

The 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth

Interviewer: Lucy Vernal (Interviewer, Ideas Lab)

Guest: Professor Michael Dobson

Recorded: 02/04/2014

Broadcast: 11/04/2014

Intro VO: Welcome to the Ideas Lab Predictor Podcast from the University of Birmingham. In each edition we hear from an expert in a different field, who gives us insider information on key trends, upcoming events, and what they think the near future holds.

Lucy: We're here today with Professor Michael Dobson. Michael, rather than try to give a list of your many titles, you can introduce yourself!

Michael: I'm Director of the Shakespeare Institute, which is in Stratford upon Avon, and Professor of Shakespeare studies for the whole of the rest of the university as well.

Lucy: And several other things too.

Michael: Well yeah, I work with our beloved partners, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust; I'm an Executive Trustee with them and I'm also an Honorary Governor of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Lucy: And there's a great reason for us having a chat today because the 450th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth is coming up.

Margaret: Yeah, coming up very soon. The official birthday is April 23rd, which is also St. George's Day. I mean we only know the date Shakespeare was baptised, which was the 26th April but he was probably born on the 23rd.

Lucy: So this is the best guess.

Michael: Yeah, it'll do very well. On the 23rd itself in Stratford, the official birthday performance by the RSC will be of their very good current production of Henry IV Part One, after which there's a fireworks display.

Lucy: So people can come along to that.

Michael: Come along and 'ooh and ahh' at the fireworks and indeed at the acting if you can. But the main event happens at the weekend closest to the birth day which is 25th/26th. On Friday 25th April it's the annual [Shakespeare's birthday lecture \(http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/visit-the-houses/whats-on.html/birthday-lecture.html\)](http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/visit-the-houses/whats-on.html/birthday-lecture.html) which takes place at the Shakespeare Institute and it's Michael Bogdanov, a very great director and champion of popular engagement of Shakespeare who made that wonderful TV documentary, Shakespeare on the Estate, about Shakespeare in deprived areas of Birmingham.

Lucy: So that's 4 o'clock on the Friday?

Michael: 4 o'clock on the Friday.

Lucy: At the Institute.

Michael: At the Institute.

Lucy: And that's an open public lecture?

Michael: Yeah. On the Saturday morning of course all civic parading life bursts forth. The streets of Stratford will be jammed with a schoolchildren procession carrying flowers to Shakespeare's grave, ambassadors from around the world, representatives of important universities – notably this one – a selection of Shakespeare Institute students will parade themselves through the streets, there will be banners, there will be street theatre, there will be Morris dancers, there will be people dressed up as characters from Shakespeare plays. Everyone will walk through the streets following a route from Shakespeare's birth place to his grave. The Pragnell Award will be given. There is a big official lunch. The Director of the Shakespeare Institute traditionally gives a lifetime achievement award to somebody important in the enjoyment and appreciation of Shakespeare. Last year it was Simon Russell-Beale, the actor. This year it's Sir Nicholas Hytner, the Director at the National Theatre.

Lucy: And it's not just the UK that will be celebrating this anniversary.

Michael: No, absolutely not, absolutely not. There's a huge conference happening in Paris, organised by the Societe Francais Shakespeare with performances at the Comedie Francaise, the Opera *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* at the Opera Bastille, a major line-up of international speakers and events in Paris and then there's also at the same time a huge celebration going on in Germany where it's the 150th birthday of the Deutsche Shakespeare Gesellschaft, the first great National Society for the Study of Shakespeare, which the Germans invented before they had a state and it's a huge do. On the Sunday I'll be there. [Ewan Fernie \(/staff/profiles/shakespeare/fernie-ewan.aspx\)](#), our very own, is giving a lecture there as one of the highlights of that event and on the Sunday I'm doing an interview at the Deutsche National Theatre in Weimar with Honorary Fellow of the Shakespeare Institute, Sir Kenneth Brannagh, about his long career in Shakespeare. So a transcript of that I think will be published in due course. There's also a huge biennial International Festival of Shakespearean Performance happening in Romania, in Criova where there's another university that the Institute has links with and there our very own Stanley Wells, former Director of the Shakespeare Institute, will be receiving a lifetime achievement award. So there's lots going on. I mean Shakespeare, he has great birthdays.

Lucy: And what's incredible is this is – it's a big year, obviously 450th – but you're actually looking forward to some even bigger celebrations to come.

Michael: Yes. Since Shakespeare lived to the age of 52, these big anniversaries come quite close together. 2016 will be the 400th anniversary of his death when we can celebrate 400 years of his works at work in the world and his reputation developing and spreading worldwide. The University will be co-hosting an enormous event, the World Shakespeare Congress, which is something that happens every five years and it's like a sort of Shakespeare Olympics.

