

## Shakespeare on politics — what can we learn?

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**Welcome from the Governor, Her  
Excellency, the Honourable Margaret  
Beazley AC KC**

*Bujari gamarruwa Diyn Babana Gamarada  
Gadigal Ngura*

In greeting you in the language of the Gadigal, Traditional Owners of these lands and waterways, I pay my respects to their Elders past, present, and future. I extend that respect to the Elders of all parts of our State from which you have travelled.

There are moments in one's life when an event so concentrates the mind that it is forever fixed in one's consciousness. For some it was JFK's assassination. For others, September 11. Often it is a far less dramatic moment.

For me, one of the latter occasions was the first time I heard John Bell do a reading of Shakespeare. I remember exactly where it was — a dinner at the University of Sydney, in the late 1970s. So transfixed was I by the delivery that, as I speak, I cannot quite bring to mind the piece he delivered. But I was hooked, if not on all of Shakespeare at that time, certainly on any of John Bell's performances.

It was his vision that brought into our midst the Bell Shakespeare Company, which over its nearly 35-year history has matured into a premier arts institution and a leading Shakespearian performance company. We are blessed.

But why is this important? Indeed, why is Shakespeare even relevant some four centuries after his plays were written and performed. This is probably a rhetorical question, given the number of biographies of Shakespeare, the books written about his works, what must be the millions of performances of his plays.

Shakespearian scholar Harold Bloom sees Shakespeare as not a mere observer of the human condition, but as the inaugurator of that condition in the first place. In his 1998 work *Shakespeare: Inventing the Human*, Bloom wrote: "Shakespeare will go on explaining us, in part because he invented us."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, when in 1891 Oscar Wilde wrote that "Life imitates art far more than art imitates life,"<sup>3</sup> he was, I would suggest, echoing Jacques in *As You Like It*, in one of Shakespeare's most quoted observations: "All the World's a Stage And all the men and women merely Players."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edited transcript from a talk presented on March 6, 2024, at Government House, Sydney, as part of *Ideas@theHouse*. John Bell became a Distinguished FRSN in 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-VO07cEpIpk>

<sup>2</sup> Bloom H. (1998), *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, New York, Riverhead Books, p.20.

<sup>3</sup> Wilde O. (1891), The Decay of Lying, in *Intentions*.

<sup>4</sup> *As You Like It* (1599) (Act 2 Scene 7 Lines 139–140). The motif of the world-as-stage is repeated in several other of Shakespeare's plays: "Life's but a walking shadow and he himself nothing but a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage" (*Macbeth*, Act 5 Scene 5); "I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano; A stage where every man must play a part, And mine a sad one" (*The Merchant of Venice*, Act 1 Scene 1). Although emblematic

Coming from a melancholic ruminator, as Jacques is, this soliloquy draws the listener into what seems to be a mediation on the misery of life; after all, none of the ages of man he then runs through, comparing them to the acts of a play, sound much fun. Take old age: “with spectacles on nose and pouch on side” and the final age, one’s dotage, “Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.” And *As You Like It* is one of Shakespeare’s comedies.

I first found my Shakespeare home in his comedies, probably as an antidote to studying *King Lear* (1605–06) — one of his three great tragedies — at school. The other two are, of course, *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, in which we find Shakespeare’s unravelling of the human spirit cleverly crafted through language and history.

Take *Macbeth*, for example, which introduced the word “assassination” into the English language.<sup>5</sup>

In *Julius Caesar*, which was written at a time following a series of religiously motivated attempts on the life of Elizabeth, Shakespeare understood the power of brevity of language: “Et tu Brute”.<sup>6</sup> Nothing more needed to be said.

Of John Bell, there is much to be said.

Tonight, we have the extraordinary privilege of hearing from an individual whose knowledge of Shakespeare’s plays — both as text and, perhaps more importantly, as performance — is unequalled in this country. He has been pivotal in making accessible to countless audiences the rich experiences those plays provide. He established a

company that has educated, enriched, and expanded our world.

I thought, however, that much could be understood of this consummate artist who has played such a seminal role in Australian theatre and in modern Australian thought by reference to his university friends and contemporaries, and his sometime housemates; the names are a litany of the movers and shakers of the 1970s in the arts, in literature, in journalism.

There were political activists and political commentators, including Clive James, Germaine Greer, Bruce Beresford, Ken Horler, Mungo McCallum (of whom it is reported Gough Whitlam described as “a tall, bearded descendant of lunatic aristocrats” — Gough did have a flair for the “magisterial statement”). There was also Richard Wherrett, John Gaden, Laurie Oakes, and Les Murray.

It might not be surprising, therefore, to find that the title of tonight’s presentation, in what is the 9<sup>th</sup> iteration of *Ideas@theHouse*, held in collaboration with the Royal Society of NSW, is *Shakespeare on politics — what can we learn?*

Ladies and gentlemen: John Bell.

### Introduction

Thank you very much, Your Excellency, and good evening, everybody. Well, I guess we were all quite happy to see the end of 2023. It was a pretty rough year. Apart from the record-breaking climate-change events all over the world — fires, floods, droughts, and pollution — we had the ongoing horrors of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the ghastly

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of Shakespeare’s work, the motif is not originally his, appearing in *Damon and Pythias*, a play by Richard Edwardes published the same year as Shakespeare was born.

5 Shapiro J. (2006), *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*, London: Faber, p. 160

6 *Julius Caesar* (Act 3 Scene 1)

war in Gaza, which apparently has images too terrible to broadcast, let alone contemplate. And I'm afraid this year isn't looking a great deal better so far, plus we have the American elections coming up. So, buckle up. It could be a bumpy ride.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I wake up in the mornings and pause before I switch on the news, wondering "What new horrors await us? What is the latest thing we have inflicted on ourselves? What damage have we done? What aggression or torture or cruelty or abuse?" We really are a rotten species. Why don't we just drop the bomb and give the place back to the cockroaches?

But then I stop and think, "Hang on, we've also produced Socrates and Shakespeare, Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven. We have produced Isaac Newton and Einstein, Angela Merkel, Marie Curie, Stephen Hawking, Abraham Lincoln, Emeline Pankhurst, Martin Luther King, Mum Shirl, Eddie Mabo, Nelson Mandela, and Greta Thunberg, and that late great Russian patriot, Alexei Navalny. So, we aren't a lost cause after all." We have achieved wonderful things and we are capable of making a wonderful world. But, on dark days, the forces of ignorance, bitterness, hatred, and outdated ideology do seem about to overwhelm us.

