

THE SHAKESPEARE CLUB OF STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

The 857th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at the Shakespeare Institute on 8 November 2010. Perry Mills, Assistant Headmaster, Head of Sixth Form, Head of the English and Expressive Arts Faculty at King Edward VI Grammar School, gave a most enlightening talk on the Elizabethan and Jacobean boys' companies. These boy actors undertook all the parts, male and female, in plays by Shakespeare, Lyly, Marston, Middleton etc. Mr Mills has been exploring the challenges of staging 'transvestite drama' (boys playing female roles) with his own students and, consequently, the repertoire of these companies. The lecture traced the discoveries made as a result of this 'unique primary research'.

The boy companies were very popular with audiences at the time. Of course, we do not know exactly how the parts were played: if they were played straight or if the boys camped it up and Mr Mills had a unique opportunity to see how the modern schoolboy reacted when faced with the challenge. He had produced many plays at KES and has taken these productions to Oxford and Warwick Universities and the Globe Theatre in London, where they had been received with great enthusiasm. Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan*, which had a large number of female parts, was performed at the Globe, set in the 1920s. The boys at KES enjoyed acting female parts and Mr Mills had never had problems with casting. It seemed to give the boys an insight into how women feel and think and to be sympathetic to the characters they are playing. Mr Mills said he believed that it was important that the boys understood every word of the text and a lot of time was spent in class on this. Trust was also important – the boys trusted each other and Mr Mills, as director, was able to trust the boys in turn. The boys themselves served as stage managers, lighting technicians, wardrobe, etc.

When Michael Wood was filming his television series on Shakespeare, he came to KES and the boys played a number of extracts from Shakespeare and other writers for him. They spoke in English and Latin, as would have happened when Shakespeare himself was a pupil there and it was recorded in Big School. Mr Mills showed video clips of the boys in action. An extremely well-received excerpt was the end of *Richard III*, with Richard in a wheelchair for his horse and the boys enacting a very moving, but also exciting, battle scene. This had been recorded at the Courtyard Theatre and Mr Mills hoped that his students would have the opportunity to act a complete play as part of the RSC season before long.

This whole evening was a revelation for those present.