

## Inaugural Meeting of the APPG on Shakespeare

Lords Committee Room 1, November 28<sup>th</sup> 2024, 1-3pm

The proceedings of the meeting were translated into BSL as it happened by Becky Barry and Hahna Ahmed.

### Introduction

In the interregnum before the election of an MP as the APPG's new Chair, Prof Michael Dobson (Director of the Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham, and extra-parliamentary secretary of the APPG) called the meeting to order. He reminded those assembled of its history to date: its foundation, under the leadership of James Morris, in 2022; the staging of *Julius Caesar* at the Speaker's House in July 2023 as part of Parliament's celebration of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the First Folio; the focus-group event 'Why Shakespeare in Education?' held at the Shakespeare North Playhouse on April 4 2024 with Frank Cottrell-Boyce, the Children's Laureate, as a facilitator; and the projected follow-up inquiry into the state of Shakespeare at all levels of the education system (originally scheduled for June 2024, but indefinitely postponed when the general election was called). He also spoke of the APPG's objectives ('to promote Shakespeare's work in the community, exploring the teaching and learning of Shakespeare in educational settings; embedding accessibility in Shakespeare's works as staged, translated, adapted, and performed, including in British Sign Language; and to explore Shakespeare's literary, cultural, and performance legacy as part of the intangible cultural heritage of the world'). He explained that the APPG, which recognizes that Shakespeare is a unique national resource, seeks to provide a two-way channel of communication between the state and Shakespeare, supplying Shakespearean expertise and on occasion performance to Parliament in a bid to improve the quality of public debate, and providing stakeholders from all areas of Shakespearean activity across the UK with the opportunity to inform relevant areas of policy. He pointed out that the particular fields of policy to which this APPG was especially relevant, and which it intended to pursue as defining areas of its activity, were: arts, culture and heritage; education; community, accessibility and inclusion; and international relations. He introduced some of the speakers who would be addressing these topics later in the meeting, and spoke briefly, under the last of these headings, about the current proposal to have the works of Shakespeare – especially their performance worldwide – listed by UNESCO as part of the world's intangible cultural heritage.

### Performances

The performer, impresario and anthologist Allie Esiri then prefaced the performances given by a distinguished company of volunteer actors, as follows:

My name is Allie Esiri and I'm the curator of *Shakespeare For Every Day of the Year*. I'm honoured have been brought in by Michael Dobson to help create the performance part of today. We are enormously grateful to the phenomenal cast for giving up their time for this important APPG and for appearing pro bono. It's my great pleasure to introduce you to the actors – Andrew French, Henry Goodman, William Grint, Rory Kinnear, Sule Rimi, Hugh Ross, Samantha Spiro, Dame Janet Suzman, Dame Harriet Walter, and Olivia Williams -- and our BSL interpreter Becky Barry.

We know that Shakespeare and his acting troupe performed for Elizabeth I and subsequently James I and their courts at Whitehall, so it's pleasingly fitting that we are continuing the tradition in the postcode of SW1.

Anthologizers before me have demonstrated that Shakespeare extracts can stand alone as works of art in themselves. After all, entire plays don't concern themselves with before and after, and in this sense these extracts are no different. Was Hamlet an untroubled, cheery child before his father died? How are we to know that the young lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* live happily ever after? Soliloquies can give us a fully fleshed out moment of a life, and they have been chosen today for a variety of reasons, as we will see. Let's begin with a soliloquy from *Hamlet*, performed by Rory Kinnear.

Rory Kinnear prefaced his performance of 'To be, or not to be' by pointing out its relevance to the then-impending debate on the Assisted Dying Bill.

Dame Harriet Walter prefaced her performance of Henry IV's appalled vision of his son's future disorderly reign ('O my poor kingdom....') by saying the speech had come vividly to mind as she and her American husband had struggled with the news of the recent US election result.

Hugh Ross, noting Shakespeare's perennial accuracy about politics, performed Cassius's egalitarian appeal to Brutus from the second scene of *Julius Caesar*.

Sule Rimi spoke of the universal applicability of Shakespeare's eloquence about death, and performed Claudio's 'Ay, but to die...', from *Measure for Measure*.