Lucy: It moves round the world.

Michael: It moves round the world, yes, different cities have to kind of bid for it and Stratford and London put in a joint bid which won for 2016. So delegates will come to Stratford at the end of July, there will be an enormous opening ceremony, there will be major Shakespeareans doing public events, public lectures, and a conference and all sorts of performances, events for schoolchildren – a lot happening. And then everybody will move to London, seamlessly and effortlessly by bus, all organised by us, especially by the great Caroline Ashton, the Events Manager of the College of Arts and Law who is already on the case. And then there will be, the last three days of the conference will be based at The Globe in London and there will be more performances, more lectures and a big party at the British Library.

Lucy: And you've got a special recitation of David Garrick's Jubilee Ode.

Michael: Yeah. That's one of the things we're planning for the opening ceremony in Stratford. In David Garrick, the great Midlands actor from Lichfield, more or less invented the public celebration of Shakespeare with the first great fan convention, the Stratford Jubilee of 1769 and we're going to restage that with the original music with an orchestra, with singers, and with the great actor Sam West to whom we're about to give an Honorary Degree. He's someone else who has strong connections with

Birmingham. So that's going to be a grand event and we'll be commissioning a new equivalent, a new poem about Shakespeare from Poet Laureate, Caroline Duffy. So there will be a new poem to go with it as well.

Lucy: And you're hoping too for an announcement about a European Laureate.

Michael: Indeed. We're hoping that the European Union will recognise the significance of this great 400th anniversary by declaring Shakespeare European Laureate, the first we hope of a possible series, you know, perhaps even Savantise, Moliere and Mozart might get their turn later on but it will be Shakespeare, the great figure of the European Renaissance, important in the culture of every European country, would be a terrific place to start.

Lucy: So before all that there's plenty going on at the Institute itself, both kind of locally with your students at the Institute and globally.

Michael: Indeed. Earlier this year we ran our first massive open online course - a MOOC – all about Hamlet, which was studied by students from 82 different countries. We had thousands of people. Nowadays people can share in the glories and benefits of the Institute from pretty much wherever they are on the planet and we'll be running that MOOC again and we hope we'll be making more about other Shakespeare plays in due course.

Lucy: So you can literally sign up wherever you are in the world, for free, and study Hamlet with the Shakespeare Institute.

Michael: Yeah. We've cameo's from different academics at the Shakespeare Institute and our friends at the Royal Shakespeare Company. Beautiful photography of the Institute gardens, you know, the whole bit.

Lucy: That is an amazing opportunity and Mike, do you have a few more takers this year after a certain famous actor plays Hamlet later on?

Michael: Well indeed, we have Benedict Cumberbatch to look forward to in the autumn when he plays Hamlet at the Barbican. I have an article about this in a recent issue of the Observer if anybody wants to look up their website online. Yeah, perhaps Cumberbatch will bring fresh fans to Hamlet, just as David Tennant did when he played Hamlet for the RSC back in 2008.

Lucy: And before all that obviously there's the birthday and for the birthday there's a special BBC Radio 3 programme.

Michael: Yeah, Shakespeare For and Against, starring Ewan Fernie and indeed me and other Institute personnel, presented by Mark Ravenhill, the controversial playwright who's worked for the Royal Shakespeare Company as well as for the Royal Court.

Lucy: And that's taking a good hard look at the relevance of Shakespeare for 2014.

Michael: Yeah, whether it's definitely good for you or not.

Lucy: So if you're interested in that, that's [BBC Radio 3 \(http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3\)](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3), the week of the birthday, round about the 23rd.

Michael: Indeed. And also on April 20th, the BBC will be broadcasting a new radio production of *Antony and Cleopatra* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/proginfo/2014/16/r3-drama-on-3-sunday.html>) with Kenneth Brannagh as Anthony and Alex Kingston as Cleopatra, so that's going to be worth hearing.

Lucy: It's such an exciting moment, year, couple of years. Michael, thank you for taking the time to tell us all about it.

Michael: Thank you. See you in Stratford.

Outro VO : *This podcast and others in the series are available on the Ideas Lab website: [www.ideaslabuk.com \(http://www.ideaslabuk.com\)](http://www.ideaslabuk.com). There's also information on the free support Ideas Lab has to offer to TV and radio producers, new media producers and journalists. The interviewer and producer for the Ideas Lab Predictor Podcast was Sam Walter.*

[Privacy](#) | [Legal](#) | [Cookies and cookie policy](#) | [Accessibility](#) | [Site map](#) | [Website feedback](#) | [Charitable information](#)

© University of Birmingham 2015

