

Shaking Up Shakespeare Episode 3: Celebrity Shakespeare from Kenneth Branagh to Paul Gross, with a dash of Keanu Reeves

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Stephen Johnson: I would dearly, would love to have seen Keanu Reeves play Hamlet in Winnipeg that time when he was flown in.

Jamie Robinson: I was like, okay, that's *Hamlet*.

Music.

Marlis Schweitzer: Hello everyone, and welcome to *Shaking Up Shakespeare*, the podcast where we acknowledge, investigate, and query Shakespeare's enduring presence on 21st century Canadian stages. I'm Marlis Schweitzer, one of the hosts of the series, along with Liam Lockhart-Rush 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're grateful for the opportunity to live and work on this land.

This is the second of three episodes that focus on the institutional and cultural structures that prop up Shakespeare in Canada. Our conversation would be incomplete without also reflecting on how Canadian ideas of Shakespeare continue to be influenced by British and American cultural products on stage, film, and television. Though seemingly less insidious than more overt or violent forms of imperialism, cultural imperialism involves the systemic promotion, dissemination, and privileging of culture associated with imperial or dominating powers.

Those familiar with the history of Anglo-Canadian theatre know that the so-called alternative theatre movement of the 1970s was shaped by artists eager to break away from British and American cultural influence and seek something more distinctly "Canadian." I hope you can hear my air quotes there. Of course, this resurgent form of nationalism came with its own issues - a subject perhaps for another podcast. Ultimately, despite efforts to move towards a post-colonial or even a de-colonial future, contemporary Canadian society continues to be informed by its colonial past (and you'll hear more about this in subsequent episodes).

Twenty-first century cultural imperialism explains why so many Canadians continue to revere Shakespeare or believe that his works are important and necessary. And again, we're not saying that they *aren't* important. We're really interested in investigating how Canadians have come to hold this belief, to believe so deeply in the value of Shakespeare. At the same time, repeated exposure to Shakespeare via film, TV, and stage has sharpened the critical perspective of many of the people we spoke with. There's no one way to talk about Shakespeare's influence on Canadian artists and the Canadian stage today: our interviewees express love, fascination, confusion, anger, mistrust, disgust, and more.

For a number of our interviewees, their knowledge and appreciation of Shakespeare was informed by time spent in England, whether they were traveling as tourists or visiting family, or pursuing an education where they had opportunities to see Shakespeare at recognized institutions such as the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Old Vic, or the Globe Theatre.

Here's theatre critic and university professor Karen Fricker.

Karen Fricker: I guess my first meaningful encounter with his plays in performance was in trips to London, UK, which I did in the summer in between high school and university. I did the summer course at RADA, believe it or not, and I remember going to the Royal Shakespeare Company when they were at the Barbican. They would bring shows to the Barbican every year, which doesn't happen anymore. And seeing Juliet Stevenson in *Measure for Measure*. That is my first visceral memory of Shakespeare at scale and performed by somebody who's so masterful with that language and bringing it into her body as is Juliet Stevenson.

Marlis Schweitzer: Actor Sara Topham also has strong memories of her first *Hamlet* in London.

Sara Topham: I was taken as a teenager to see it at the RSC in London. And I have very strong visual images of that one because it was a visually strong production.

Marlis Schweitzer: Professor Stephen Johnson's experience seeing *Hamlet* at the Young Vic remains with him because of the production's powerful postmodern concept.

Stephen Johnson: It was done at the Young Vic in London by Michael Bogdanov. It was a kind of a modern dress po-mo thing in the nineties, and I remember it with such affection because it was all so, there was so much lightness of touch and humour in a play that you don't think has it. You know, Hamlet came out wearing a Wittenberg University t-shirt and he was a hippie, with the round, he had glasses and hair exactly like mine at the time. You know, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were a couple of preppy idiots who spent the entire intermission setting up for the play within the play. They spent the whole time setting up the stage and ordering people around and doing all of this. And it was all very funny, except when it wasn't. And I remember it so well because it paid no respect to the play, but paid complete respect to the play at the same time, in my opinion. I could identify with every single character in a different way than I had previously, and I was still moved at the end. Maybe more moved. Because, you know, but Hamlet, as far as I could tell, was an undergraduate at the University of Guelph. You know, he was, it was the same guy.

Marlis Schweitzer: For some of our interviewees, attending multiple productions of Shakespeare's plays in England led them to reassess their relationship to his work and ask new questions about why certain roles remain dominant. Here's Dalhousie professor Roberta Barker on *Hamlet*.

