Shakespeare in Today’s World: Exploring the Timeless Relevance of Shakespeare’s Masterpieces

The purpose of this course is exploring why Shakespeare’s masterpieces continue to remain relevant centuries after they were written. Tackling these works from the perspective of a director and actor – the class aims to reveal what has fascinated and inspired artists for centuries and the timeless paradoxes, inherent in these classics, that lie at the core of the human condition.

The first two courses will delve into Hamlet – probing each act and revealing how directors and actors must wrestle with the script. The course will be paired with performed soliloquies by the lecturer and a probing of the script from a directorial lens, revealing how artists wrestle with this piece and why the piece has inspired directors and actors alike for centuries.

Weeks 3 and 4 will shift to Othello – and take a similar approach, unearthing the paradox at the heart of the play and revealing why this play endures and continues to speak to our conceptions of good and evil, angel and devil.

In the final two weeks the class will focus on Macbeth in a similar manner. The lecturer will currently be in rehearsals for a production of Macbeth that he is directing – and will enrich the course with insights into the current concept, process, and challenges of the piece while continuing to delve into the paradoxes of the script.

In the exploration of each play – the overarching question, “Why do this play here, today, now?” will guide the lecture tying the history of the play, Shakespeare’s intentions with what continues to resonate about our nature and society to today’s world.

Week 1 – Hamlet Act I & II

- **The Text**
  - Context of the play when it was written
  - Historical context that Shakespeare was playing with when he wrote it
  - Who and what is the Ghost? Why is this significant?
  - What are the symbols and themes that Shakespeare affords us right away – how are we to make sense of the opening lines of the play with the last lines of the play?

- **The Actor**
  - Why has this play enraptured and inspired artists for centuries? What is the ‘mystery’ the play’s core?
  - What are the challenges in each scene for the actors?

- **The Director**
  - How does a director look at and wrestle with this text?
  - What are the challenges in each scene for the director?
  - Directorial choices – who is the protagonist? Who is the antagonist? – Why might this be more complicated than it might first seem? What is Hamlet attempting to achieve?

Week 2 – Hamlet Act III, IV & V

- **The Text**
  - The Mousetrap – where, how and why do the players appear? How does this relate to the ghost – and Shakespeare himself?
  - Gertrude doesn’t see the Ghost…
• Ophelia’s madness – drowning
• The Revenger’s Tragedy and Laertes’s arc

The Director
• Artistic choices and consequences – what are casting choices that can be made in Hamlet that will help articulate a director’s vision?
  o Hamlet the Zealot – ‘must be cruel to be kind’
  o What to make of Hamlet sailing away on a ship only to fight pirates?
  o The significance of the clowns as gravediggers
  o The final duel and the poisoned goblet – why the play ends with Fortinbras and his enigmatic line ‘bid the soldiers shoot.’

Week 3 – Othello Act I, II, III

The Text
• What pre-conceived notions of good and evil and race was Shakespeare playing with in the Elizabethan era
• The evil of Iago – and the motif of the Devil in this play – and its contagion. Why is this notion of the Devil central to the timelessness of this piece and why it has endured.

The Actor
• Breakdown of soliloquies of Iago – and why Shakespeare is having Iago speak directly to the audience

The Director
• How and why Othello is open to such a jealous rage
• The significance of Emilia, Desdemona and the handkerchief
• The significance of Cyprus in this world – why is the play set here

Week 4 – Othello Act IV, V

The Text
• Exploration of Act IV and Act V
  o What is the tragedy of this play?
  o The power of the domestic sphere of this play about warriors

The Actor
• Othello and Desdemona death scene

The Director
• Following the handkerchief in this play – its significance and symbolism
• How does the devil manifest in this play
• The symbolism and significance of the marital bed being the setting for Act V
• What part of this is a ‘morality play’ – and how is Shakespeare problematizing our sentimentalism

Week 5 – Macbeth Act I, II, III

The Text
• What is Shakespeare aiming at with the notion of fate?
• Why write a play about Ambition?

The Actor
Who and what are the witches – why do they exist in this world? What is their metaphysical importance to this masterpiece?

What is the significance of Banquo in this world and his relationship to Macbeth.

Who is Lady Macbeth – why does Shakespeare render her the way he does?

The Director

What is the importance of setting this play in Scotland?

Why is Macbeth seeing a dagger before him…?

A breakdown of each act and each scene -

Week 6 – Macbeth Act IV, V & Conclusion of the class

The Text

What actually happens at the end with MacDuff – who wins and why?

What is the poison of this world – what is Shakespeare saying about the human soul and how can this be rendered onstage?

The Actor

Macbeth soliloquy – ‘Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow’ and Lady Macbeth ‘out damned spot’

The Director

Continuing to work through the Acts IV & V of Macbeth – what are the questions a director and actor have to answer, problems they have to solve

Conclusion

What are the major takeaways from this class – how has Shakespeare captured the essence of paradoxes at the core of our nature that we continue to play out throughout human history and what wisdom is there to be gleaned from his masterworks.