

THE SHAKESPEARE CLUB OF STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

The 882nd meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 10 December 2013. Chaired by Mrs Jean Lawrence, Ms Emily Oliver spoke about Shakespeare under socialism, focussing on East Germany in the 1980s leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Using Orwell's *1984* as a reference point Ms Oliver showed how politics and performance influenced each other in this totalitarian state though censorship was never publicly acknowledged by the East German Government. The GDR had the highest density of state-funded theatres in the world, all with permanent ensembles, producing up to 30 Shakespeare productions a year in the 1980s.

Ms Oliver spoke in detail about the work of the actor Ulrich Muhe, who had a history of political dissidence in the 1980s, playing a subversive Lancelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice* in 1985 and Hamlet in the 8-hour *Hamletmaschine* in 1990 which mirrored the intellectual crises of the East German Communist era. Muhe spoke at the largest public demonstration in 1989 and, after unification, starred in *The Lives of Others* (2006), a film critiquing the communist regime in which he played a surveillance officer spying on two theatre practitioners.

It has been argued that Shakespeare's plays have been used as dissident texts under repressive regimes but Ms Oliver concluded that politics in the East German theatre was condoned as it served as a safety valve by domesticating dissent and that actors only made a political difference when they stepped outside the theatre. Performance is ephemeral but theatre history can dangerously lend itself to a rescripting of the past, like Winston Smith rewriting history of the Ministry of Truth in *1984*.

Ms Oliver took questions from the audience and the meeting finished at 9pm.