THE RAMSAY CENTRE FOR WESTERN CIVILISATION

Ramsay Lectures

John Bell AO OBE

Founder Bell Shakespeare, actor and Australian Living Treasure

Shakespeare

Prof Simon Haines

We are indeed very privileged this evening to be able to welcome tonight's guest at our final Ramsay event for 2019. I think you could say we've saved the best for last. John Bell has been a major influence on the development of Australian theatre in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. He is one of the nation's most illustrious theatre personalities, an award-winning actor and acclaimed director, a risk-taking impresario, a torch bearing educationalist and speaker on leadership. John has been a key figure in shaping the nation's theatrical identity, as we've come to know it over the past 50 years.

John founded the Bell Shakespeare Company in 1990 and served as its director for 25 years. His productions have included over 15 of Shakespeare's greatest plays, which have been performed to almost two and a half million Australians and tourists from overseas as well. John Bell has received recognition from many bodies for his leadership and his significant contributions to national culture.

He is an Officer of the Order of Australia and the Order of the British Empire. He has Honorary Doctorates of Letters from the Universities of Sydney, New South Wales and Newcastle. And in 1997, he was recognised by the national trust as one of Australia's Living Treasures. So in addition to being born to greatness and achieving greatness, he has had greatness thrust upon him. And as we all also know, he is one of the great Malvolio's of our era as well. So, ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to the stage John Bell.

Prof Simon Haines

So John, what exactly is it about Shakespeare? Why is he still performed all over the world and not by any means only in English speaking countries? I'm just remembering what Cassius says "*In states unborn and accents yet unknown*". He's known and loved. Why has he lasted? Why does he still speak to us so powerfully? So those are the questions in the background.

I know you're a modest kind of chap and you'd rather jump straight into those questions about the big guy rather than talk about yourself. But I would like to begin

just by asking you a few questions about your own career and we'll come back to questions like that later on. You worked with all the great English Shakespearian actors and directors of the later 60s and in the 70s, you worked with Peter Hall, with John Barton, with Trevor Nunn, with Peter Brook, Paul Scofield, the Ian Holm, Glenda Jackson and many others.

What were the standout productions and performances that you saw at close quarters from that era? And it's kind of a multi question in a way. What did you take away from that? What lessons did you carry away to use in your own career as a director and actor from that period? Were there key mentors or models in your mind? And maybe just going back a step, what was the epiphany or the moment when you decided that this was the career for you? So, several questions.

John Bell

Well, I've only got half an hour, but let's start with the epiphany because that's really where we should go from. That happened very early on when I was about 14 years old. Our English teacher marched into the classroom and dumped copies of "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*" on each desk. But instead of getting us to read the play or him reading it for us, he performed the play for us. He was a bit of a ham actor, he was the football coach as well as the English teacher, big bloke with a big voice. Bottom was his favourite role, of course. And he would march up and down the aisles declaiming the words, acting all the roles, describing the sets, the costumes, the lighting, the scenery. He brought the play alive. His Bottom was very convincing. His Titania was less convincing, but he gave it his best shot.

And so we couldn't wait for the next English lesson. This was Shakespeare brought alive in the classroom in a very exciting way. And then he and his successor in the same school took us off to see the Olivier movies in the cinema. If any Shakespeare show came to town, courtesy of the Arts Council, we'd be marched off to the Town Hall to see that. And even though they were pretty tacky old productions in the Maitland Town Hall, to see actors onstage, speaking these words, having fun, that really inspired me. And so at the age of 15, I announced I'm going to be an actor and do Shakespeare for the rest of my life, which is more or less what I've done. So that was the epiphany.

It was a combination of the classroom and an inspired English teacher and then seeing great performers, well, Olivier, particularly in the cinema. So exciting. So thrilling. It was Henry V actually that really turned me on, it was Olivier's movie. We were taken off to the cinema for a matinee to see it. I was bowled over, I couldn't believe in the one sitting that you could get all this heroics and derring do and chivalry and all that sort of stuff, and the comedy, the lowlife comedy and knock about farce, the romance of it all. But also, this language, I'd never known people who could speak so well and speak so beautifully and say such wonderful things. And I walked about a three mile walk home and the whole time I was muttering to myself one phrase over and over again. And it wasn't one of the great heroic speeches. It was a line from the Duke of Burgundy.

