

## **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.

This course will focus on how *Hamlet*, *Coriolanus* and *King Lear* speak to our current unprecedented moment of an impending Presidential election, global warming and a pandemic. We will explore how the themes of apocalypse, revelation and plague deeply inform Shakespeare's masterpieces and how theatre artists use these masterpieces to create meaning from moments such as the one we are living in today.

The first two courses will delve into *Hamlet* – probing each act and revealing how directors and actors must wrestle with the script, and how/why this script speaks to our current moment. 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 4 and 5 will shift to *Coriolanus* and take a similar approach, delving into this lesser-known work in Shakespeare's canon. The lecturer played the title role in *Coriolanus* and will use his experience in this role to illuminate what is beneath Shakespeare's challenging piece. This play was also written during a plague in Shakespeare's time and the metaphor and reality of the plague exists inherent in the play as well.

In the final three weeks the class will focus on *King Lear* – and take a similar approach, delving into the paradox disorder and renewal at the core of the play that is playing out in our own lives 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, Shakespeare's intentions with what continues to resonate about our nature and society to today's world.

### **Week 1 – Hamlet Act I**

- 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 II & III**

- The Text
  - Hamlet/Ophelia love scene – what is happening?
  - 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...
- The Actor
  - Hamlet's Arc and Claudius' prayer...
- The Director
  - Artistic choices and consequences – what are casting choices that can be made in Hamlet that will help articulate a director's vision?
  - Hamlet the Zealot – 'must be cruel to be kind'
  - How does this relate to the theme of apocalypse? What is Hamlet's role here?

### Week 3 – Hamlet Act IV and V

- The Text
  - Ophelia's madness – drowning
  - The Revenger's Tragedy and Laertes's arc
  - Whose play is it in Act IV?
- The Actor
  - How are we to understand Claudius and Gertrude's relationship & journey?
- The Director
  - What to make of Hamlet sailing away on a ship only to fight pirates?
  - The significance of the clowns as gravediggers
  - The final duel and the poisoned goblet – why the play ends with Fortinbras and his enigmatic line 'bid the soldiers shoot.'
  - What does this play look and feel like post-Covid-19 in America?

### Week 4 – Coriolanus, Act I, II & III

- The Text
  - What form does this play take – a political drama, a tragedy?
  - What is Shakespeare wrestling with in terms of political power and through the role of Coriolanus?
  - Why is this play considered 'a problem play?'
  - What is it about the character of Coriolanus that resonates with us today?
  - What does this play reveal for us about our relationship to leaders and our leaders relationship to the people?
- The Actor
  - What are the challenges an actor playing Coriolanus must face?
  - What are the challenges for an ensemble in this piece?
  - What is the significance of Aufidius in the 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 – Coriolanus Act IV, V

- The Text
  - Exploration of Act IV and Act V
  - What is the tragedy of this play?
  - What is the significance of the mother/son relationship in the play?
- The Actor
  - Coriolanus / Volumnia scene
- The Director
  - How does the tyrant manifest itself in this play?
  - What choices does the director have to make at the end of the play – how are we to feel about Coriolanus?
  
  - The significant relationship between the people and Coriolanus and the journey of this relationship

## Week 6 – King Lear Act I, II,

- The Text
  - Why does King Lear divide his kingdom?
  - Why are the pre-conceived notions we come to this play with, how can we read it anew?
  - What is the central paradox of this script – why has it inspired artists for centuries?
  - What does this script say about disorder and renewal? The Apocalypse? Revelation? And a plague?
  - How does this play relate to Oedipus?
- The Actor
  - What are the challenges for the actor playing King Lear?
  - What is the significance of the Fool?
  - How does blindness and madness and theatricality become a core aspect of this play – and what does this mean for the actor?
- The Director
  - How does a director begin to tackle the enormity of King Lear?
  - What are the central decisions a director must make and what are the consequences?
  - A breakdown of various scenes in the first three acts and the decisions and choices therein

## Week 7 – King Lear Act III & IV

- The Text
  - What actually happens at the end of King Lear? Why did Shakespeare choose these final lines?
  - How does redemption play a core part in this play? What is re-ordered after all the disorder? Or, is it? Does renewal come? And, if not, why not?
- The Actor
  - What is the journey that *King Lear* goes on – and how does this relate to judeo-Christian symbolism? And, what does this mean for the actor playing him?
- The Director

- Continuing to work through the Acts III & IV of *King Lear* – what are the questions a director and actor have to answer, problems they have to solve?

### Week 8 – **King Lear Act V & Conclusion of the class**

- The Text
  - What actually happens at the end of *King Lear*? Why did Shakespeare choose these final lines?
  - How does redemption play a core part in this play? What is re-ordered after all the disorder? Or, is it? Does renewal come? And, if not, why not?
- The Actor
  - What is the journey that *King Lear* goes on – and how does this relate to judeo-Christian symbolism? And, what does this mean for the actor playing him?
- The Director
  - Continuing to work through the Acts IV & V of *King Lear* – 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.