

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 928th meeting of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon took place on Tuesday 12 November, when Sir Nicholas Hytner, former Artistic Director of the National Theatre and co-founded of the Bridge Theatre, gave his Presidential Address entitled “We must leave out the killing”. The meeting was chaired by Roger Pringle.

The theme of Sir Nicholas’s talk was the need to bridge the gap between great works by long-dead authors and a modern audience. Do we treat them as new works hot off the press, or do we strive for authenticity, asking the audience to imagine themselves back in time? Which approach best uncovers the universal qualities of the piece? There is no right answer.

Recreating Shakespeare’s world onstage became an obsession only in the twentieth-century. Before that, his work had been heavily adapted, and Shakespeare himself had a cavalier approach to history. Producing it today Julius Caesar seems to be an uncanny prediction, with a Roman mob, swayed by a demagogue, straight off the streets. Other productions have had recognizable settings: after the Iraq war his Henry V was a charismatic leader trying to justify his actions, and following the credit crunch, Timon of Athens found himself abandoned by hangers-on. It is the job of the Director to find a way of making the work seem natural.

These issues have received much less attention in the world of opera, Sir Nicholas’s other passion. He contrasted the role of singers and actors: an opera singer has to hold a single idea during a long and complex aria, whereas an actor has to think through the argument of a soliloquy that moves the play forward. The libretto may generate feeling, but words are secondary. It is always the score that makes an opera worth staging. Opera directors face the same question though of “embalming versus novelty”.

Going back to plays, audiences rarely notice omissions or changes if they are successful, and he compared his Henry V with Laurence Olivier’s wartime film of the play. Both owed their success to being of their own time. Productions put on now need to reflect the changes in us. In his recent *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* his rewrites restored something true about the life-affirming nature of the play, in which love is love. In the end, the text always survives.

After many questions from the large and enthusiastic audience the meeting closed at 9 pm.