In the last scene of the play, he describes how France has been destroyed and torn apart by the war and how all the vines and fields have been destroyed. And it says "*The Coulter rusts that should deracinate such savagery*". And the whole way home, I kept saying to myself over and over again, "*The coulter rusts that should deracinate such savagery*". I didn't know what it meant. I didn't know what a "coulter" was and what "deracinate" meant, but just the sound, the cadence that was something I couldn't get out of my head. So I rushed home, looked up the dictionary, what does a coulter, what does deracinate mean? And then I was on the way, and I think the way into Shakespeare for so many kids is finding out what the words mean, once you know what they mean, then it starts to make sense. But often just the sound and the cadences can hook you even before you know what it means.

So that was the epiphany. And then leading on from that, your next bit was about my time in England. Well, I went to England in 1964 to go to the Bristol Old Vic School. I did six months there, then they sent me off to audition for the RSC in Stratford. And I moved to Stratford and I was fortunate to be in that company, the Royal Shakespeare Company at a time, I think was one of the golden eras. It was the time of Peter Brooke, Peter Hall, Paul Scofield and you mentioned Glenda Jackson, you know, Holm and Richardson are some wonderful actors. I would stand in the wings every night and just watch them and listen to them over and over again, especially Scofield. I just couldn't get over the sound of his voice, what he could do with cadences and metre.

And so on. I just watched and listened every night. On weekends I could get up to London and see Olivier and Richardson and Gielgud at the Old Vic, the national. And that was equally astonishing. I slept on the footpath four times to get to see Olivier as Othello because it was totally sold out, but they kept 10 seats back for every performance and if you got in first you'd get a seat. So I slept on the footpath four times and got in and got the first seat in the back row of the gods every time. Nevertheless, I got to see his Othello four times and that was the single most astonishing performance I remember. Because even though I was so far away and he was right down there, he walked onto the stage. And without any effort, he filled that space without raising his voice, without doing anything extraordinary. He just managed to fill the entire theatre. And that was something one aspires to do, to project one's thoughts, one's feelings that far, that easily….

Prof Simon Haines

Fascinating. Yes. And so what he was projecting was not even just the words or the movements, but just his personality.

John Bell

He was projecting Othello, he was projecting the entire character. And as I say, with such ease. Technique is something that actors have to work hard at and in those days before actors got sucked into television and films so entirely, you had to really

work on your theatre technique. Nowadays you don't. If you're an actor these days, you have to learn film, technique and television technique. If you have a microphone just there, you don't have to try very hard at all or develop much in the way of vocal technique but if you were put on stage you'd be struggling.

Prof Simon Haines

Now your acting and directing alone would have been sufficient to make you a National Treasure but your achievements as a theatrical entrepreneur have brought Shakespeare to a generation or more of Australians who would otherwise never have had the chance to see high quality performances of Shakespeare plays. I know you told me the other day that you weren't the very first person to create a Shakespeare company in Australia, but you have been by far the most successful. So I wonder if you could just talk to us a little bit about whether you see any connection between those two types of creativity, entrepreneurial creativity and artistic creativity.

John Bell

Well I guess I've got some pretty good precedents there, Mr Shakespeare was a writer, actor, director, theatre manager and ran his own company. So there's a good example to follow. Of course, theatre in the 16th century and later was really a matter for actor managers. If we look at, in the 19th century, people like Irving and Keen and so on they all founded their own companies and directed themselves in those roles. But the idea of separating management and artistry, that's become a quite a recent thing. Certainly in Shakespeare's day it was like the old commedia troupes in Italy, the whole family was on the road in covered wagons and they would write the plays, perform them, direct them, run the box office, pull the curtain, sell the pies at interval, the whole lot and, I think, Shakespeare was rather similar.

