

## The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 931<sup>st</sup> meeting of the Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon took place on Tuesday 11 February 2020. The speaker was Dr Catriona Fallow from Queen Mary University of London whose subject was “Past and Present Plays: Rewriting Shakespeare at the Royal Shakespeare Company”. The meeting was chaired by Sylvia Morris.

Dr Fallow traced the development of the RSC’s adaptations of Shakespeare’s work. In the early 1960s Peter Hall, its Artistic Director, insisted that new work by living authors would help to define the fledgling company. Shakespeare had to be thought of as a contemporary writer: as Hall said “we keep our work new and daring just as Shakespeare was”.

As well as performing new plays at the Aldwych Theatre in London, in 1963 the RSC staged *The Wars of the Roses*, based on the *Henry VI* and *Richard III* plays. Showing that their approach even to Shakespeare was radical, John Barton substantially rewrote the three *Henry VI* plays, turning them into two and creating a new work “by Shakespeare”, *Edward IV*. Barton’s skilful writing fitted in seamlessly among Shakespeare’s and the trilogy was the Company’s first major triumph.

The Company’s next experiment was to stage *The Theatre of Cruelty* season in London. It included new plays, many violent, and Charles Marowitz’s condensed and rearranged version of *Hamlet*. The so-called “Dirt Plays” caused outrage among both audiences and Governors of the RSC, who found the message they sent about the Company and its house dramatist unacceptable.

Jumping forward to 2010, in London the RSC staged *The Gods Weep*, by Dennis Kelly. Unlike the adaptations of the 1960s, Kelly took *King Lear* as a starting point, writing a completely new, sprawling play. Kelly felt his play shared features with Shakespeare’s: “we love his plays because they’re messy”. That it was seen as an appropriate play for the RSC to stage demonstrated how the Company’s attitude to adaptation had changed. Shakespeare was now an inspiration to new writers just as Shakespeare had been inspired himself.

Ten years on, the RSC is about to embark on another adaptation of the *Henry VI* plays. It seems that this time, rather than defining itself by irreverent experiment, the Company will refer back to its own formidably successful history.

After many questions the meeting closed at 9 pm.