

Shakespeare Institute to host landmark exploration of Bard's verse

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The University of Birmingham's Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon is to play host today (17 October) to the second part of a landmark exploration of Shakespearean verse-speaking, with actors, directors, scholars and theatre directors.

Not since John Barton's influential TV series and book, *Playing Shakespeare*, in the early 1980s has verse speaking in Shakespearean performance come under such close scrutiny.

Launched at Shakespeare's Globe in London last month in a collaboration between Globe Education and the Shakespeare Institute, *The End of Shakespeare's Verse* comprises five events between now and January next year in the UK and North America. It has been inspired by actor turned academic, Abigail Rokison, a lecturer at the Shakespeare Institute, whose acting career has included roles in theatre and in TV productions such as *The Darling Buds of May* and whose book *Shakespearean Verse Speaking* won the Globe First Book Award in 2012; and by Giles Block, a leading text adviser at Shakespeare's Globe since 1999, whose book *Speaking the Speech* was published earlier this year.

Abigail has scrutinised the work of composers and editors of Shakespeare's works, and she questions the validity and origin of some seemingly time-honoured approaches to speaking his verse. Her fresh examination is influencing the way verse is taught in conservatoires, spoken on stages and printed on pages. Giles's approach has influenced some of the UK's leading classical actors and directors.

Working with actors, the pair focus on three plays from different periods of Shakespeare's career: *The Merchant of Venice*, *Macbeth* and *The Winter's Tale*. Today's symposium in Stratford will focus on Shakespeare's use of rhyme: should actors revel in it or reject it? At the event, the audience of actors, directors, scholars and representatives of the UK's leading drama schools will be invited to share their perspectives regarding the end of Shakespeare's verse.

Over the next few months the debate will continue at the American Shakespeare Center in Virginia, US, on 28 October; at The Pearl Theatre in New York on 29 October; and it culminates in Canada at the Shakespeare Theatre Association Conference at the Stratford Festival, Ontario, on 22-25 January 2014.

Abigail Rokison commented: 'This Globe/ Shakespeare Institute initiative has been a fantastic opportunity for the academic and theatre communities to share ideas about verse speaking and the Shakespearean text. The first session at the Globe generated some vigorous debate, and I hope that further sessions will do likewise. Having had a career that straddles both acting and academia I am thrilled to have had the opportunity to be involved in this series of symposia.'

Michael Dobson, Director of the Shakespeare Institute, added: 'This exciting event beautifully exemplifies the cross-fertilization between academic scholarship and theatrical practice which has always been part of the Shakespeare Institute's mission – just the sort of dialogue between study and performance which now features prominently in the Institute's teaching portfolio with the inauguration this term of our 'Shakespeare and Creativity' suite of courses.'

Patrick Spottiswoode, Director Globe Education, whose idea it was to bring the two leading contemporary commentators on Shakespearean verse speaking together for an international re-evaluation, commented: 'It is timely to review approaches to the speaking, teaching and editing of verse in light of Giles and Abigail's books and at a time when some leading theatres are occasionally substituting prose for verse. Are universities, drama schools and editors perpetuating myths that are influencing the way verse is spoken in theatres? A question the series sets out to explore.'

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Notes to editors

Abigail Rokison began her career as a professional actor, training at LAMDA. Her acting work includes numerous roles in theatre, and, amongst other television roles, Primrose Larkin in TV's *The Darling Buds of May*. Following a degree with the Open University, undertaken whilst acting, she went on to take an MA in 'Shakespeare: Text and Playhouse' at the Globe Theatre/King's College London. She completed her PhD in 'Shakespearean Verse Speaking' in the English faculty at Cambridge University in 2006 after which she became a lecturer in Drama and English in the Education Faculty in Cambridge and Director of Studies in English and Drama at Homerton College, Cambridge. From 2008-2010 Abigail was Chair of the trustees of the British Shakespeare Association and joined the Shakespeare Institute, Stratford Upon Avon, as lecturer in Shakespeare and Theatre in January 2013.

Titles include *Shakespearean Verse Speaking*, published by Cambridge University Press in January 2010 and *Shakespeare for Young People: Productions, Versions and Adaptations* – published by Continuum in 2012. She has contributed chapters to *Shakespeare in Stages* (CUP), *The Children's Literature Handbook* (Routledge), *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare's Poetry*, *The Great Shakespearians* series (Continuum) and the chapter on Shakespeare's Globe's production of *Henry V* for Globe to Globe (CUP). She has written for journals including *Shakespeare* (Routledge), *Literary Compass* and *The New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, including the only interview given by David Tennant on his performance as Hamlet.

Abigail is an associate producer of Wild Thyme productions and is represented for presenting work by Sara Cameron at Take Three Management and has been an academic advisor/interviewee on the BBC/PBS Shakespeare series *Prefaces*.

Giles Block, Globe Associate, Text

Giles has led the text work at Shakespeare's Globe since 1999, and to date has been involved in over 40 productions. His directing credits at Shakespeare's Globe include: *Antony and Cleopatra* (1999); *Hamlet* (2000) and *Troilus and Cressida* (2005). His posts include: Associate Director at Ipswich Theatre; Staff Director at The National Theatre and Director of Platforms at the National Theatre. His theatre direction includes: *The Fawn*, *She Stoops to Conquer* (National Theatre); *Macbeth*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *King Lear*, *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Skylight* and *Vincent in Brixton* (Shochiku Company, Japan). In 2000 the Association of Major Theatres of Japan recognised Giles for services to the Japanese Theatre. In recent years, Giles has directed *The Tempest*, *Henry V*, and *The Comedy of Errors* at The Blackfriars Theatre in Virginia. Giles is Head of Text for Globe Education, sharing his approach to the verse and the prose with many undergraduates, graduates, teachers and scholars each year.

The Shakespeare Institute (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/edacs/departments/shakespeare/courses/index.aspx>)

Housed in historic Mason Croft in the heart of Stratford-upon-Avon, the University of Birmingham's Shakespeare Institute boasts an illustrious past as a beacon for international Shakespeare scholarship. Former directors include major Shakespearians Philip Brockbank, Stanley Wells, Peter Holland and Kate McLuskie. Its present director is Professor Michael Dobson. The Institute enjoys close and developing relations with the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. It has its own world-class research library and hosts the world's most prestigious international Shakespeare conference as well as the biggest postgraduate conference in Shakespeare studies. The Institute has recently launched two new postgraduate programmes – at MA and PhD level – which have a unique focus on Shakespeare and creativity, allowing students to combine theatrical and academic study of Shakespeare's life and work.