He founded, he and his 11 companions with his 12 sharers, the Globe Theatre. They hired the actors and paid them and took the box office. But, basically, he was the chief writer and actor in all those plays, of course, he was the director as well. The idea of a director is quite a recent thing too. If you were in Shakespeare's company, he would hand out your parts and you would learn them. It's very like the artisans in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, you know, there are your parts, go home and learn them then come back tomorrow and we'll rehearse it. So the actors were given their parts, they weren't given the whole play because that was too dangerous. They might run off and flog it to a different rival company because there was no copyright. That’s what many of them did.

So we get some pretty shocking pirated editions of Hamlet for instance, someone playing Francisco or Bernardo would run off and sell it to another company. So all you got was your own bit of script and you wouldn't know what was happening in the play until you all got together and read it. “Oh my God, he dies in the end. I didn't get

that bit". So the actors would come together and then Shakespeare himself would tell them what to do and how to behave. Very like Hamlet telling the actors how to behave and don't saw the arms too much, don't be too big and don't be too little either. Hamlet playing the director. So that's what Shakespeare would've done. He would've directed the actors. People were very used to the actor manager - writer running the company.

We have many precedents of that.

You said I was the first to start a Shakespeare company, I wasn't. We had Alan Wilkie's company. I can't think what years that was. In the last century when I was at university, I saw John Alden's company. He was touring Shakespeare around Australia, not as extensively as my company has done, but then in those days they had no subsidy from government. They had no corporate sponsors or donors. It was all done from box office. I really applaud Alan Wilkie and John Alden for the pioneering work that they did in bringing Shakespeare to the country.

Prof Simon Haines

So was fundraising a big issue for you from the beginning?

John Bell

Fundraising took about nine tenths of my time. I think as an artistic director, it's inevitable if you've got to run an arts company, that's where your focus has to be, very largely. And the time leftover is when you do the creative bit.

Prof Simon Haines

We've talked a bit about education already and about schools and your early experiences of a very inspiring teacher. So I'd like to turn now to the huge issue of how you teach Shakespeare, especially in schools but also to some extent in universities, but it's more schools I'm interested in. So many people, unlike you, report negative experiences of doing Shakespeare in school. It's dreary, it's boring. Just a few had a great teacher like you did. What are your thoughts about this? Do you see a continuing place for Shakespeare in school curriculums and if so, what do you think is the best way to arouse students' interest in his amazing, dramatic poetry? I mean, do you think there's a tendency nowadays to run away from teaching Shakespeare at schools? This is just too hard. It's too old fashioned. It's too elitist, whatever. How should we be thinking about bringing Shakespeare to young people in the future?

John Bell

You have several obstacles. The mindset that sees Shakespeare being one of the dead white males for instance, and therefore no longer relevant or desirable to be taught in schools. I don't know how big a faction would be arguing that particular line. But for other teachers who are interested in wanting to teach Shakespeare and other, what you might call difficult, subjects, the curriculum is so crowded, there's so little time and they've got to try and squeeze in as much as they can.

I remember talking to a teacher in a school out West and most of her class was English as second language students and she said "*I have to teach these kids Antony and Cleopatra. I've got 12 hours to teach them and get them ready for their HSC*." Well, it's kind of crazy.

So over-crowded, so little time and kids struggling with English as a second language as well, it's really an uphill battle. Nevertheless, I do hope that Shakespeare stays on the curriculum. I think it is being gradually whitewashed out of many curricula, even at university level. There are other easier, softer options and people see it as either irrelevant or too difficult, but I hope we can keep Shakespeare and other icons there because it is our history, our culture, our past and our present. One way I've found is to get kids performing and speaking the words, once you're on your feet and speaking it, it starts to make sense. Once you start moving around and feeling the emotions, feeling what's happening arguing about characters' intentions and motives and what they're doing, get that discussion going. But if you're on your feet performing it, it's much better than sitting swatting out of a textbook and going through the paraphrase and all that sort of stuff, which is the best way to kill it, I think. I have found with fairly small kids one of the best ways to start them off is Shakespearian insults.

