

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 897th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 10 November 2015. John Cunnington took the chair and introduced Joan Foley, Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Arts, Creative Industries and Education at the University of Western England. Ms Foley's provocative title was 'Why do we have to do him when he's dead?' in which she recounted her experience of teaching Shakespeare with learners in secondary schools and with trainee English teachers.

Asking audience members to share with a neighbour their own first encounter with Shakespeare, Ms Foley shared a little of her own biography growing up in Coventry, how she was initially taught to understand Shakespeare as a poet rather than a man of the theatre, and the epiphany of her first visit to the theatre to see *The Taming of the Shrew* at Stratford in 1979 with some teacher friends. Later actors, like Mark Rylance and Kenneth Branagh, made her engage with the plays and she began to see how to share Shakespeare with students, by seeing Shakespeare's characters as real people. Her academic mentors had been proponents of Shakespeare teaching through performance, going back to H. Caldwell Cook, author of *Play Way* in 1917.

Ms Foley reminded the audience of the history of teaching Shakespeare from the Newbolt Report in 1921 to the present when, for good or bad, the current curriculum required two Shakespeare plays to be taught at Key Stage 3 (11-14 years) and at least one at Key Stage 4 (14-16) and those in full texts. Her own method was to teach Shakespeare 'by stealth', starting with excerpts and encouraging students to ask, and answer, their own questions about the text.

Most trainee teachers of English, she said, didn't like Shakespeare or found it difficult or thought that young people didn't like it. Her method was to show them examples of good productions, posters and stills, using online resources like www.stagework.org.uk or Shakespeare's Globe website. One of her greatest inspirations was the RSC's Learning and Performance Network which encouraged teachers to speak Shakespeare out loud, to use the classroom as a rehearsal room. She had put this into practice and showed a video of a remarkable performance of *Romeo and Juliet* by some of her students.

Ms Foley concluded with some homework for the Shakespeare Club. Would members be mentors for young teachers, introducing them to the theatre in Stratford, to experience their own epiphany?

After questions and a heartfelt vote of thanks, the meeting concluded at 8.55pm.