

SCHWEITZER, MARLIS, LOCKHART-RUSH, LIAM AND VAN DER MERWE, HOPE

Shaking Up Shakespeare.

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Over the past several years, conversations about Shakespeare and the legacy of his works on Canadian stages and in our educational system have become more prevalent. The cultural reckoning of 2020, spurred on by the COVID-19 pandemic and the death of George Floyd, reignited debates that challenged Shakespeare's relevancy and cultural capital in contemporary society with pointed questions such as, How is Shakespeare relevant to our modern and changing society? Why do we continue to study and perform a dead, white, male playwright from the 1500s? Why is Shakespeare still the most performed playwright in Canada at the exclusion of minoritized voices who are writing about contemporary Canadian society?

Hosted by Marlis Schweitzer, professor in theatre and performance studies at York University, and Hope Van Der Merwe and Liam Lockhart-Rush, both recent graduates of York University's BFA Acting Conservatory and Theatre and Performance programs, *Shaking Up Shakespeare* is a ten-episode podcast that grapples with these questions and more, with its introductory trailer stating that it "aims to examine the legacy of Shakespeare's work, specifically in the context of Canadian theatre culture and Canadian society more broadly." It features "interviews with actors, directors, playwrights, dramaturgs, intimacy directors, students, scholars, critics, arts administrators, and educators." The podcast aims to discuss Shakespeare by bringing together diverse perspectives with each episode devoted to a specific topic relating to Shakespeare such as its dominance in educational institutions and on stage, casting and accessibility practices, intersectional approaches, and specific adaptations in a Canadian context. The podcast also includes excerpts from the (Re)casting Shakespeare in Canada Symposium, which took place at York University in April and May 2023.

As a Shakespeare lover, I was skeptical as I began the podcast, wondering if I was going to be forced to listen to hours of speakers bashing Shakespeare. However, to my pleasant surprise, one of the most interesting aspects of the podcast was hearing about the conflicting tensions that many of these individuals grapple with; they both love Shakespeare and find it highly problematic; they acknowledge not only Shakespeare's power and brilliance but also the need to be critical of them. This is what makes this podcast work; both truths are held at the same time throughout the series.

In the beginning episodes, we hear from artists about their first encounter with Shakespeare; many speak about their first introduction in English class sitting at desks and reading line by line, bored and confused. Those who perform Shakespeare discuss their experiences of

first speaking his words on stage and unilaterally agree that you cannot understand Shakespeare until you put his words into the body. Shakespeare was written to be seen and heard, not read, and one can only feel the power of the words by experiencing the breath and the language on a visceral level. Performing Shakespeare has changed many perspectives on the power and value of Shakespeare's words. York University Assistant Professor Jamie Robinson discusses seeing his first Shakespeare on film and the profound impact that watching British actor and director Kenneth Branagh perform *Hamlet* had on him and how his use of language made the text accessible to the listener thereby influencing a generation of actors.

In the episode titled "Something Rotten: Shakespeare and Colonialism," playwright and performer Kaitlyn Riordan discusses how Shakespeare has been used as a tool for colonialism and his work exists everywhere. She states: "Shakespeare was used as marketing for the colonial vision of the world . . . as an icon of white supremacy," and an acculturating tool in residential schools. Everyone has had an encounter or a connection to Shakespeare, be it through his texts, or through words and quotes that have endured through the ages whether they know it or not.

Theatre artists Cole Alvis, Jeff Ho, and Yvette Nolan weigh in about the colonial project as "importing Eurocentric ideas and asserting them as the center of conversation such as the naming of the town 'Stratford', and adopting an entire festival devoted to Shakespeare." They note that Shakespeare has become a monolith that exists everywhere in Canada and continues to justify the absence of certain voices in Canadian culture; it remains an emblem of excellence while excluding others.

In the episode "Adaptation and the Politics of Language," the podcast begins to dive into ways in which theatre artists have "shaken up" Shakespeare by re-envisioning his plays in diverse, inclusive, and intersectional ways through discussions on recent Shakespeare adaptations such as *Queen Goneril* by Erin Shields, *Portia's Julius Caesar* by Kaitlyn Riordan, *Pawâkan Macbeth* by Reneltta Arluk, and *Death of a Chief* (based on *King Lear*) adapted by Yvette Nolan and Kennedy C. MacKinnon.

I found this one of the richest, in-depth episodes as the speakers discuss and grapple with what Shakespeare is to them now and how they have complicated his work by inserting minoritized voices into his stories. The speakers are not only clear in voicing their frustrations with Shakespeare but also candid about the fact that this frustration has inspired them to find ways to creatively invite characters who exist in our world and to give them a voice through Shakespeare, thereby creating other avenues of access. In speaking about her adaptation *Pawâkan Macbeth*, which uses the cannibal spirit as the title character ("Pawâkan" means dream spirit in Plains Cree language), Reneltta Arluk uses the term "take-over" versus "adaptation" to describe her approach because she sees the work as "an exploration as a community."

Later episodes explore casting practices, outdoor Shakespeare, feminizing Shakespeare, and discussions on ways that the text can reflect what an individual brings to the story. The episode "Crippling Shakespeare" centres discussions on the barriers and marginalization that disabled actors face in the Canadian theatre industry. Finally, an entire episode is dedicated to a discussion of Ravi Jain's ground-breaking, *Prince Hamlet*, a bilingual (hearing and American Sign Language), queer, interracial adaptation of *Hamlet*, making it the first intersectional exploration of this play.

Overall, this is an extremely well-curated podcast that explores the many Canadian-led innovations that theatre artists are investing in through the lens of Shakespeare. In addition, each episode contains links to readings and plays referenced in the podcast for further exploration. It is a treasure trove of information and thought-provoking questions and is an effective way to open conversations about the role of Shakespeare in contemporary Canadian society. Contrary to my fears as I began this series, the podcast celebrates Shakespeare giving us examples of the many ways that artists are re-purposing and expanding his stories, allowing them to say something different and tell stories that might not have been heard on certain stages. After all, Shakespeare re-imagined and, in fact, stole stories from many sources to suit the times his plays were being written. Why can't we?

For those first starting as theatre practitioners, this is an excellent resource to enter the world of Shakespeare through a modern lens and may help artists see themselves in the world of Shakespeare in more diverse ways. I plan to introduce this podcast to my students who might be skeptical as to why we are still studying him and how they might understand and use his stories in positive and impactful ways.

For the experienced practitioner, it is an excellent refresher with added details and information about ongoing innovations in Shakespeare productions. It is an important reminder that it is okay to both love Shakespeare and critique his works at the same time.

Contributor

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