Roberta Barker: I've seen it many, many, many times. I had in particular the effect, the experience with *Hamlet* that I had with Shakespeare more broadly when I was living in Stratford upon Avon. And that was partially because of having the incredible privilege of living in England for three years when I was doing my PhD. And living in Stratford in

particular, but also being able to go to London and other places. I just saw an incredible conglomeration of productions of *Hamlet*, and it really came home to me how incredibly frequently the play is performed. And I started asking myself, “No matter how much I love this play, why? Do we really need to see this many *Hamlets*?”

Marlis Schweitzer: Roberta also recalled a growing awareness of how audiences in London viewed Shakespeare differently from audiences elsewhere.

Roberta Barker: I was once at a Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Hamlet* in the nineties with Alex Jennings, a very, very, very great actor, very interesting production by Matthew Warchus, where they cut some of the major soliloquies. And you could actually hear the audience gasp when it didn't come. Like what other play, what other text in the theatre has that kind of reputation that that many people in the audience -- and sure it was London, you know, it's a very privileged, English theatre city -- but still like what other play has that, “Oh! They cut “To be your not to be, Oh my god.” You know? So there's sense in which I am really excited by directors and performers and theatre artists who are like, “I'm interested in why this play is so important, why it has this huge, huge profile in world theatre history, why it's been used as a language to speak about so many things. But I also want to talk back to that.” And I think that's actually something that can be done by a range of theatre artists, but the perspectives that they bring with them, and the lived experiences that they bring with them, and the art that they bring with them, and the craft and the training and the performance traditions that they come from are obviously going to open up those possibilities about the ways that they can talk back to the text.

And for me those are the most interesting things. And I would like to see more productions that don't just cast somebody different, but still do *Hamlet*, which is something that I've seen quite a lot of. And I've seen wonderful *Hamlets* by non-binary actors, female-identifying actors, actors of colour, trans actors, who bring incredible insight and new dimension, but I'm still worried about the fact that the idea is that somehow they all have the privilege of living up to this character. What makes that bloody character so great? Why not... I'm very excited about the works that have been, like, “Why are we still listening to this guy talk?” My teenage self would be so disgusted with me that I'm saying this, you know (*laughing*). I used to be able to cry just to hear the words, “The readiness is all,” you know. So again, I think that it's very much about positionality, what one perceives as innovative and cutting-edge and important in productions of *Hamlet* and yeah, I'm really aware of both the blinders that I had on when I really felt that there were sort of transformative things that could be done with the text of *Hamlet* and the blinders that I have on right now when I'm kind of jaded and I'm like, “Oh, yes, I've seen so many.” It's all the same, you know?

Marlis Schweitzer: The year after Raoul Bhaneja spent studying at Shakespeare's Globe in London impressed upon him Shakespeare's capacity to reach multiple audiences.

Raoul Bhaneja: And so when I was at Shakespeare's Globe in 2002, you know, in the international company there, I very much saw a place with the same mandate where it was for people who spoke English, people who didn't speak English, people who were tourists, people who had PhDs in Shakespeare. And that really the prototype that Sam Wanamaker built and that Mark Rylance, particularly at that time, ushered in was this idea that he really was the world's playwright and that his plays existed for different levels of education, understanding and background simultaneously in the Globe. You know, the groundlings, the

middle class, people in the royal box. You know, when you're standing on the stage at Shakespeare's Globe and you're acting, you know, those three people are - and also from here to here, you have a degree audience at 180 degrees - you know, you're just enveloped by people - and they were all of those stratas existed in the same time when the plays were being played - so the plays were meant to land in different ways of different people. Highly educated people in the royal box would understand some of the conversations around, say, kingship and royalty and fealty. They would understand that in a different way than maybe the guy on the ground would, but the guy on the ground would understand when the grave digger's saying "These pocky corses will scarce hold the laying in," you know, that they were able to click into that and that they all existed at the same time.

So when it came to my show, *Hamlet (solo)*, all those years later, it was very much about creating a version of the play *Hamlet* done in a solo format that was very intimate. That the audience was very close and that it could be any audience, anywhere, of any kind. I've done it literally for all kinds of people all over the world and all kinds of scenarios, and that it was, again, accessible because the focus was really going to be on the language, that that was the concept. The concept was that one person is doing it and language is its focus. And it was only one actor and only the text. And no set, no costumes, no props. No nothing. And I had proof that Shakespeare was actually accessible in a way, really when it was presented in its absolute simplest form, as opposed to making accessible by, you know, feeling it needed to be explained.