We need heroes and heroines — inspirational figures who give us, by example, the courage and the will to carry on.

I have my own pantheon of such people, and I find they are usually risk-takers: people who have dared to break the mould, challenge tradition, and ask, "Why not?"

I find that many of my personal heroes are the ones who failed — who pushed the

boundaries too hard, too soon. But their sacrifices have made breakthroughs possible. I think of Giordano Bruno, burnt at the stake in Rome, and Galileo, who was threatened with the same fate for defying the Church and declaring that the Sun, not the Earth, was the centre of our universe.

I think of poor Vincent van Gogh, who sold only one painting in his life — to his brother Theo, who felt sorry for him — the rest he couldn't give away. "Just give me the cost of the paint," he would beg, but no one wanted them. Today, of course, his paintings are worth millions of dollars. Not that the price tag is any proof of quality. It just shows that the world has at last caught up with van Gogh and now concedes the brilliance and originality of his vision.

I think of Georges Bizet, whose opera *Carmen* was booed off-stage at its premiere. The critics were outraged: "Operas should be about noble people with lofty sentiments. How dare you write an opera about a gypsy girl and her sordid affair with a toreador and a common soldier!" Bizet died a few months later of a broken heart, never to know that *Carmen* would be the most popular opera ever written.

I think of the courage and the doggedness of Ludwig van Beethoven, who started going stone deaf at the age of 26, but pressed on, turning out some of the greatest music of the Modern Age for the next thirty years, even though he never got to hear it. After conducting one of his great symphonies, he stood facing the orchestra and had to be turned around to see that the audience was on its feet and cheering.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This was the premiere of his Ninth Symphony, two hundred years ago, on 7 May 1824, in Vienna, at a theatre since 1870 the site of the Hotel Sacher, home of the incomparable Sachertorte. <https://weta.org/fm/classical-score/may-7-1824-200th-anniversary-premiere-beethovens-symphony-no-9> [Ed.]

### William Shakespeare (1564–1616)

But of all the great artists I admire, the one who's had the greatest impact on my life and career is the dramatist and poet William Shakespeare, whom I first encountered as a 14-year-old schoolboy. Shortly after making his acquaintance, I declared, "I'm going to be an actor and perform Shakespeare for the rest of my life," which is more or less what I've done.

What is it about Shakespeare that inspires me? (Let's remember that the word "inspire" literally means "breathing in:" to open your mouth, to see something wonderful, and to breathe it in until it fills you — inspiration.)

#### *Shakespeare's curiosity and insights*

The first thing that inspires me about Shakespeare is his curiosity. He was a true Renaissance man, curious about everything — about Nature, about science, about history, art and politics, about the law and exploration, about language, but mainly about people.

He had an extraordinary insight into human nature and an empathy with people of all ages and social classes. Before Shakespeare, the characters in English drama were all stock figures and stereotypes: the young lovers, the smiling villain, the tyrant king, the noble hero etc. Shakespeare rejected such simplistic and fixed characters and said, "We're not determined by our star signs or by our chemical makeup — instead, we are a bundle of contradictions, conflicting

urges, and impulses, predictable in nothing except our inconsistencies." The American academic Harold Bloom has attributed to Shakespeare the invention of "personality."<sup>8</sup>

Shakespeare could put himself with equal ease into the mind of a 14-year-old girl, a crazy old king, or a psychopathic killer. He could identify with all of them.

As a schoolboy at Stratford Grammar, he was taught to debate in Latin and Greek, and plead either side with equal conviction — a great training for a dramatist. He could always see both sides of any moral dilemma.

But from early on, he developed a habit of taking sides with the underdog, the outsider. For instance, black people were unpopular in London at the time, equated with the Sons of Darkness, Sons of the Devil. Queen Elizabeth herself complained that, "Too many Negroes have crept into our kingdom."<sup>9</sup> Yet Shakespeare makes Othello his most sympathetic tragic hero, the victim of racial hatred and envy. Caliban, the so-called monster in *The Tempest* (1611),<sup>10</sup> is given the play's most poignant poetry. He loves the island that has been taken from him and is the only one to appreciate its beauty. A wave of anti-Semitism swept through London as the result of a trumped-up Jewish plot against the Queen.<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare's rival Christopher Marlow rushed into print with a vicious anti-Semitic play called *The Jew of Malta*, and Shakespeare quickly responded with the comedy *The Merchant of Venice* (1596–97),

<sup>8</sup> Bloom (1998) Op. cit. [Ed.]

<sup>9</sup> Bartels, E.C. (2006) Too many blackamoors: deportation, discrimination, and Elizabeth I, *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 46(2), Tudor and Stuart Drama: 305–322. [Ed.]

<sup>10</sup> The plays' dates are taken from a Royal Shakespeare Company timeline. [Ed.]

<sup>11</sup> See 28 February 1594 Trial of Rodrigo Lopez finds him guilty of plot to poison Queen Elizabeth I, <https://jewinthepew.org/2015/02/28/28-february-1594-trial-of-rodrigo-lopez-finds-him-guilty-of-plot-to-poison-queen-elizabeth-i-otdimjh/> [Ed.]

in which a Jewish character is central to the play: Shylock, the money lender. But here the Jew is depicted as a victim of abuse and persecution, especially at the hands of Antonio, the Christian merchant.

When asked why he wants revenge on Antonio, Shylock replies:<sup>12</sup>

He hath disgraced me and hindered me  
of half a million ... Laughed at my losses,  
mocked at my gains, scorned my nation,  
thwarted my bargains, cool'd my friends,  
heated my enemies; and what's his reason?  
I am a Jew ... Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath  
not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions,  
senses, affections, passions; fed with the  
same food, hurt with the same weapons,  
subject to the same diseases, healed by the  
same means, warmed and cooled by the  
same winter and summer as a Christian  
is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you  
tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison  
us, do we not die? And if you wrong us,  
shall we not revenge? If we are like you  
in the rest, we will resemble you in that.  
If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his  
humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong  
a Jew, what should his sufferance be? By  
Christian example? Why — revenge. The  
villainy you teach me, I will execute; and it  
shall go hard but I will better the instruc-  
tion.

Whatever our sympathy for Shylock, we know that revenge is not the answer. We can see by what's happening in Gaza that revenge only begets revenge.

