

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 2014/15 season was inaugurated at the 887th meeting of the Shakespeare Club which took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 9 September 2014. Chaired by Dr Susan Brock, Mr John Wyver, writer, academic and media producer, spoke about the RSC's recent live broadcasts of its productions: 'From stage to screen: producing RSC live from Stratford-upon-Avon'. To date Mr Wyver and his company, Illuminations, had been responsible for four RSC performances in the last year, but he began by tracing the history of broadcasts from the Stratford stage back to 1911, with Frank Benson's *Richard III*. The first live radio broadcast had been Ben Iden Payne's 1937 *As You Like It* and the first TV from Stratford was in 1951, when the Gadshill scene from *Henry IV part I* was filmed with the Memorial Theatre cast for children's television, until 1955 when *The Merry Wives* (second half only) was broadcast live from the Memorial Theatre stage.

Since then the filming of RSC productions for broadcast had been sporadic, though some of the early examples were preserved in the archives. Despite the pioneering work of the Metropolitan Opera in transmitting live broadcasts of its shows into cinemas from 2006, it took a few years for theatre to follow and the RSC started to explore this seriously only in 2012 when Greg Doran took over as Artistic Director.

The objectives of these broadcasts was to open up the RSC's work to more diverse audiences, which Mr Wyver admitted hadn't yet been successful, and those at a distance and to transfer to the screen an experience very close to actually being in the theatre. Covering the essence of performances as well as the detail, the liveness was crucially important and shots of the theatre audience were included to give the cinema audience a sense of being part of a shared community. The most controversial element to date had been the introductions to the broadcasts which were loved and hated in equal measure. Mr Wyver then explained how the filming was done in the theatre, transmitted by satellite and shown in 300 plus cinemas in the UK and abroad.

The challenge was to make these broadcasts financially sustainable. Only *Richard II* had made a profit to date. The RSC were committed to five more broadcasts in 2015 and Greg Doran's vision was to have one for each of the plays in the Shakespeare canon over the next seven years. Mr Wyver though that making the recordings available on DVD or by digital download was the way forward. At £250,000 each the broadcasts were cheap, he said, compared to the cost of £1.5 million for a single episode of *Dr Who*.

After questions from the audience, the meeting finished at 8.50pm and members adjourned for refreshments.