

## **Shakespeare in Today's World: Exploring the Timeless Relevance of Shakespeare's Masterpieces**

The purpose of this course is exploring why Shakespeare's plays 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.

This course will focus on how *Richard III*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure* and *The Tempest* speak to our current moment of reforming our world as we (hopefully) emerge from a pandemic and an unfathomably tumultuous 2020. We will explore how the themes of renewal, re-order, restoration and justice deeply inform Shakespeare's works and how theatre artists use these masterpieces and 'problem plays' to create meaning from moments such as the one we are living in today.

The first two courses will delve into *Richard III* – probing each act and revealing how directors and actors must wrestle with the script, and how/why this script speaks to our current moment. Moreover, we will explore the complicity of those in Richard III's world, how Richard's drive to become king seeds his downfall and how the content of Richard's psyche is interwoven into a theatrical form within the play. 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 & 4 will shift to *Merchant of Venice* and take a similar approach, delving into this controversial work in Shakespeare's canon. We will explore the cycles of hatred, the argument for mercy, the conundrum of justice, the anti-Semitism in Shakespeare's world and how Shakespeare did and did not challenge the prejudice of his day.

Weeks 5 & 6 will shift to *Measure for Measure* and continue the exploration of how Shakespeare advocates for mercy and challenges Puritan self-righteousness. Often considered one of Shakespeare's 'problem plays,' we will explore the ways in which the unresolved issues of this play offer artists incredible opportunities for interpretation and why these 'problems' are central to the play and our own time.

The final two weeks the class will focus on what is often considered Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*, and take a similar approach, delving into the apparent illusion of justice that Shakespeare offers. We will discuss the provocative questions Shakespeare hides in this play about whether we are creatures of monstrosity or magic and how the two are often intertwined throughout history and continues today.

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 and Shakespeare's intentions with what continues to resonate about our nature and society to today's world.

### **Week 1 – Richard III Act I, II & III**

- The Text
  - Context of the play when it was written
  - Historical context that Shakespeare was playing with when he wrote it
  - How is theatre utilized within Richard's identity and how is this interwoven throughout the play?
  - 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
  - A monologue from the prequel (Henry VI) to Richard III & how this informs playing Richard
  - 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 Richard attempting to achieve? What is Richard’s tragedy? How do all of these questions lend themselves to directorial choices?

## Week 2 – **Richard III Act IV & V**

- The Text
  - The significance of the convoluted plot developments
  - How does Richard achieving the crown sow the seeds of his tragedy?
  - What is the climax of our play?
  - How do we understand the end of the play?
- The Actor
  - How does an actor wrestle with the drama of Richard III’s identity crisis
  - What choices does an actor make?
  - How does an actor construct a layered journey throughout a play?
- The Director
  - Artistic choices and consequences – what are casting choices that can be made in Richard III that will help articulate a director’s vision?
  - How does Richard III’s actions affect the world of our play?
  - How does the action of the play, Richmond’s arrival offer re-ordering to the world of the play? How does this relate to our world today?

## Week 3 – **The Merchant of Venice Act I, II & III**

- The Text
  - It has been said that Theatre is always an exercise in the ‘Recognition of the Other’ – how does this particular play reveal this? And, how does it do it in unexpected ways?
  - Why is this play a romantic comedy and how does that affect the form?
  - How do we make sense of money in this world?
- The Actor
  - How are we to understand the action of the play?
  - How does one begin to undertake a role like Shylock?
  - What are the other roles in this play that are a challenge to the actor and why?
- The Director
  - How do you begin to work on a play like this?
  - What do we mean when we speak of Shakespeare’s ‘problem plays’
  - How is justice interwoven throughout this text and how does this affect the direction?
  - What directorial choices are available in a post-2020/covid-19 world?

#### Week 4 – **The Merchant of Venice, Act IV & V**

- The Text
  - What form does the journey of this play take? Why did Shakespeare make this decision?
  - What is the role of mercy in this play and its relationship to Justice?
  - How do we make sense of anti-Semitism in this play and Shakespeare's world?
  - How do we make sense of the ending?
- The Actor
  - How does an actor tackle Shylock's famous speech?
  - What are the challenges for an ensemble in this piece?
  - What are the challenges for the lesser-known characters in this play?
- The Director
  - How does a director illuminate what is central, timeless and relevant about this play?
  - What choices does a director have to make about the world of this play and how does that relate to an audience's experience of the production?

#### Week 5 – **Measure for Measure, Act I, II, III**

- The Text
  - How does this play explore moralism?
  - Why is this play considered a 'problem play' and how does it afford the director an opportunity?
  - What role does Puritanism play in *Measure for Measure* and what role did it play Shakespeare's world?
  - What is the role of justice in this play and how does it differ from *The Merchant of Venice*?
- The Actor
  - What are the choices that actors make during the course of this play?
  - How does Isabella play a particular scene with Angelo?
- The Director
  - What directorial choices (casting, staging, set design) are available because of the tensions inherent in this play?
  - What are the consequences of particular directorial choices that are made and how they lead to other choices?

#### Week 6 – **Measure for Measure, Act IV, V**

- The Text
  - How does 'disguise' and double casting play a central role in this play?
  - What is the climax of the play?
  - What are we to make of the Duke's disguise as a friar and how this is central to the questions in the play?
- The Actor
  - What challenges emerge with the last few scenes in the play?
- The Director
  - How does a director find their way within this 'problem play'?
  - What are the central decisions a director must make and what are the consequences?
  - A breakdown of the final scenes and the decisions and choices therein

## Week 7 – The Tempest, Act I, II & III

- The Text
  - Why is this play considered a masterpiece?
  - Why did Shakespeare write this play as his last?
  - What are the themes inherent in this play that resonate today?
- The Actor
  - What are the challenges a role like Caliban offers an actor?
  - What are choices actors are faced with in specific moments throughout the text?
- The Director
  - Working through the Acts I, II & III of *The Tempest* – what are the questions a director and actor have to answer, problems they have to solve?
  - How does a director arrive at a ‘directorial vision’ of this world and how does this relate to our lived experience today?

## Week 8 – The Tempest Act IV, V & Conclusion of the class

- The Text
  - What are the choices Shakespeare makes in terms of structure and how this relates to the content of the play?
  - Why did Shakespeare choose this cast of characters to tell this story? What do they afford us?
  - What role does magic play in this world and why?
  - Who is the protagonist and who is the antagonist?
- The Actor
  - What are the choices that an actor has playing Ariel, Prospero, Miranda, and others?
- The Director
  - What is the central challenge of directing this play? What are the pitfalls? How do you challenge pre-conceived notions about the text? What are radical choices that illuminate the ways in which *The Tempest* continues to speak to America in 2021?
- *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.