There are so many of them and they are so outrageous and colourful. You have two teams and give them a stack of insults each. You get them to fling the insults across the room at each other and they get really excited by the madness, the exotic language, the energy, the naughtiness of it. That's a good way in, "Cream face, grim face". And there's a lot worse than that.

Prof Simon Haines

It's a mixed audience! Just to pick up on one of the things you were saying about dead white males and out of dateness. Do you think recent changes in the ways a lot of people think about matters such as race and gender and power and colonialism have had an effect on how Shakespeare is read or performed? I mean, is identity politics narrowing the range of ways that we can think about the plays and the poetry?

John Bell

Oh, I think that's true. And I think it goes way, way back. I remember 30 years ago when I was doing *The Tempest* for the first time at the Belvoir Theatre and I met some American students that were out here on a holiday. We got chatting and they said, “What are you doing?” I said, “I'm doing *The Tempest* at the theatre. Do you want to come and see it?” And they said “Oh no, no, no, we don't want to watch that because we've been taught that it's a colonialist propaganda piece and therefore we don't want to see it. We didn't study it because we were told not to, it's colonial propaganda.”

Well, that kind of thing set in many, many years ago. And I think there's still a certain kind of market for that kind of thinking, which is crazy. I mean if anything, I say *The Tempest* is an anti-colonialist piece.

You take someone's land away, you take away his language, his religion, you chain him to a rock and then ply him with alcohol to make him subservient. That's got a familiar ring about it. So I think the piece is anti-colonialist as with all of Shakespeare.

You asked me earlier, why have the plays lasted so long? What is it that keeps them alive. And I think one answer to that is that the plays are not quite finished. He asks lots of questions but doesn't answer them. Unlike say Brecht or George Bernard Shaw and many writers today, writing with a political or social agenda and giving a message, that's the antithesis of what Shakespeare does. He never preaches. He's never didactic. He never gives you a message. And that can be frustrating at times. If you're in the rehearsal room saying, “Well, what does he want?”

What is he saying? What is he trying to tell us? And that's where the debate takes place. But in fact, he's not telling us anything. He's just showing us the way things are. It's up to us to provide the answers to that. So in a sense, the plays live on because each generation provides its own answers to the questions about racism, about sexism, about the patriarchy, about antisemitism. We bring our own attitudes, our own answers to those and play them in a way that makes sense to us. If Shakespeare had locked it down and said, “There's the problem, there's the question and there's the answer”, then you'd stick it in a time capsule and say, “Well, that's what they thought back then.” Or that's QED. But, no, he throws it open to us. What do we think about these big moral issues?

And that debate is what is healthy. And as I say, every generation brings it’s own answer to those questions. The play keeps changing. The text doesn't, the text is the words on the page. That's just the text, the play is what happens when people pick up the text and start performing it? That's where the play happens. So put it this way - the text stays the same, but the play is always new. And that's what I think, is one reason, why Shakespeare will always be fresh and new as long as we have families,

as long as we have ambition and murder and lust, Shakespeare has got a place and things to say to us.

Prof Simon Haines

Indeed, the text stays the same, but it's such wonderful text. Isn't that the other thing that a given metaphor or a given phrase allows so many different readings and interpretations. That even though the text stays the same, it's multidimensional as well.

John Bell

Yes. Like in any good piece of poetry a metaphor.

Prof Simon Haines

Ambiguous

John Bell

Yes, the plays are ambivalent, they're ambiguous. I think perhaps one possible reason for that is that Shakespeare was taught at school to debate, at the Stratford Grammar School, where he went with these three brothers. They were taught to debate and debate in Latin, sometimes in Greek, but more usually debate in Latin and to debate each side of an argument with equal persuasion, which I think is fantastic training for a dramatist, which means you never take sides. You'd argue both sides and then you leave it to the audience or people listening to think, well who was right, who was wrong? Julius Caesar is a perfect case of that. You keep switching allegiances while watching that play. Is Brutus right? Or is he wrong? Is he up himself?