Marlis Schweitzer: For more information on Raoul Bhaneja's *Hamlet (solo)*, please see our show notes.

Often it's the persona of the actor playing Hamlet that draws an audience to the theatre. Here's Stephen Johnson again.

Stephen Johnson: I had this experience of going to the theatre in London where I was going to see *Hamlet* in a West End Theatre. Big deal. It's going to be a traditional *Hamlet*. And David Tenant who at the time was Dr. Who, was going to be playing Hamlet. So naturally it was sold out. And sold out by all sorts of people who'd never been to Shakespeare or possibly the theatre. And then he had to drop out because he was sick. And suddenly all these tickets were available. (*laughing*) And that's how I got to go and see the *Hamlet*. So I went to see the *Hamlet* with the understudy, and I went in and I sat there and for the first 20 minutes of the play, I had absolutely no idea where Hamlet was onstage because he wasn't the star. There was this guy, I'm looking around, and the way it had been staged clearly was so that everybody was going to watch David Tenant somewhere and he would be identifiable wherever he was. But because he wasn't there, Hamlet was not identifiable and I've always taken that away with me as being a radical reinterpretation of the play, even though it was unintended, because it's quite true that Hamlet just kind of appears after a while, and he's a forgotten individual at the side of the stage. And that's exactly who this guy was. He was a forgotten individual at the side of the stage.

Marlis Schweitzer: For those unable to travel to London to see British actors in person, touring productions offered access to British interpretations. Here's actor and director Allyson MacMachon recalling an early theatre-going experience in Toronto.

Allyson MacMachon: I also remember seeing the English Shakespeare Company in 1986. They came here with the whole *War of the Roses* series. I had just started university and I think I got a \$20 ticket to see all three. And I sat there at the Royal Alex for the whole day, at nine o'clock in the morning. And it was mind blowing. It was mind blowing to see that the language wasn't a barrier. They were making really hardcore political and design choices. Yeah... I'm sort of just vibrating thinking about this and it's stuff that companies right now would not take the kind of dare that this company did in this production.

Marlis Schweitzer: Film also offered an alternative, especially during the late 1980s and early 1990s when British actor and director Kenneth Branagh offered a fresh new take on some of Shakespeare's most hallowed works making Shakespeare seem exciting and even sexy again. Here's actor director Jamie Robinson on seeing Branagh's 1996 film version of *Hamlet*.

Jamie Robinson: Then I remember when Kenneth Branagh did his epic four-hour, five-hour version, I went to see that in the movie theatres. And this was shortly after I graduated from undergrad. And I loved it. I went, "Oh!" And why? Cause they did the whole thing. There were no cuts. It just had the whole breadth of it. And I thought it was quite marvelous. And I went to see it again the next day. It was one of those things. Is it the perfect movie? Probably not. I don't think I've seen it since. But that was my first introduction to *Hamlet*. And it really was a test of "Can I see a Shakespeare show and, and really get it?"

Marlis Schweitzer: Seeing Branagh's *Hamlet* had a similar impact on University of Guelph professor Peter Kuling, who had limited access to Shakespeare in northern Saskatchewan.

Peter Kuling: I think my relationship to Shakespeare really started when I was aware that there were plays I could access growing up in northern Saskatchewan with not much to read or see or, you know, finding plays and experiences and really loving scripts and really loving dialogue. But I didn't really have the outlet for, you know, seeing it in performance per se, a few times at Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan, but not really full-blown big productions. So many of my early examples in Saskatchewan were filmed because I couldn't access a stage. So it was the Kenneth Branagh *Hamlet* from 96 that becomes this foundational, sort of like the total text minus one Horatio line, you know, or something.

Marlis Schweitzer: For actor Raoul Bhaneja it was Branagh's 1989 film adaptation of *Henry V* that caught his attention.

Raoul Bhaneja: I wanted to be Henry the Fifth. And remember for people, my generation, you know, this is right around the time when Kenneth Branagh comes out with his *Platoon*-style, Oliver Stone *Henry V*, you know, which for those of us who were Shakespeare nerds at that time, and young actors, I've run into so many guys my age, mainly guys, but some women as well in their forties who saw that movie. It kind of reinforced our nerdiness about Shakespeare being something kind of - I mean, we were completely fooled by it - that it was something kind of mainstream and that it wasn't stuffy and old. I imagine much like maybe *Henry V* or *Hamlet*, Olivier's films, had done in the forties for people who saw it as a much more accessible kind of actor thing to do.

