## SHAKESPEARE ANNIVERSARY

## **INSIGHT**



## THE BARD PLAYS ON

Shakespeare is as relevant today as he was when he shuffled off this mortal coil in 1616, writes **Phil Brown** 

E DIED four centuries ago but the English playwright William Shakespeare is still very much with us.

In fact, he has never been more popular and as the world prepares to commemorate the 400th anniversary of his death next Saturday, it's worth asking why the bard of Avon, who was born in a Warwickshire market town in 1564 and died in 1616, is still so popular.

He is the most famous and most performed playwright in history. His plays are constantly performed (Queensland Theatre Company opens a production of his much-loved rom-com Much Ado About Nothing next weekend), his work is still studied widely and everyday conversation is

peppered with phrases from his plays.

Mention "cold comfort" and you're quoting The Taming of The Shrew; "one fell swoop" is from Macbeth; wildgoose chase" from Romeo and Juliet and anyone declaring that "love is blind" is quoting The Merchant of Venice.

But there's more to Shakespeare than his catchphrases.

His work has lasted because of his ability to get to the heart of the matter in human relations without ever lecturing or hectoring, says Peter Holbrook, professor of Shakespeare and English Renaissance literature at The University of Queensland.

He is one of the world's leading Shakespeare scholars and chair of the International Shakespeare Association, which holds a world congress every five years.

It was last held in Brisbane in 2006. The last one was in Prague and Holbrook will preside over the next in Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon this July and August.

He says Shakespeare is "continually refreshed by new generations approaching his work".

"One of the keys to his genius was that he was a little elusive and his work is still open to interpretation," Holbrook says.

"The critic Frank Kermode talked of classics being 'patient of interpretation' in that they lend themselves to different ways of thinking.

"Shakespeare's plays are full of ambiguity and ambivalence and that leaves space for interpretation and means they are constantly dynamic." Holbrook says that Shakespeare's own views on issues are unclear, that he leaves it to others to make up their minds and that keeps them fresh. And in Elizabethan England he challenged the dominant paradigm.

"In The Merchant of Venice for example we get Shakespeare breaking with stereotypes about Jews and we find out what it might be like to be a Jew in Christian society in Venice," Holbrook says. "That was very progressive stuff at the time.

"Most famously he gave us a black man in *Othello* who turns out not to be a devilish villain. The devil in the play, Iago, is white. Shakespeare was very preoccupied with inequality and in *Henry V* there's a speech depicting the horrors of war."

hakespeare's themes of love, war and politics still resonate today. Film and stage adaptations have sometimes contemporised

the works, rarely tampering too much with the text.

A perfect example of such modernisation was an African production of Verdi's opera *Macbeth* presented at last year's Brisbane Festival.

It was a riff on the bard's famous Scottish play set in the Congo and dealt with warlords, corrupt businessmen and refugees.

One of the most popular modern adaptations is Australian director Baz Luhrmann's 1996 Romeo + Juliet, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes which swaps 14th century Verona for modern urban Verona Beach. Holbrook says Luhrmann "got Shakespeare" although he prefers Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 version of that romantic tragedy.

Shakespeare still pervades popular culture. Several episodes of *The Simpson's* feature Shakespearean references while best selling Australian children's author Andy Griffiths gave us a modern take with his book *Just Macbeth!* which was produced on stage by Bell Shakespeare.

The 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death is being marked globally and in Queensland a slew of events are planned including a month-long film festival at the Gallery of Modern Art.

The University of Queensland is presenting lectures to celebrate Shakespeare's legacy and the annual 4MBS Brisbane Shakespeare Festival in September-October will also mark the anniversary year.

ext weekend, the Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble (QSE) will be putting on half-hour versions of Shakespearean tragedies at the Davies Park Farmers' Market at West End and The Gap Farmers' Market. Does that sound like sacrilege?

QSE artistic director Rob Pensalfini says Shakespeare's plays are "not sacred texts" and can be abridged.

His ensemble is behind a mission to make the bard a life-changing experience with its Shakespeare Prison Project at the Southern Queensland Correctional Centre in the Lockyer Valley.

Over three months prisoners choose a play, rehearse and eventually perform it for other inmates, families and invited guests.

"Once the prisoners get past the funny language they really identify with the works," Pensalfini says.

"When we were doing The Merchant of Venice, a Lebanese-Australian prisoner who was a Muslim came up to me and said, 'I can't say this speech, this guy's a Jew'. We had a chat and he went ahead with it and it helped him develop empathy. Shakespeare helps prisoners stand in somebody else's shoes and feel like they are doing something positive."

Queensland Theatre Company artistic director Sam Strong, says Shakespeare's power of human observation makes his work timeless and universal.

"He has this ability to span the full breadth of human experience," Strong says.

"We should celebrate that and we're marking the 400th anniversary of his death in the best way possible by putting one of his plays on stage."

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