Is Cassius too cowardly, is he right? Who's in the right here? And the answer is nobody. They're all right or wrong at various parts of the story, just like we are in real life. And I think that as long as the plays retain that ambiguity, we shouldn't try and solve them. We should just present the audience with the situation. I suppose *The Merchant of Venice* is a very good case of that. That people can get very angry or turned off or perturbed. This play is antisemitic. Well, in fact, I'd say it's the reverse. We see Shylock as the persecuted one, the victim of prejudice and his daughter is taken from him. She converts to Christianity, she takes all his money, he's spat on by the Christian merchants. I mean, no wonder the guy gets, you know, a little bit feisty.

Of course, Shylock is not a heroic, warm hearted person either. He's not a paragon of virtue, but then nor is Antonio. Put them side by side and you see, this is what happens in a society, this is the all-white club, which is pretty exclusive. They don't

like anybody of another creed or colour coming into their white club. Shylock is just one of the victims of that kind of prejudice. So you look at that society and how it functions and think, yeah, I can relate to that. Our own society has some of those same connotations.

Prof Simon Haines

It's such an interesting example that play. Its anti anti-antisemitic.

John Bell

It is anti anti-antisemitic but you wouldn't say it's pro semitic, but it's just that this is the world we live in. This is what happens when bigotry is let loose and the audience should find it disturbing and challenging. They should argue about it, but they shouldn't come out feeling like “Oh, well that was all right, nice night's entertainment.” No, it should rattle you. And I think Shakespeare goes on with all his plays and the longer he goes on, the more disruptive he gets and the players get more bleak and troublesome and ambivalent. When you get to *Measure for Measure* or *Troilus and Cressida,* it’s a very sort of rancid view of the world that he's putting out there. But one can't deny that it's got a lot of truth about it.

Prof Simon Haines

Othello, I'm thinking of as well, John. What you've just said about *The Merchant of Venice* is also true in spades about that play in the sense that, don't you want as a director and as an actor to preserve as much of that ambiguity as you can in the performances and in the productions rather than closing down on the possibilities, which is what's tended to happen with identity politics ways of doing the plays? I mean, if Othello is just about racism, you miss so much of what's in it, right? Isn't that so, and it seemed as if a sudden rise in the popularity of Othello happened in the 60s and the 70s at the time of the social justice movements in America. And everybody said, well, this is obviously a play about race, but it's about jealousy. It's about so many other things. It's about envy, it's about revenge, it's about vindictiveness, all of those things, isn't that so?

John Bell

Yes, I agree. Yes.

Prof Simon Haines

Sorry, I just wanted to get that off my chest.

John Bell

But you're right in so far as until that time, the 60s and 70s, black actors never played Othello. I think Paul Robeson was the one example of a black actor who got to play Othello. Otherwise everybody, Olivier, Gielgud, Richardson, Scofield, they all blacked up. Which you cannot do at this point in history. Maybe that will turn again in time that will become okay to impersonate other races. Right now it's off the agenda. But it was only in the 60s and 70s that that mould of the classical actor was broken and people started using their own provincial accents and dialects and people of colour started to play, not just Othello but Henry V and Hamlet and King Lear. It became open to everybody.

Prof Simon Haines

And you wrote that way very successfully didn't you? Because you had the view from the start that putting Shakespeare on in Australia didn't mean that you had to have plummy Olivier accents. You could do it to an Australian audience with an Australian accent.

John Bell

It will always be a bone of contention about how you should you speak Shakespeare. How musical, how beautiful should it sound? It's always going to be a point of debate. Up until the 50s, you had to have a certain classical tone and voice, like Redgrave or Olivier or Gielgud and that was the norm. But we have to think back to Shakespeare's own company, it was made up of actors who were Welsh, Irish, Scots, Northumbrian, from Devon, all over the place and they all had their own provincial accents. There was no London accent as such, except Cockney of course was the only one.