Marlis Schweitzer: Branagh's ability to make Shakespeare accessible may explain why, in 1995, Hollywood celebrity and Canadian actor Keanu Reeves returned to Canada to play *Hamlet* in a production at the Manitoba Theatre Centre. This was two years after Reeves had played the role of Don Juan in Kenneth Branagh's adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*. In 1995, Keanu was an undisputed star, and the opening night in Winnipeg attracted international attention. Those lucky enough to get a ticket could purchase a T-shirt emblazoned with Keanu's face on the front and the words "To thine own self be true," on the back. Here's what Brian D. Johnson reporting from *Maclean's Magazine* had to say about Reeve's performance:

Liam Lockhart-Rush (as Brian D. Johnson): "He did remember his lines. In fact, at times he recited them very quickly like a schoolboy dying to get to the end. Perhaps it was just opening night nerves, but Reeves raced through some lines at such a clip that the sense was almost unintelligible. He whipped through the soliloquy, the signature tunes of Hamlet, as if they were air guitar solos locked into Shakespeare's iambic pentameter. He surfed from one consonant to the next, faster and faster. He rode the play as if it were wired to blow up below a certain speed."

Marlis Schweitzer: Here Johnson playfully nods at some of Keanu's most famous roles at the time. Roles including Bill from *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, Johnny Utah from *Point Break*, and, of course, Jack in *Speed*. At the same time, he acknowledges Keanu's... acting limitations. Johnson nevertheless praised Keanu for his physicality and comic timing: "Even when his delivery was lacking," he wrote, "there was something intriguing about his presence, the ingenuous lift to his voice, the blank sense of disconnection that he projects and his valiant efforts to overcome it. Those qualities make him a more suitable casting choice for Hamlet than he might at first seem."

And Keanu, in his now widely recognized Keanu fashion, endeared himself to the Winnipeg community, who found him in Johnson's words, "friendly, humble, accessible, hardworking." Keanu even insisted on being paid at the same rate as the other actors, refusing to be treated differently as a celebrity. Nevertheless, the MTC's decision to take such a big swing in casting Reeves as Hamlet remains a textbook example of the impact of cultural imperialism and celebrity, one that our interviewees continue to reflect upon.

Raoul Bhaneja: I mean in a way it does take Keanu Reeves coming from Hollywood in 94, three or four, whenever that was. You know, it takes almost that to make a large-scale production of it happen, or it's a production at Stratford when its turn comes up and they've decided to, you know, knight, enshrine, crown, whoever is the lucky bugger who gets to do it there.

Marlis Schweitzer: Here's U of T Professor Emeritus Stephen Johnson.

Stephen Johnson: I would dearly, would love to have seen Keanu Reeve's play Hamlet in Winnipeg that time when he was flown in. It wouldn't have been a good production... I love the guy, but he's his own meme. But you're casting not for the interpretation of the thing, of the play. You're casting for some other purpose. And I'd actually think the more radical approach is to change the setting, change the costuming, change the, you know.

Marlis Schweitzer: UVic professor Erin Kelly notes how the Hollywood or celebrity model of producing Shakespeare, particularly *Hamlet*, continues to impact casting decisions at smaller companies.

Erin Kelly: I just feel like there's just a lot of productions of *Hamlet* that start with the idea that this is a star role and whether it's our long-time lead male who, where it's his turn, or we're going to get the nice celebrity that everybody wants to pay to come and see do this role. There's all sorts of stuff invested at that point. Making Hamlet the star and making Hamlet likable and admirable.

Marlis Schweitzer: So the Keanu Reeves model of Hamlet, I don't know if you heard of that one in Winnipeg...

Erin Kelly: I did. I heard it was in Winnipeg. And I heard he wasn't bad.

Marlis Schweitzer: Yeah, tracing the history of Keanu's career, it comes at a really fascinating moment, post some of his early celebrity. He's looking around to kind of go, "What do I do now? Who am I? What can I do? Can I do Hamlet?" And I think the invitation came and he was like, "Ok, why not?"

