

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 891st meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place at Mason Croft on Tuesday 13th January 2015. Mrs Janet Anslow chaired and introduced the speaker, Professor Tiffany Stern, whose subject was “*O bitter, black and tragical*”; *tragic performance on the Shakespearean stage*.

Researching staging and performance in Shakespeare’s theatre, Professor Stern had noted that contemporary writers used different terms to describe tragedies from those for other theatrical genres. These terms could be divided into three types: the tragic stage, tragic walking, and tragic speaking. She used contemporary descriptions of stage productions and printed playtexts to support her theory that tragedy was distinct from other kinds of drama.

For a tragedy, the theatre would be hung with black curtains, while characters such as Hamlet echo this convention through their clothing. This allowed the audience to anticipate the action and the conclusion of the play before it had begun.

In classical times tragic actors had worn buskins, or high boots, while socks, or low shoes, were worn by comedians. There are many references to them, but she questioned whether they were real garments, or simply metaphors. In favour of them being real, she quoted references to performers of tragic roles such as Tamburlaine “stalking”, “jetting” and “strutting”, all exaggerated ways of walking that might be encouraged by wearing a boot.

References to the tragic voice usually suggest a majestic, affected tone was used. She regretted the modern loss of musicality in speaking poetry on stage, illustrating her point with a printed musical notation of Garrick’s swooping delivery of “To be or not to be”. The theatre was also a place where words were excitingly new-minted, and members of the audience would write new words in their table books to be used later.

Richard Burbage, Shakespeare’s leading tragic actor was described as one who “weighted every word, and measured every pace”. By closely examining the usually lost elements of performance Professor Stern offered a more rounded understanding of the experiences of Shakespeare’s original audiences.

After questions, Professor Stern drew a raffle and after the close of the meeting at 9pm members retired to the conservatory for drinks and fruited pies.