Refugees were also unwelcome in London, flooded with Huguenots fleeing Catholic

persecution in France. They were met with hostile crowds and the old familiar chant: "They've come here to take our jobs!" There were violent demonstrations and attacks on the hapless refugees.<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare addressed the issue in his play *Sir Thomas Moore* (1592–95) (Act 2 Scene 4). This speech is of great significance, not only for its content, but because it's the only surviving page of manuscript we have in Shakespeare's own hand. [Figure 1] Sir Thomas Moore confronts the rioters who want all the so-called "strangers" removed from England:<sup>14</sup>

Grant them removed and grant that this  
your noise  
Hath chid down all the majesty of England;  
Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,  
Their babies at their backs, and their poor  
luggage  
Plodding to the ports and coasts for  
transportation.  
And that you sit as kings in your desires,  
Authority quite silent by your brawl,  
And you in ruff of your opinions clothed.  
What had you got? I'll tell you: you had  
taught  
How insolence and strong hand should  
prevail,  
How order should be quell'd, and by this  
pattern  
Not one of you should live an aged man;  
For other ruffians, as their fancies wrought  
With self-same hand, self reason, and  
self-right,  
Would shark on you, and men like ravenous  
fishes  
Would feed on one another.  
What country, by the nature of your error,  
Should give you harbour?

<sup>12</sup> *The Merchant of Venice* (Act 3 Scene 1)

<sup>13</sup> On Evil May Day, May 1, 1517. [Ed.]

<sup>14</sup> Watch Sir Ian McKellen declaim the "Strangers" speech, <https://www.williamlanday.com/2017/02/28/shakespeares-speech-on-immigrants/> [Ed.]



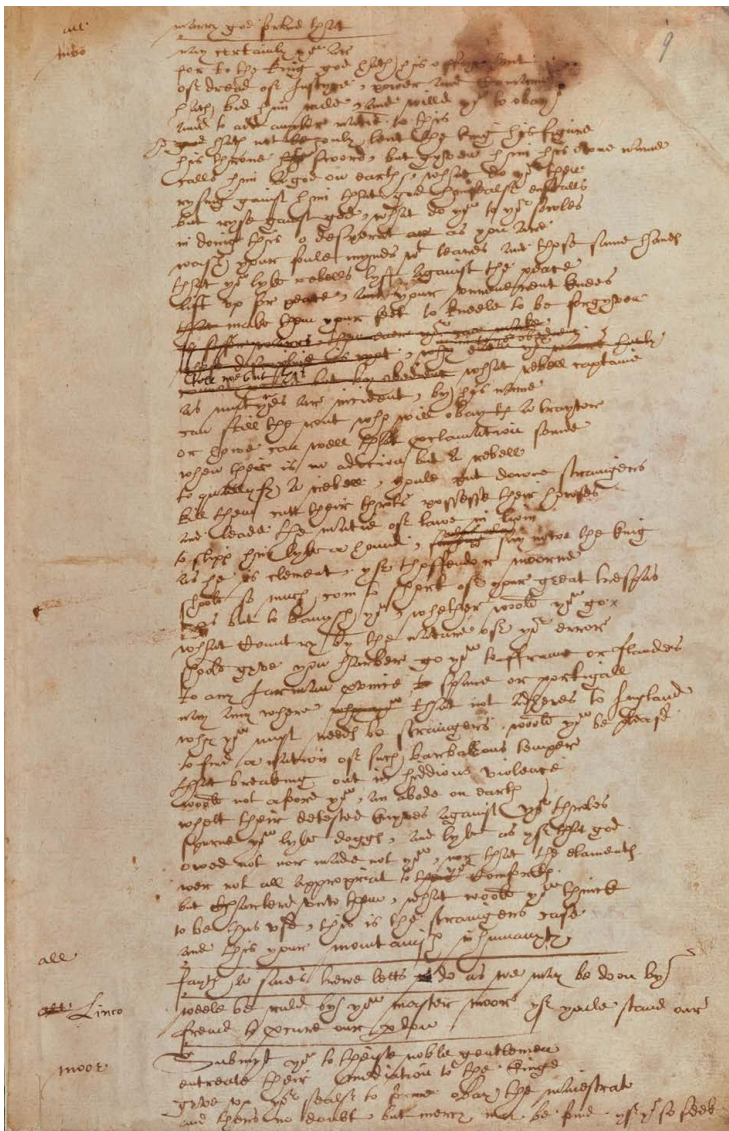


Figure 1: The “Strangers’ Case” speech in Shakespeare’s own hand; the only surviving page of his writing. In the British Museum.[ Ed.]

Why, you must needs be strangers!  
 Would you be pleased  
 To find a nation of such barbarous temper  
 That, breaking out in hideous violence,  
 Would not afford you an abode on Earth?  
 Whet their detested knives against your  
 throats,

Spurn you like dogs; what would you think  
 To be such used? This is the strangers’ case  
 And this your mountainish inhumanity.

A speech very pertinent to our times, I think, as we see far-right candidates in Germany and the USA promising to deport asylum seekers.

### *Shakespeare's range*

The second aspect of Shakespeare that most inspires me is the range of his work. Most of us can write one sort of book or play — you'll know what I mean by "a typical Agatha Christie or Stephen King," — even "a typical Noël Coward or Tennessee Williams." But there's no such thing as "a typical Shakespeare." Of his 38 surviving plays, there aren't two alike. He wrote tragedies, comedies, romances, historical dramas, knockabout farces, and magical fairy tales. Even within those genres no two plays are alike. Each of his comedies, for instance, stands alone and bears no resemblance to any of the others in tone or expression.

This is a tribute to his wide-ranging imagination: not only could he imagine a moonlit forest, a blasted heath in Scotland, a sunny forest of Arden, a freezing castle in Denmark, or a fantasy island in the Caribbean, he could bring them all to life without scenery in broad daylight on the open-air stage of the Globe and people would believe him:

"Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania!"<sup>15</sup>

"The air bites shrewdly; it is very cold."<sup>16</sup>

"But, look, the morn in russet mantle clad,  
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill."<sup>17</sup>

### *Shakespeare's imagination*

And so on. Shakespeare's imagination fired the imaginations of the two thousand people packed into the Globe, and they went on his journey with him.

Imagination is the prime driver of all successful enterprises. I recall an interview

with Paul Keating, in which he said, "If you can't imagine a new *economic* landscape, if you can't imagine a new *social* landscape or *international* one, then there's no way you're going to get one. In the end, if the creativity is not there, if the artistry is lacking, the outlook will be meagre and dull."

Art, music, poetry, and drama — these are the elements that nourish our imaginations, which otherwise would lie dormant.

And what fires imagination? It's a sense of wonder, as if seeing things for the first time, the way a child does. We all know the delight of watching a child experience something wonderful for the first time — a Christmas tree, a birthday present, a new puppy, a trip to the circus. Wide-eyed and open-mouthed, they breathe it in: Inspiration.

