic themes or narrative points in the plays.

This episode was the first of three episodes examining the cultural privilege of Shakespeare and the institutions that sustain that privilege. In the next episode, Marlis takes a deeper dive into celebrity, British and American influences on Canadian productions of Shakespeare, and some of the effects of cultural imperialism.

Stay tuned!

See you next time on

*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](http://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 Batista. ASL Translation by Dawn Jani Birley. Original Music by Faith Andrew. Special thanks to Charles Ketchabaw and Will Innes at FIXT POINT for support with training, development, audio equipment, and software.

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Thanks for listening to *Shaking Up Shakespeare*.