

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 926th meeting of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon took place on Tuesday 14 May, when Paul Prescott, Assistant Professor at the University of Warwick, gave a richly-illustrated talk on Shakespeare in Yosemite. The meeting was chaired by Melissa Mailer-Yates.

Dr Prescott explained that the Shakespeare in Yosemite project began when he and a friend came across a disused amphitheatre in the valley and imagined it as a Shakespeare performance venue.

The Yosemite valley is in California, 4000 feet above sea level, 7 miles long and surrounded by granite walls 2-3000 feet high. Yosemite became the USA's second National Park in 1890 after years of lobbying by John Muir. The park's ecological importance meant that the project required an environmental dimension, and needed to refer to the USA's literary tradition of interest in the natural world seen in the works of Thoreau and Emerson.

Outdoor Shakespeare is enormously popular in North America with at least 308 Shakespeare festivals. Asking why Shakespeare matters to the people of the continent had already led Paul to take part in the 2014 *Shakespeare on the Road* project that visited fourteen of these festivals.

The first barrier was to persuade the National Park to allow it, addressing questions about why Yosemite might need Shakespeare, and what social and financial difference might it make to the community.

As a result, several principles govern the festival. Performers include students, amateurs, professionals and even Park employees. Performances are free, scripts are heavily cut to include songs, and props and costumes are recycled or recyclable. Productions are relocated to Yosemite so in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the fairies are named after local flora.

The festival launched in 2017 with the programme *One Touch of Nature*, from the writings of Shakespeare and John Muir. In 2018 they performed *As You Like It*, and in 2019 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The project has raised many issues. Why do we need to fill empty spaces with Shakespeare, and why do Americans perform Shakespeare rather than homegrown writers? Controversial topics can be addressed through Shakespeare, so while National Park employees are discouraged from using the phrase "climate change", it is acceptable to perform Titania's speech about the weather which describes its effects. We are now rediscovering what Shakespeare knew, that natural places such as forests are good for the human spirit.

After many questions the meeting closed at 9.10 pm.