We take joy in seeing them have that experience, and it may remind us that we've become somewhat jaded or nonchalant, in taking such things for granted. We've seen it all before.

An artist is somebody whose sense of wonder, of seeing things as if for the first time, is not jaded, doesn't become nonchalant, but is constantly alert to the beauty or the horror, the absurdity and the bliss, the miracle of everyday life. If we keep an open mind and an open heart, we can share that experience and see life anew through the eyes of the artist.

### **Was Shakespeare a risk-taker?**

Was Shakespeare a risk-taker? He certainly was. Sometimes his dabbling in politics came too close to the bone. His play *Richard II* (1595–96) showed a weak monarch being

15 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595–96) (Act 2 Scene 1).

16 *Hamlet* (1600) (Act 1 Scene 4).

17 *Hamlet* (Act 1 Scene 1).

deposed by his feisty cousin. It struck a nerve with Queen Elizabeth, who was being threatened by *her* cousin, Mary Queen of Scots: “Know you not,” she stormed, “that I am Richard the Second?” The play was banned, and Shakespeare and his fellow actors were called before a tribunal. Some fast talking by friends at Court saved his neck.

His rival Ben Johnson castigated him for breaking the rules of classical theatre, which prescribed that a drama should take place in real time, in the one location, like the ancient Greek Tragedies. But Shakespeare flouted the rules by having the action take place on multiple occasions, sometimes over large gaps in time, thus revolutionising the whole nature of drama. All of Shakespeare’s plays are still regularly performed; Ben Johnson’s only rarely. Shakespeare’s whole career was one of experiment, revolution, and breaking the rules, challenging his audience.

### Shakespeare and leadership

Over a lifetime spent working in the theatre, founding and running two theatre companies, I’ve learnt quite a lot about leadership from studying Shakespeare’s plays and characters. *Julius Caesar* (1599) is a virtual playbook of the dos and don’ts of leadership. In the play’s tussle for leadership, we can see why some succeed and others fail.

Take Julius Caesar himself: a brilliant military commander, a crafty, ruthless politician, great orator, who’s undone by overweening ambition. His arrogance and aloofness mean that he’s not moving with the times. He has a tin ear and can’t hear the signs of conspiracy happening all around

him. He allows flatterers to steer him away from reality and refuses to listen to sound advice.

His antagonist Brutus may be “the noblest Roman of them all,” but he too has his flaws. Proud of his reputation for honesty and integrity, he has no tolerance for weakness in others and dismisses their opinions. He is too secure in his opinion of himself.

His friend Cassius, on the other hand, is too lacking in self-confidence and allows himself to be overruled by Brutus, even when he knows that Brutus is wrong.

Mark Antony is a brilliant spin-doctor and a manipulator of public opinion — a supremely tricky orator. But having got the top job, he whittles it away through self-indulgence and laziness. It’s not enough to get to the top job; you have to have the flexibility and the self-control to stay there.

Coriolanus is another instructive figure from Roman history. A brilliant fighting machine, he is a nightmare in peacetime: a man who refuses to compromise or negotiate, and so is easy pickings for the politicians who seek to destroy him. General George Patton springs to mind.<sup>18</sup>

Shakespeare’s eleven history plays give us more graphic examples of good and bad leadership. We witness the destruction of Richard II, who puts his faith in divine right and entitlement.

We see the demise of his successor, Henry IV, who is plagued with guilt for the murder of his predecessor, and believes that the proper posture for a king is aloofness and austerity. He makes a major mistake by being ungrateful to those who have helped him attain the Crown, thereby breeding resentment and rebellion.

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<sup>18</sup> See the discussion of Coriolanus the character in Greenblatt, S. (2018) *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Power*, London, Bodley Head. [Ed.]



His son, Henry V, is the most charismatic and successful of Shakespeare's monarchs. He has learned by watching his father's mistakes and sets about crafting his image from an early age. He has spent his adolescence in London's pubs and brothels, partly so that he may dazzle the world by his eventual "reformation," but also so he may get to know the people he will eventually reign over. He wants to know their names, how they live, what they think. He's adept at developing "the common touch."

As soon as he is king, he sets about making himself a national hero by declaring war on France and blackmailing the Church into giving him its blessing.

At first, his campaign goes well, with Henry exhibiting such sterling leadership qualities as tenacity, endurance, strategic thinking, discipline, and a contagious optimism. But as he advances deeper into French territory, his troops are beset by illness, fatigue, and depletion in numbers.

He gets as far as Agincourt, where he finds himself outnumbered five-to-one by a French army, fit, well-armed, and itching for battle. And this is where Henry's true leadership comes to the fore. He realises that stirring speeches and grand rhetoric aren't going to win the day. He is adept at reading the room and changing tack. He has to find a language that is homely and simple. He has to call his troops by name and convince them that they are a band of brothers, and they are actually lucky to be here to participate in such a glorious victory. He can't offer them reinforcements or full bellies or warm coats. He can offer them something better — immortality.

This day is call'd the feast of Crispian:<sup>19</sup>  
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,  
Will stand a-tiptoe when this day is nam'd,  
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.  
He that shall live this day and see old age  
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,  
And say 'Tomorrow is Saint Crispian.'  
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars  
[And say 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day'.]  
Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,  
But he'll remember, with advantages,  
What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,  
Familiar in his mouth as household words —  
Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,  
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester —  
Be in their flowing cups freshly remember'd.  
This story shall the good man teach his son;  
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,  
From this day to the ending of the world,  
But we in it shall be remembered;  
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers —  
For he today that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,  
This day shall gentle his condition.  
And gentlemen in England now a-bed  
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,  
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks  
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

And the rest, of course, is history. The speech works its magic and Henry's troops go on to win one of the greatest military victories in English history.<sup>20</sup>

Having spent the bulk of my life running two theatre companies — the Nimrod

<sup>19</sup> *Henry V* (1599) (Act 4 Scene 3).

<sup>20</sup> On 25 October 1415. [Ed.]

and then Bell Shakespeare — I reckon I've learned a lot of valuable lessons about leadership by studying Shakespeare's plays and characters. These lessons include listening to people, empathising with their situations, not taking myself too seriously, leading from the front, but as part of the team, staying loyal, trustworthy, resilient, positive, optimistic, generous with praise, and grateful for support, bold, but responsible in risk-taking.

I don't say I've always succeeded in all of the above, but at least I know the lessons are there to be learned.