William Grint, reminding his audience that BSL is an officially recognized language and that Shakespeare is no less vital to Deaf spectators than to hearing ones, performed Macbeth's 'Is this a dagger...?' soliloquy in British Sign Language.

Dame Janet Suzman, noting the resonances she found in the role of Volumnia with her own experiences of parenting a son, performed Volumnia's instructions to Coriolanus before his public confrontation with the tribunes.

Henry Goodman, with Andrew French as Cromwell, performed Wolsey's 'Farewell, a long farewell to all my greatness' from *Henry VIII*, a perennial reminder, he pointed out, of the fragility of what political power may induce leaders to regard as 'greatness.'

Olivia Williams, Samantha Spiro, Rory Kinnear and Sule Rimi performed the quarrel among the four lovers from act IV of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Olivia Williams pointed to the inequalities in access to high-quality Shakespeare provision between elite schools and the state sector.

Andrew French, remembering how his working-class Black mother in south London had bought copies of *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Tempest* and had read them to him when he was very young, performed Prospero's 'Our revels now are ended'.

## **Election of Officers**

Dr Abigail Rokison-Woodall (Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham) then conducted the (unanimous) election of Manuela Perteghella as Chair.

Manuela Perteghella (LibDem) then took over the running of the meeting.

James Wild (Con), Neil Coyle (Lab) and Baroness Bonham-Carter (LibDem) were elected as Vice Chairs. James Wild expressed his satisfaction about the recent archaeological discoveries at the King's Lynn Guildhall, the oldest continuously-used theatre in the UK (which neighbours the home of

Shakespeare's colleague Robert Armin, and which was almost certainly a venue when Shakespeare's own company were on tour), which is located in his constituency.

Manuela as Chair addressed participants and audience, thanked the performers for sharing their creative and artistic practice and their thoughts on Shakespeare's texts chosen for the event. Manuela highlighted the importance of theatre making, of Shakespeare for all, of the role of Shakespeare in education and beyond. She also talked about the role of translation and adaptation in progressing the 'Fortleben' (afterlife) of Shakespeare's body of work in different languages and cultures.

#### **Panel discussion:**

A panel discussion, chaired by Dr Abigail Rokison-Woodall, then ensued, looking at key areas of the APPG's interests.

Dr Abigail Rokison-Woodall herself (Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham) spoke as follows:

One of the things that I would like to see this All Party group focus on is access and inclusion with regards to Shakespeare. I am going to say something about a couple of projects that I am leading.

For the past few years Tracy Irish and I have been running a project – 'Signing Shakespeare'. This started as a joint project between the University of Birmingham and the RSC and since then we have worked with schools for the Deaf and teachers for the Deaf around the country. We have seen Deaf children engage deeply with Shakespeare's work and give fabulous performances. The project is inspired by the fact that although Shakespeare is a compulsory author on the National Curriculum no bespoke resources exist to help Deaf children who use sign language to access his work. This means that many are excluded from GCSE English Literature, which impacts on their futures – in particular their chances of going to University. We have worked with Deaf actors to produce films in sign language which accompany a bespoke scheme of work. We have interest from Pearson education in rolling out the resources more widely, but there still remains the issue that BSL is treated essentially as a foreign language in UK education. If you are in Wales and speak Welsh you can take your GCSEs in Welsh, your exam papers will be in Welsh, but if your first language is British Sign Language – also a native language of the British Isles – you still have to take your exams in written English. We'd like to see this change.

The other project which we are running with the RSC – which I am leading with Josefa MacKinnon – Creative Programme Director, Access and Inclusion at the RSC – is to make the Shakespearean text more accessible to Deaf actors who are often excluded from auditions, read-throughs and aspects of rehearsal. We have the ambition of producing an app of the Complete Works of Shakespeare in British Sign Language. This has been done for the Bible and the Qur'an and we think that the Complete Works of Shakespeare should be next.

These projects require financial as well as technical support. We need to get the word out there that these things are needed, and that some groups are still excluded from accessing the work of Shakespeare. With the BSL Act of 2022 we all have a responsibility to promote and facilitate British Sign Language in all areas of life, and Shakespeare is no exception.