But there was no, there was no dictionary as yet until Dr. Johnson came along. So you spoke the way of wherever you came from. And it would have been a wonderful jumble of sounds and dialects and accents from all over the place. It didn't matter what you were playing, you spoke the way of who you were. When I started the Bell Shakespeare Company, I wanted that to be the case too. I deliberately cast actors, a Polish actor and a Greek actor, I forget how many others, but a mix up of different sounds and voices and accents so that we were trying to break that mould of one having to sound like John Gielgud for instance. Well, let's speak the way we are, the way we speak but that doesn't mean that that's the answer in itself.

You still have to speak Shakespeare with vigor and energy and clarity and great articulation and an understanding of the power of the words you're speaking. You can't just rattle them off like you can with a TV script. You've got to invest them with something. That's what's missing, it's not the beautiful sound. It's the lack of appreciation of language, the lack of investment in what the words can do that's at fault. It's nothing to do with beautiful musical voices. It's to do with energy and understanding and communication.

Prof Simon Haines

And understanding the language particularly. I know this is probably a variant of a question that you've been asked a great many times but I'm going to do it anyway. The Shakespeare roles that you've found most or least rewarding, but rather than put it that way you've done at least one Shylock, a Macbeth, Richard III, Coriolanus, Malvolio as we were saying, a Prospero, of course Hamlet and King Lear, Ulysses as well. I think, Troilus. So perhaps I could just ask, are there two or three of those roles that just pop into your mind, into your memory as having required more of you, digging deeper into your resources as an actor than others? Even in some cases, maybe with depths that you still feel you haven't completely plumbed. On the other hand, are there other characters that just seemed like a breeze relatively, a delight to take on because you know where you are and you know how to do this? So the two different kinds of characters?

John Bell

The second one is rare to feel it's just a breeze and, I guess, with ease, that's rare. But I did feel it with Richard III, which I've done that three times. He charms the audience so readily and he speaks to the audience so much and he's not a complicated character. He's very much out for number one. If you see a few gangster movies, you know how to play Richard III and he's delicious and he's funny and he's smart. You can do lots of different things with Richard III. King Lear, on the other hand, is an absolute backbreaker. I've done that three times and I've never got anywhere near where I wanted to go with that one. It absolutely takes everything out of you and gives you nothing back. It's just drains you of every possible energy and emotion and the size of the imagination that requires is astronomical.

And I've never yet seen a King Lear that I found totally satisfactory. It's just so vast. The closest to it I guess was Paul Scofield in Peter Brooks movie of King Lear. It's not a great movie, unfortunately, and Scofield's not well served by it, but they did it on stage before that. I understand from all I've read and heard about it, but that was a really great Lear. But that really is almost unconquerable it's like climbing Everest three times a day or something, it knocks it out of you.

Prof Simon Haines

That's so interesting. I remember that Charles Lamb said in the early 19th century that Lear was un-actable.

John Bell

He's almost right.

Prof Simon Haines

Basically, he felt that you should just read it. This is Lamb, not me. He just thought that the depth of the poetry is so great that you can't convey it on the stage.

John Bell

We've got to go trying you see. That's why one does it because it's so difficult. You want to come back again and again and try. I suspect in some ways we take the play too seriously in the sense that we go all out for bleak and negative and gloomy. In Shakespeare's day on the Globe stage it you would've been done with a lot of colour and very rowdy and noisy and fast moving and that let the tragedy happen later. I think we perhaps approach it with too much fear and too much reverence instead of enjoying the ebullience of it. But I don't know. Perhaps next time I do it, I'll find the answer, but I don't think I'll get that far.

Prof Simon Haines

Yes. That thing of going into the theatre expecting that you have to be totally kind of….

John Bell

Well, yeah, the expectations are so huge.

Prof Simon Haines

Yeah, that's right. Whereas of course that those early productions that you mentioned a little while ago, you had to compete with a noisy audience, the people in the pit possibly talking all the time and standing on hazelnuts and all jammed together and perhaps finding it difficult to hear. So you had to be, it had to be a more of a spectacle.