### Shakespeare's longevity

Shakespeare's plays have lasted 400 years and are still performed the world over in almost every language. One reason they've lasted so long is that in a sense, they remain unfinished. Shakespeare asks lots of searching questions in his plays but he doesn't provide any answers. The plays never have a so-called message. They're never didactic, unlike Berthold Brecht's or George Bernard Shaw's, and many playwrights writing today with a particular social or political agenda.

That means that each generation has to answer Shakespeare's questions in its own way: what do we think about racism? Anti-Semitism? Sexism? The Patriarchy? Ambition? Revenge?

The words remain the same. The words are the text, but the text is not the play. The play is what happens when actors pick up the text and start to perform it to each other.

And that's where the answers, the attitudes, the responses will become manifest. The words are always the same, but the play is always different, always new, always now.

### Shakespeare's language

And then we have language. Language is humankind's greatest invention. That which separates us from, and allows us to dominate, the rest of the animal kingdom. English has been the most successful to date of all the modern languages, and Shakespeare was one of those who shaped the English we speak today.

English, more than most languages, is always in transition. New words and phrases are added to the lexicon every day, and other words and phrases become obsolete. In Shakespeare's day, the English language was experiencing a major explosion of invention and excitement. There was as yet no definitive English dictionary,<sup>21</sup> so words could be new-minted and mean whatever you wanted them to mean, especially with such a wide range of English dialects and accents. Most of us today have a vocabulary of about 10 to 20,000 words. Shakespeare had a vocabulary of some 60,000 words and introduced hundreds of new words and phrases into our language.

We quote him all the time without realising it. In the words of Bernard Levin:

if you cannot understand my argument and decide "*It's Greek to me,*" you are quoting Shakespeare. If you claim to be *more sinned against than sinning*, you are quoting Shakespeare. If you recall your *salad days*, you are quoting Shakespeare. If you act *more in sorrow than in anger*, if your *wish is father to the thought*, if your *lost property has vanished into thin air*, you are quoting Shakespeare. If you have ever refused to *budge an inch* or suffered from *green-eyed jealousy*, if you've been ever *played fast and loose*, if you have been *tongue-tied*, a *tower*

21 Reputed to be Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755). [Ed.]

*of strength, hoodwinked, or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort, or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days, or lived in a fool's paradise — why, be that as it may, the more fool you, for it's a foregone conclusion that you are, as good luck would have it,* quoting Shakespeare.

If you think that it's *early days* and you clear out *bag and baggage*, if you think it's *high time* and that *is the long and the short of it*, if you believe that *the game is up* and that *the truth will out*, even if it involves *your own flesh and blood*, if you lie low to the *crack of doom* because you suspect *foul play*, if you set your *teeth on edge, at one fell swoop*, without *rhyme or reason*, then, to *give the devil his due, if the truth were known* (for surely you *have a tongue in your head*) you are quoting Shakespeare, even if you *bid me good riddance and send me packing*. If you wish I was as *dead as a doornail*, if you think that I am an *eyesore, a laughing stock, the devil incarnate, a stony-hearted villain, bloody-minded, or a blinking idiot*, then — *by Jove! O Lord! Tut, tut!* for *goodness' sake! what the dickens!* — *it's all one to me* — for you are quoting Shakespeare.

That was Bernard Levin's doing, not mine.<sup>22</sup>

### Shakespeare and governance

Apart from Shakespeare's comments on leadership, which I spoke of above, what does he have to offer about when it comes to good governance and the safety of the realm?

In *Henry V*, the Archbishop depicts a medieval concept of order, with the king at the top and everyone else one step rather below on the ladder, each one fulfilling a function allotted to him at birth.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore doth heaven divide the state of  
man into diverse functions,  
Setting endeavour in continuous motion;  
To which is fix'd as an aim or butt  
Obedience; for so work the honeybees,  
Creatures that by a rule in nature teach  
The act of order to a peopled kingdom.  
They have a King, and officers of sorts,  
Where some, like magistrates, correct at  
home;  
Others like merchants venture trades abroad,  
Others like soldiers, armed in their stings,  
Make boot upon the summer's velvet buds,  
Which pillage they with merry march bring  
home  
To the tent royal of their emperor;  
Who, busied in his majesty, surveys  
The singing masons building roofs of gold,  
The civil citizens kneading up the honey,  
The poor mechanic porters crowding in  
Their heavy burdens at his narrow gate,  
The sad-eyed justice with his surly hum,  
Delivering o'er to executors pale  
The lazy yawning drone.

It's a charming speech — the Archbishop, of course, is a major figure of the Establish-

<sup>22</sup> Levin, B. (1983) Quoting Shakespeare, in his *Enthusiasms*, London: Jonathan Cape. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5877ceae5016e102ef4fi8f4/t/5b9981b60e2e7257287d6fo8/1536786870360/Quoting+Shakespeare.pdf>. But see Winick, S. (2020) Proverbs, myths, and “The Bard”: Are we really “Quoting Shakespeare”? *Library of Congress Blogs*, 23 April. <https://blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2020/04/proverbs-myths-and-the-bard-are-we-really-quoting-shakespeare/> [Ed.]

<sup>23</sup> *Henry V* (Act 1 Scene 2).

ment, and we shouldn't be surprised about his very medieval concept of order.

Moreover, he's under pressure from King Henry to find an ecclesiastical excuse for invading France because, if he doesn't, the Church will lose half its property. So the Archbishop has very good reason to be seen as a King's man.

Law and order are paramount, but what about when you have a weak or tyrannous king? This is the dilemma that plagues all of Shakespeare's History plays.

*Henry V* is a complex, rich, and poetic play, not just a jingoistic spectacle. It was written at a time when England was just beginning to emerge as a global power and was facing off enemies in Spain and France, as well as rebellions in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Patriotism ran high. The play celebrates the Earl of Essex's defeat of the Irish rebels, and in one scene, Shakespeare brings together an Irishman, a Scot, a Welshman, and an Englishman in the trenches attacking Harfleur.<sup>24</sup> Naturally, a quarrel breaks out, but all is resolved when the trumpet sounds, and they gather together under the flag of St. George. This is Shakespeare's image of the birth of a united kingdom.

