

Shakespeare

Bigger than me

James Garnon

Performing Shakespeare

One of the things that attracted me most to Shakespeare as an actor to play with is he gives you an opportunity to play characters bigger than yourself. And being part of a process of making these very, very important and beautiful and touching and humane works of art come alive for people is obviously something that's very attractive to do.

The worldwide appeal of Shakespeare

I can't remember the first time I encountered Shakespeare. I do know I grew up in the same house as my grandfather and he quoted Shakespeare endlessly without me necessarily knowing. I think he quoted lots of different things. And I think in British culture that's how we encounter Shakespeare. You come across him without knowing it and slowly you realise where these things come from. But too often, I think people even in Britain feel that Shakespeare is something that belongs to other people, that it belongs to teachers, or it belongs to universities, or it belongs to upper-class people or it belongs to middle-class people. It really, really doesn't. Shakespeare belongs to everyone. He was writing for everyone. And there's a reason why Shakespeare's theatre was called The Globe. It wasn't just reflecting England. It wasn't just reflecting London or Britain. It was meant to represent everyone. His characters come from Italy, from Britain, they come from France, they come from Africa. Shakespeare is a truly international writer writing internationally. He may not have known a great deal about the world at the time he was writing but he was trying to speak for all of it.

Shakespeare's verse

Shakespeare's plays often, a lot of his words, are put into a specific verse structure which we call the iambic pentameter. That sounds very complicated. It isn't. Iambic just means that it's got two beats in it that are ostensibly *I Am*. With the stress on the second part, *I Am*. But they are in a pentameter. That's a five-foot line. So in each line of the verse it goes *I Am, I Am, I Am, I Am, I Am*. Very simple. It's rather like any form of poetry or beat or song. But if you observe it, so for example, 'To be or not to be: that *is* the *question*.' If you observe the iambic the meaning becomes clearer. Obviously in speaking you don't say 'To be or not to be,' but the knowledge of that and by paying attention to that when you come to speak it the meaning becomes clearer. 'To be or not to be: that is the question.' You're leading to the final line. And when you say it and give yourself over to Shakespeare and you get out of the way, you stop trying to make sense of it and you stop trying to explain it to people, if you just give in to it, the line plays through you and

sings and becomes clearer. All you actually need to do with Shakespeare is sit and just receive it. Just like when we watch films from America where, you know, you might be watching a sort of film about the police in some inner city in America. And everybody talks very quickly and you can't quite follow all the lingo but you don't worry. You just watch the scene. You'll find that you pick up quite a lot of it.

Shakespeare's way with words

Another interesting thing about Shakespeare is it's been argued that he often uses two words like 'pomp' and 'circumstance'. There's an expression from Shakespeare that's entered the English language. 'Pomp and circumstance', that's two words basically explaining the same thing with a very slight difference. And it's been argued that Shakespeare was writing not only for a heightened courtly audience, he was also writing for a more simple audience of journeymen and people ... he was writing for everybody in Elizabethan society. So he also used quite common words. Words that were more easily understood and that way he made everybody understand. So I think even at Shakespeare's time, you know, he understood that not everybody was understanding everything at every given moment, but the general sense comes over you. We know that he ... it would appear that he invented a lot of words. It's debatable how many of the words he invented and how many of the words are just the first time we see them written down. But he obviously had confidence to be introducing new words to his audience because they were ready to try and understand.