John Bell

Yes. It's hard, isn't it, to judge that audience. They can’t have been just dumb clucks who threw vegetables at the actors that kind of a kind of myth, you don't write plays that good for an audience who is not listening or not responding. And he kept raising the bar higher and higher every play that he wrote. So obviously the audience was

coming with him and by the time he gets to King Lear he can expect an enormous amount of attention and response from the audience.

So they weren't just a dumb audience. At the same time, he's quite critical of the groundlings, so-called who care for nothing except noise and dumb shows, so he had a certain contempt for them. At the same time, he kept working on them and trying to bring them along. In fact, he often helps them by translating as he goes. In Macbeth he says, for instance, the line is, "*Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand? No, this, my hand will rather the multitudinous seas in incarnadine. Making the green one red*." So for the people sitting in the gallery, all those public servants and Latin scholars, they get the meaning of "*this, my hand will rather the multitudinous seas in incarnadine"* and then for the groundlings,he translates "*making the green one red*". That's what it means. That's the subtitle. So he's very conscious of the nobs in the audience and the Groundlings and played with as big an audience as he can muster.

Prof Simon Haines

There's that lovely bit at the beginning of Julius Caesar where a Senator speaking to a mob of workers says, "Go home you idle workers, get you home". And he's talking to the audience.

John Bell

Well I am glad they didn't

Prof Simon Haines

So who would it have been in the audience? What, what was the social makeup?

John Bell

We know that a lot of women went to the theatre, which is interesting because they didn't in most of Europe, but the English women were noted for being very independent, going shopping, going gossiping, going to the theatre. They got out like ladies do today, go and have lunch. There wouldn't have been too many apprentices. They were working too hard and slogging away and they wouldn't have got a day off to go to the theatre for heaven sake. Nor would the working men who were drudging trying to earn a living. So it would have been largely public servants, law students, lawyers, medical people, professional people. But there were enough of them to fill *The Globe*, which was 2000 people and *The Rose* and *The Red Bull*, and there are about six theatres all operating. And they were all doing business. I don't mean that they were all packed out all the time, but there were enough people going to the theatre to keep all those companies rolling over. So, there was an audience there.

Prof Simon Haines

Yes. I think the population of London in Shakespeare's time was about 200,000 people. And from memory, the number of people who saw plays in those years between the 1570s and the closing of the theatres at the time of the civil war was millions. So in other words, in any given week, tens of thousands of people went to the theatre.

John Bell

I wish they still did.

Prof Simon Haines

But after all, if the only alternative was bull baiting, they probably made a good and the women would not have gone to the bull baiting they would have gone to this. So we have come back to where we started out with this question about what is it about Shakespeare? So what do you find more enthralling about him than any other playwright? Are there still passages that sends shivers down your spine? What might it mean to say he is essential to us, to our conception of ourselves as selves? Is he, like Harold Bloom says, is he the founder, the originator of the modern conception of what it means to be an individual? That's another whole stack of questions.

John Bell

But Harold Bloom says that Shakespeare invented the idea of personality, which is rather a big claim. But if you think back to before Shakespeare, the drama before him, the characters are pretty like stock characters. You get your tyrant King and you're dashing hero and you're comely maiden et cetera. They're all pretty uncomplicated. And the idea was that people were governed by the humours, the chemical makeup of your body or by the stars, that's how your character was determined. Shakespeare was refuting all that. “the fault is not in our stars, dear Brutus, but in ourselves.” He poo pooed the whole idea of character or a character being formed and fixed. Instead he's saying we are a bundle of contradictions and warring impulses and we are totally unpredictable. You can't count on anybody to be consistent because we're just not. I guess Hamlet is the prime example of the modern man who is never fixed for a moment in his circled personality. It just shifts moment to moment according to circumstances. So I guess in that sense Bloom is right.