Canadian stage film and television actor, Paul Gross, took up similar questions in season one of his hit series *Slings and Arrows*, which premiered in 2003, *not* on the CBC as you might expect (though today you can find it there on CBC Gem), but rather on Canada's Movie Central and the Movie Network channels. Set at the fictional New Burbage Theatre Festival - clearly modeled on the Stratford Festival - Gross plays a former actor turned indie director named Geoffrey Tennant, who must contend with the nerves and inexperience of a young Hollywood actor named Jack. (It's worth noting that Jack is the name of Keanu Reeve's character in *Speed*). In this case, the role of Hamlet in *Slings and Arrows* was played by a young Luke Kirby, now an Emmy award-winning actor. And if you've seen *Slings and Arrows*, you might also recall that it features a very young Rachel McAdams.

Marlis Schweitzer: Here is Professor Peter Parolin recalling *Slings and Arrows*.

Peter Parolin: I mean, I always remember, from *Slings and Arrows*, Paul Gross directing this young American actor - I think it was a young American actor in the series - on how to play through *Hamlet*. And he's got this one wonderful scene where he goes, "It's just six soliloquies. Six soliloquies." And he does this read of how the soliloquies drive you through the narrative. You know, that's one way of approaching it, but it's a pretty good way to think, "Oh, there is a skeleton here through the soliloquies," even though of course early textual history will say that the soliloquies don't always show up in the same form or the same place in relation to each other.

Marlis Schweitzer: What made Gross's exploration of Hamlet in *Slings and Arrows* so compelling for Parolin and others was that Gross had played the role of Hamlet himself at the Stratford Festival in the year 2000.

Peter Parolin: Hamlet is very physical. And the challenge is how do you externalize this really rich journey that the character's going on internally? And I thought Paul Gross, in my memory, did a very good job with that. I just have an image of almost like *King Lear's* image of the mother, the wandering womb coming up and getting him. And I just had images of Paul Gross doing this with his fingers. Like he was so intense. So you just felt this rising emotion. And he was charismatic. The production was staged well, there were good actors in that production, but Paul himself is what I really remember.

Marlis Schweitzer: Interestingly, this past year, Paul Gross returned to the Stratford Festival playing King Lear in a production directed by Kimberley Rampersad.

While other Hollywood productions of *Hamlet* are starting to fade from view, Mel Gibson's 1990 film was an initiating moment for some. Here's actor-director Jamie Robinson again.

Jamie Robinson: Oh, you just brought back a memory. I went with some high school friends. We went to see Mel Gibson in *Hamlet*, and I was really excited because I was so upset that I could never understand Shakespeare. I said, "I'm gonna go see Hamlet -- I don't know it -- with Mel Gibson. and I'm gonna get it." And I saw it and I, I got it. It was Hollywoodish. Yeah. And, you know, it was pretty digestible. But it wasn't that exciting to me. I was like, "Okay, that's Hamlet."

Marlis Schweitzer: Actor Sturla Alvsväg also recalls seeing Gibson's *Hamlet*, though he needed a bit of help from interviewer Jeff Ho to remember his name.

Sturla Alvsväg: I don't know how many productions of *Hamlet* I've actually seen. What's his name, from *Braveheart* in the movie and stuff. What's his name?

Jeff Ho: Mel Gibson.

Sturla Alvsväg: Mel Gibson. Yeah. (*laughing*)

Jeff Ho: He did play a Hamlet, right?

Sturla Alvsväg: He did. Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Marlis Schweitzer: Professor Liz Pentland is less impressed with Gibson's version.

Elizabeth Pentland: (*laughing*) I don't teach Mel Gibson. I mean, I think there are far more provocative films of *Hamlet* that really get me excited and that students have a lot to say about or can find really compelling.

Marlis Schweitzer: Pentland's comments remind us of the critical role teachers and professors play as tastemakers shaping the way students consume Shakespeare and influencing what they consider good or important interpretations. A syllabus that steers a class away from Mel Gibson and towards the work of an innovative new director can radically reshape how Shakespeare is perceived. At the same time, for those who don't have

access to formal university training or live outside theatre centres, film and television productions of Shakespeare's such as the recent Netflix adaptation of *The Tragedy of Macbeth* starring Denzel Washington, continue to spread the gospel of Shakespeare... In our next episode, we consider how the enduring popularity of Shakespeare in the Park and other forms of outdoor Shakespeare continues to influence the way Canadians see, hear, and experience Shakespeare.

ALL THREE HOSTS: 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.

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Thanks for listening to *Shaking Up Shakespeare*.