Naturally, the play was popular throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the expansion of the British Empire. It was so again in periods of intense patriotism during World War I and World War II. In fact, when Laurence Olivier played the role of Henry at London's Old Vic Theatre, he was visited by Winston Churchill, who reminded him, "You are England."<sup>25</sup>

Olivier, who was in the Royal Air Force at the time, was commissioned by the War Office to make a morale-boosting movie, so he chose *Henry V*, which was a great success. But to ensure its popularity, Olivier cut the more contentious scenes, such as Henry discarding or executing his old companions. During the Battle of Agincourt, as described by Shakespeare, Henry ordered all prisoners to be slaughtered in case they mounted a counterattack. Olivier cut that scene too. He just kept the glamorous patriotic bits.

Shakespeare's ambivalence towards war and what Othello describes as "the pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war"<sup>26</sup> is well expressed by a young soldier in *Henry V*:<sup>27</sup>

But if the cause be not good, the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all — 'We died in such a place! — some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left.' I am afeared there are few die well that die in a battle, for how can they charitably dispose of anything when blood is their argument? Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the King that led them to it.

War certainly has its horrors, and Shakespeare depicts them forensically in his three plays of the history of Henry VI. Civil war is the greatest of evils, and is well-encapsulated in the stage direction: "Enter a father who

<sup>24</sup> During August and September, 1415. [Ed.]

<sup>25</sup> Or was it Charles Laughton who said this to Olivier? [Ed.]

<sup>26</sup> *Othello* (1604) (Act 3 Scene 3).

<sup>27</sup> *Henry V* (Act 4 Scene 1).

has killed his son, and a son who has killed his father.”

The chaos gives rise to populist demagogues who prey on the ignorance and bigotry of the population to make a pitch for the throne. Such is the rebel leader, Jack Cade:<sup>28</sup>

We, John Cade, inspired with the spirit of putting down Kings and Princes, command silence!

Valiant I am! I am able to endure much. I fear neither sword nor fire. Be brave then, for your Captain is brave, and vows reformation. When I am King, there shall be no more money; all shall eat and drink at my expense; and, the pissing conduit shall run nothing but red wine for the first three days of my reign. First thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers. How now! Who's there?

A: The clerk of Chatham — he can read and write.

Cade: O, monstrous!

A: We caught him setting boys' homework.

Cade: Here's a villain!

A: He has a book in his pocket with red letters in it.

Cade: Nay then, he's a conjurer! Come hither, sirrah. I must question thee. What is thy name?

A: Emmanuel.

Cade: Dost thou write thy name? Or dost thou sign it with a cross, like an honest, plain-dealing man?

A: Sir, I thank God I have been so well brought up that I can write my name. *Deo gratias*.

Cade: Hang him! He's a traitor! He speaks French! Hang him with pen and ink-horn around his neck. There shall not be a maid to be married, but she shall pay to me her maidenhead ere they have it. Now, away! Some to Westminster, some to the Houses of Parliament, some to the Inns of Court! Burn them all down! Destroy all the records of the realm — my mouth shall be the Parliament of England!

It reminds me of somebody. I can't — can't think who.

So rebellion and civil war are to be avoided, which means that Order must be imposed — until it reaches a tipping point where it becomes tyranny, as we see reflected in *Julius Caesar*, *Richard III* (1592–93), *Coriolanus* (1608), *Macbeth* (1606). At that point rebellion becomes reformation. It's always a delicate balance.

In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus concludes:

The abuse of greatness is when it disjoins  
Remorse from power.<sup>29</sup>

It's a sentiment echoed by Isabella in *Measure for Measure* (1604):<sup>30</sup>

Oh, it is excellent to have a giant's strength!  
But it is tyrannous  
To use it like a giant!  
But man, proud man,  
Dress'd in a little brief authority,  
Plays such fantastic tricks before high

28 *Henry VI Part 2* (1591) (Act 4 Scene 2).

29 By remorse, he doesn't mean "regret" but "pity."

30 *Measure for Measure* (Act 3 Scene 2).



heaven  
As make the angels weep.

### Shakespeare and justice

We're familiar now with the concept of justice being represented by a woman who is blindfolded, holding in her hand a pair of scales. This image was widely known in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. The blindfold indicated impartiality, but what do the evenly balanced scales represent? One hopes they might suggest a balance between justice and mercy. Justice is a cold and cerebral concept, mercy a warm-hearted and compassionate one.

We saw that debate as recently as last December as to whether convicted criminals (all refugees) should be freed or kept in "preventative detention." The debate was largely driven by racism and fear-mongering and became a political football. Could justice be tempered with compassion?

One might do well to hope that here in our own country, the scales might represent justice balanced by mercy and compassion.

This is best depicted by Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. She accepts that Shylock has the law on his side but urges him to "season" justice with mercy. I like her use of the word "season." It suggests something that adds relish or flavour to something that is cold and bloodless:<sup>31</sup>

The quality of mercy is not strain'd.  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes  
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.  
His sceptre gives the force of temporal  
power,  
The attribute to awe and majesty

Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;  
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;  
It is enthroned in the heart of kings,  
It is an attribute to God himself,  
And earthly power doth then show likest  
God's  
When mercy seasons justice.

Thank you for your very kind attention.

### Questions and answers

**Susan Pond:** My name is Susan Pond, and I have the privilege of being the president of the Royal Society of New South Wales, which has held *Ideas@theHouse*, now the ninth, in partnership with Her Excellency and Government House. John, that was very much what we were hoping to achieve with this series. We've had incredible expositions of great science and, tonight, great literature and great acting. Thank you very much. I will thank you more formally in a few minutes, but we do have time for questions. I would particularly like to take questions from some of the younger members of the audience; we have at least eight university students here. I was thinking about what you might say and therefore what questions to ask. Can you tell us whom you regard as the people who've given great speeches in real life, which have come somewhat close to Shakespeare's figures, and any in Australia?

**JB:** Well, the people that spring to mind immediately, of course, are Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln, who slaved over the Gettysburg Address for hours and hours to make it as perfect as possible. When he made that speech, hardly anybody heard it. He had quite a high, thin voice, and there was a big crowd, and only the people in the front row actually heard the Getty-

<sup>31</sup> *The Merchant of Venice* (Act 4 Scene 1)

sburg Address. Thank God it was written down, and we now have it as a great piece of oratory. Churchill, of course, is renowned for his motivational power. Examples in modern politics are a little harder to find.

**Q:** What about Boris Johnson? Your perspective on Boris?

**JB:** You know, I've never sat through a Boris Johnson speech, so I don't know how to assess him. I'd like to hear your opinion about who you think a great modern speaker is. I don't think it's been fashionable in recent times to appear too oratorical: don't get too smart, you know, the quip is mightier than the sword. No Australian examples of great orators or motivationalists? I'm sure some of you will have answers to that, someone you regard as a great speaker in Australian politics or society. Any offers?