But your question about what is it that is so special? I think it's the range. It's the range of work and it's the wholeness. If as some gloomy commentators have said that the world is destroyed in the next thousand years, either by nuclear war or despoiling the ecology and we're just left with a barren planet, if an alien were to land

and find two or three survivors huddling in a cave and said to them, “What was it to be human? What was humanity all about?” They can say, “well, there you are, there's a book. The collected works of Shakespeare. That will tell you what humanity was like. The full range of emotions and thoughts and, and aspirations, hopes and despairs, villainy and virtue. It's, it's all there in the plays and particularly in the sonnets.

That's what humanity used to be. That's what it was like.” I think the range is that huge. There's no other writer covers such an enormous range, no matter who you mentioned. They stick to one kind of well-worn piece of territory. Chekhov, for instance, is my second favourite playwright. But he's writing a very small part of human experience with a great genius, but it's very compact. Whereas Shakespeare, not just comical, tragical, historical, pastoral, but within those genres, there are no two comedies that are anything like each other. They're like chalk and cheese. *As You Like It* is nothing like *The Merchant of Venice. Romeo and Juliet* is nothing like *Hamlet.* He creates a different world for each play and they're all convincing worlds. On the one hand, we know when we go to see them that these worlds don't really exist.

The Venice is not really like that, Denmark's not really like that. The Forest of Arden is just a fantasy, but when we're sitting in the theatre, we believe in the worlds he's created. The range of stories and emotions and philosophies he takes us through is extraordinary. That's why he's unique, it's simply that the imagination is so boundless as is the curiosity.

Prof Simon Haines

I'm just thinking of something Iris Murdoch says about Shakespeare and Tolstoy, which is that these are the two great demonstrators of the reality of other lives. So you watch a Shakespeare play, you read a Tolstoy novel and you are overwhelmed by these real lives that they've imagined. And I'm wondering if we can connect this to what you were saying earlier on about why he's not like George Bernard Shaw for example, because Shakespeare keeps himself out. All you've got is the lives and therefore he showing you as a watcher of the play, how to keep yourself out too.

John Bell

Yes. I think that's why we are so bent on trying to find a biography of Shakespeare. We want to know what it was really like because as you say, he's invisible. He's the invisible man. He never tells us what he thinks or feels. For every argument there's a counter argument. Totally unlike Shaw or Brecht who tell you exactly what you have to think and that this is the message. It's kind of frustrating that we don't know what he was but on the other hand it's also a blessing. If we did know, then we'd start shaping the productions and the players to fit our image of that man. The fact that he's totally ambivalent and invisible means that we'll never know and we will have to go on seeing the plays through our eyes rather than his in a way. The sonnets too, you see there's a whole life story in the sonnets. It's a fantasy, it's a

fiction and yet it's so convincing. You'd swear this really happened, but I'm convinced it didn't. So it's a drama he made up.

Prof Simon Haines

So with the sonnets, I mean people don't often say this, but they like to think of the sonnets as the one glimpse that you have of what the real Shakespeare was like in this love triangle. Then you're saying that even they are dramatic.

John Bell

Yes, yes. To think that there was a true-life story and that he had this sort of love affair with a dark lady and perhaps with a young aristocrat is such nonsense. He was far too respectable and anxious about his respectability to publish anything like that as an autobiography. It would have caused a huge scandal if people had thought it was true. He was far too conscious of his social standing and people saw it at the time as a fiction, as a parody of other sonnet sequences with the lover pleading with the lady to come across and will she or won't she. Then he throws a third character in to stir up the drama. But as I said, there's no way he would ever have committed to paper that kind of story about himself. What would his wife have thought for a start?

This is totally impossible, but it's a great drama and it does explore every aspect of love. That's why I think you have those three characters because you get every aspect of love and sexuality explored and played with in the sonnets.

Prof Simon Haines

……we have to wind up and we want some time for canopies and drinks as well. I am sure other people would like to ask you questions once we've moved away. So for the time being

"Our revels now are ended. These are actors"

Prof Simon Haines and John Bell

"As I foretold you, were all spirits and"

John Bell

"Are melted into air, into thin air:

And, like the baseless fabric of this vision

The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.”