Tamara Harvey (Co-Artistic Director, RSC) discussed the importance of inclusivity to the mission of the RSC, and the importance of Shakespeare to audiences of all kinds and in all regions of the UK.

Jacqui O'Hanlon, MBE (Head of Education, RSC) seconded these remarks and spoke of the importance of Shakespeare's place as the only author studied mandatorily across British schools, and the scope Shakespeare classes provide for creativity and for the discussion of significant issues.

Evonne Bixter (Shakespeare North Playhouse) provided a summary of the April event held at Shakespeare North:

The event held at Shakespeare North Playhouse on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2024, entitled "Why Shakespeare in education?" was an opportunity for the 5 Shakespeare organisations; Shakespeare North Playhouse, The Globe, Royal Shakespeare Company, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and The Shakespeare Institute to invite thought leaders, education specialists and creatives to discuss the relevance of Shakespeare in today's society.

The event was a response to the challenges we face within our sectors due to the historic lack of sufficient investment in arts and culture, and how this has been compounded by education policies that devalue the arts and creativity at a time when these are the skills our young people desperately need.

A panel discussion was followed by two workshop discussions, one asking how the 5 Shakespeare organisations can support education providers in exploring Shakespeare, and another asking what levers we need to activate to support meaningful engagement with Shakespeare's work. Headlines from the event were: -

- Examples of PSHE and human rights curriculum links are vast in Shakespeare's work. These could be highlighted and shared with education providers.
- In challenging times, it is imperative that arts and cultural organisations work with partners in charity and industry sectors to ensure target audiences are reached and maximum impact is achieved.
- The value of creativity and creative process needs to be re-instilled in the classroom and should start in teacher training.
- There is a need to influence policy makers by demonstrating the huge benefits of creativity on metacognition, innovation, health and wellbeing, confidence, resilience, employability and those with SEND. This awareness raising could also influence developments in the Ofsted inspection criteria.
- Funding for schools to visit external arts and cultural venues would be hugely helpful in helping them to overcome barriers to engagement.
- Gather political support for the National campaign for theatre for every child.
- Advocate for the study of English and English lit in response to the decline in HE courses.

Rachael North (Acting CEO, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust) seconded the views of other speakers, and spoke in particular about the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust's annual 'Shakespeare Week' project of bringing Shakespearean texts and activities to younger students across the country.

Karl-Matthias Klause (Deputy German Ambassador):

It is a privilege to be here, thank you. I am Karl-Matthias Klause, deputy ambassador of Germany in the UK but more important here also a board member of the German Shakespeare Society.

In particular the German Shakespeare Society is grateful for the educational work of King Charles when in his speech to the German Bundestag last year he celebrated as a British-German link the founding of the German-Shakespeare-Society in 1864.

I am here to bring to you attention the international dimension of William Shakespeare in the context of UNESCO. Shakespeare found early lovers in Germany in the 18th century: Today Shakespeare is the most performed playwright and has long been considered a German classic author.

As you all know, Shakespeare goes far beyond Britain or Germany. In the language of politics and business, Shakespeare is – on top of everything else - a global asset, a soft power asset. It is an asset for Britain, but more: Shakespeare is an asset to the world, an asset for peace starting in the minds, as longed for and promoted by UNESCO, the global forum for international cooperation in the arts, sciences and education. For humankind as a “supreme master of empathy” as a “step into goodness” – as it has been put. Performing Shakespeare is a bridge that links cultures, continents, time, ages and includes all.

I would like to point to a German-British initiative to list the reading and performance of the works of William Shakespeare as an intangible cultural heritage of the world. For the actual proposal, the lead nonetheless has to be taken by the UK and its Shakespearean institutions, mainly and foremost the Shakespeare Institute of the University of Birmingham.

The UK has ratified and deposited the Convention on intangible cultural heritage in March 2024, so this application can also be a truly all party initiative.

James Morris, formerly MP for Halesowen and Rowley Regis, founding chair of the APPG on Shakespeare during the last Parliament, expressed his satisfaction that the APPG has been relaunched, and spoke of his interests in the quality of public discourse and its connection to the quality of education. He also spoke of his hopes that further performances of Shakespeare might take place at the Palace of Westminster.