**REW:** From your comments, I take it that you quite like Paul Keating. What are your observations about him as a leader?

**JB:** Well, it's interesting because he didn't regard himself as a good speaker, and he was quite embarrassed about it and said, "I don't like doing it. It's all bullshit — making oratorical speeches." I was talking to him at the time and I said, "If you mean it, if you believe it, it's not bullshit. It's just articulating your beliefs and your ideas, so it's not fake, it's not phony." He was much happier doing the one-liners in the Chamber and quick on his feet. He wasn't happy being oratorical, unlike Gough or Bob Menzies, for instance, who revelled in it.

**REW:** I thought your comments about Mark Antony were interesting, and they seem to draw some parallels to Paul Keating. You said that once Mark Antony had the reins of power, he became disinterested. I'm just interested if you have an opinion on that.

**JB:** Well, I think the thing about Mark Antony's speech is that it's so devious, it's complete bullshit: being at Caesar's assassination, he was nowhere near it, he was away at the time. But he says, "I was there and I saw this and I saw that," you know, get the crowd all weeping. It's nonsense, showing them Caesar's will, but it isn't Caesar's will, he hasn't got it, it's back home. Brutus sends for it later on, so the whole act is a masterful piece of oratory and stirring the audience up and turning their heads around within the space of five minutes. But it's phony, and that's the kind of thing that Keating was resisting, I think.

**LF:** John, I draw a distinction between politicians who speak in pursuit of their own interests and statesmen who pursue the interests of their country or community. Is there a similar difference across Shakespeare?

**JB:** Yes, I think the politician Mark Antony — a supreme politician and totally insincere but convincing — against someone like Thomas Moore, whom I quoted about the refugees: that's a statesmanlike speech. But with others like Henry V, you've got to weigh out "what is this for, what's he got to gain out of making this?" And I think it's highly motivational, but it's to his own ends. So, there aren't that many people, I think, in Shakespeare apart from Portia. Her "mercy" speech, for instance, is totally generous and not self-interested.

**Q:** Wonderful speech, thank you for that. There are some people these days who accuse Shakespeare of being a misogynist. That seems to me to be quite false because Shakespeare has demonstrated in so many cases his admiration and support for women. Could you comment on that?

**JB:** Well, I'm sort of guessing a bit here because I never met Shakespeare. I couldn't analyse him face to face. You have to take it all from the plays and see what you can possibly wrinkle out of that. I would say that when he first started writing, he followed the tradition of women being a bit monstrous, a bit overbearing. So, early plays like *Titus Andronicus*, (1591–92), for instance, with Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, she's a really tough figure. Joan of Arc in the *Henry VI* plays is similar, a very male kind of aggressive figure. But as he goes on, he softens them more and more, and I feel he wants to give women a voice. But it's hard in that society — women don't have a voice — so he puts them into male costume: the girls disguise themselves as men — Viola, Rosalind, Portia — and when they do that, then they have a voice because they're in male attire and they are listened to. So, they can start to rule the roost, and I think he was trying to find a way of liberating women.

Don't forget, he also had an all-male company — there were no women allowed on stage — so the roles were all played by men. So, doing that gender swap was a big challenge for writers, and many of them didn't bother: you'd have all male characters, maybe one female character, because it's just too hard to write and the actors to impersonate women successfully. But Shakespeare must have had some fantastic actors in his company to play parts like Rosalind and Viola and Cordelia — marvellous roles, the best roles for women ever written. So, they were trained to do these female impersonations and to understand how women thought and behaved. They are still unquestionably the roles that most women want to play, so they are convincing.

Interesting with *The Taming of the Shrew* (1590–91), which is often seen as a piece of misogynistic writing, I think it's cleverer than that — it's two people, both of them sort of mavericks, very strong-willed, trying to negotiate how this marriage can work, and that, of course, is the basis of a lot of sitcom and comedy from way back, the male-female battle for superiority. And in *The Taming of the Shrew*, we see concessions being made on both sides, and these two mavericks work out a way of living together. Other people think they're crazy, think they're nut cases, but they do work out their own way: “we can negotiate a way of living together to keep us both happy.” And I think that's the message of that play, that you have to negotiate, you have to give a little, take a little, but nobody should feel “I am on top.”

**JW:** My question was going to be about feminism: is Shakespeare a feminist? Can I make a really quick argument that he is and see how you might respond? At that time, women were very largely packages to be passed around for their financial, dynastic, political value, and so they were fairly stereotyped roles. But then in *Richard III*, he has the women who make their curses and their lamentations and who come back as very, very strong women, making their argument about the way women are treated and standing up for themselves in their own rights. There's Lady Macbeth, who's a very, very strong woman, not a nice one, as many of the others aren't, as you've already said, but we get Desdemona and Juliet and Beatrice to whom I think he gives voices that are very strong. These women are equal to anybody else in Shakespeare's plays. They're articulate, they're intelligent, they understand their position in society and the lack of power. But I'll come back

to Portia's beautiful speech. We all learn it in high school, but I think she's actually quite an evil character in the play. She talks about these Christian virtues, and she's not Christian at all. She's one of the most Machiavellian of his characters, and she gets away with it. And everybody thinks she's a heroine because she's so articulate and so intelligent. But she'll deceive you as to who she is. She cross-dresses, she pretends, she's a liar. And when she talks about the quality of mercy, she doesn't even season it when she actually makes her judgment on Shylock — he's destroyed by her, which leads me to Machiavelli (1469–1527). My question is: Machiavelli's and Shakespeare's lives were almost congruent in different languages though, what do you think? Do you believe that he read Machiavelli? Can you talk about the influence of Machiavelli as seen in the plays?

**JB:** Yes, Shakespeare knew his Machiavelli. In *Henry VI Part 2*, Richard III says, “set the murderous Machiavel to school.”<sup>32</sup> A “Machiavel” meant a villain, in common parlance. He was that well known by reputation. If people hadn't read him,<sup>33</sup> they knew all about his philosophy.

As for Portia being evil, I think the play is often misread as a romantic comedy. But I think it's a satire about the law and money and class and race. It's a very tough play, I think, and it's not a romantic comedy at all. She has to save Antonio's life because Antonio is in love with Bassanio and has this hold on him. If she can't break that bond

between them, then Bassanio will always be in debt to Antonio, if Antonio sacrifices his life. Her destruction of Shylock — well, you can say she's merciless, but Shylock brings it on himself by insisting on the letter of the law absolutely literally. He's offered so many ways out, but says, “No, I insist on the letter.” She says, “Okay, if you want the letter of the law, this is it.” That's tough, but it's believable.

It gets one step worse when Antonio adds “And also he must become a Christian,” which I think is the worst thing to happen to Shylock — it takes away his culture, his whole identity. That's the cruellest thing they do to him.

I think it's a satire about race. I mean, Portia despises anybody who's not Venetian. She makes wisecracks about the English, the French, the Italians. None of them are good enough. You've got to be a Venetian, a white Venetian — for which you can read Londoner, I suppose. And I think it's very much about hypocrisy, Christian hypocrisy, in the way they treat the Jews.

But nobody's either really good or evil in any of Shakespeare's plays. Yes, she certainly is a trickster, and she gets what she wants, she chooses the man she wants, and marries him, and then saves his friend. An example of that is that her father has decreed that her portrait is in one of three caskets — gold, silver, and lead — and whoever chooses the right casket with her portrait can claim her as his wife. All the other suitors choose gold or silver because that's obviously the only

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<sup>32</sup> *Henry VI Part 3* (1591), (Act 3 Scene 2). A second occurrence is “Am I a Machiavel?” Host in *Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597–1601), (Act 3 Scene 1). [Ed.]

<sup>33</sup> Although *The Prince* was written in 1513, it wasn't published until 1532, after Machiavelli's death. There was no English translation of Machiavelli during Shakespeare's lifetime (translations of the *Discourses* appeared in 1636, and *The Prince* in 1640), but *The Prince* and the *Discourses* were widely read in Italian, French and Latin during the 16th century [Ed.]

worthy vessel for such a divine creature. Bassanio chooses lead, and that's the right one because the father's message is "all that glitters is not gold" and "don't go by outward appearances."

But I don't think Bassanio does it by himself. I think she helps him over the line — she calls for music, and the musician comes on and sings, "Tell me, where is fancy bred, in the heart or in the head? How begot, how nourishéd." So, like say, "dummy, it's in the lead one" and he picks it. And so that's how she chooses her husband and defies her father's will. I think that's a piece of clever trickery, and she always gets her own way. She's admirable in many ways, but as I said also she's tough and she doesn't give any ground.

And I think the other thing about Shakespeare's women is that, as he progresses, they become the moral exemplars. When we get to people like Queen Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* (1611), she's greatly wronged by her husband — he's a jealous, psychotic, crazy man and he condemns her and she apparently dies. In fact, she goes into secrecy for 14 years and in that 14 years, he recovers and gets his mind back and then she forgives him, which is extraordinary after all he's done to her.

But the women become the strong characters, the moral exemplars like Cordelia, for instance, has the moral strength in that play. I don't think Lady Macbeth is all that bad a character. She wants to be. She summons up evil spirits to make her tough, but in fact, she can't go through with it. She can't carry out the murder, and shortly after, she starts to fall to pieces once Macbeth goes rogue. She starts falling apart and finally goes insane and commits suicide. So Macbeth gets tougher and tougher, and she goes

more and more desiccated. So she's not as tough as she'd like to be.

So I think the women become the strong moral compasses in the tragic plays and some of the comedies as well. They teach men a lot, and that's in a lot of the comedies, the women teach the men. Rosalind teaches Orlando what love is really all about, for instance. So they become the wise characters, and then they become the compassionate ones and the models of integrity. And that, to the extent, yes, he's a feminist.

**Q:** Shakespeare's obviously contributed greatly to Western culture and culture in general. The one thing that is of great concern to me is that young people are failing to engage with not just his works but the great works. For most young people, the most experience they have with Shakespeare is Year 10 English, and there's nothing beyond that. And I distinctly remember that the way that we learned about Shakespeare was they had to water it down through *The Lion King*, which is obviously based on *Hamlet*. So how do you get young people to engage and not let his works be forgotten?

**JB:** That's been a problem for quite a long time. I think when I was at school, there weren't many kids who responded well to Shakespeare. We had a wonderful English teacher and gave us all he could, and only two or three of us really responded to it. Otherwise, it was water off a duck's back. I think that's common with a lot of young people. I think the best way is to see a really good performance that really inspires you, and then you want to know more about it.

Teaching Shakespeare is very hard, especially when you pass the book around the room and everybody reads a line. It kills it like that. The only way is through performance, really, which is why Bell Shakespeare



has an education company playing around the schools and talking to the kids and showing different ways you can perform characters. But that's the only way to bring it to life: get the kids on their feet performing it in a production. That's often exciting for them to feel the thrill of acting it. Not just passing the book around, that's awful. But it's true of most of our great literature, it's more and more fading into the past. Recently, they did *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) at the Sydney Theatre Company, and a lot of it was "translated" because they thought Wilde's language is too archaic for a modern audience — Oscar Wilde too archaic! You know, that's when I get worried, when it catches up with us.

**JMcL:** I'm a social work student from the University of Sydney. I'm in my final year, and I suppose social work is an inherently political profession. We're working with people who are experiencing the most micro experience of the big politics that you discussed with leadership and politics more widely. What sort of advice would you give to social workers going into a field that's flooded with political issues on how to engage in that sort of work with the teachings that you found in Shakespeare? Like what sort of advice could you give to social workers going out into that field?

**JB:** Well, I think one of the greatest things and necessary things about acting is that you have to listen and empathise and walk in somebody else's shoes. You have to take on that character. You might not like the character, say, like Richard III, but you have to understand where he's coming from, why

he's so screwed up. So I think a lot of it is about empathy, and you can find a lot of that in Shakespeare, as in other works, of course. But it's there to be found and discussed: how would you approach this character? What is their problem? What's weighing them down? How do we help that character?

**JMcL:** That's wonderful, that's actually perfect. Thank you so much.

### Vote of thanks

**Susan Pond:** The applause says it all. You will agree that John Bell has added one more star to the *Ideas@theHouse* firmament.

Through Shakespeare's lens of scepticism and prodigious insights into life, he has shown us that a man from the 1500s is a man for all time, a man for modern times. A man for modern politics.

I believe that Shakespeare would heartily approve of our Society and this series — *Ideas@theHouse* — given his broad sweep across the humanities and sciences. Remember, Shakespeare was alive before the formation of most of today's learned societies.

I believe that Shakespeare would heartily approve of John Bell. John has shown us tonight why he is such an illustrious theatre personality and why he has been a major influence on the development of Australian theatre during his lifetime. He is an award-winning actor, acclaimed director, risk-taking impresario, passionate educator, inspiring leader and memorable speaker.

Please join me in thanking John for treating us to a rare and unforgettable experience.

