

The Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

This talk by Dr Paul Prescott on *The Life, Adventures and Opinions of Sam Wanamaker* was an update to his previous lecture to the Club given in September 2013. This was the 960th meeting of the Club and was chaired by Amanda Wood.

Wanamaker is best known as the founder of Shakespeare's Globe in London, and perceptions of that theatre and its purpose have been called into question since Emma Rice's brief leadership of Shakespeare's Globe ended in controversy in 2018.

Dr Prescott quoted a number of opinions cited about Emma Rice justifying her dismissal at the time and since. These stated that she had not been faithful to the principles Sam Wanamaker had in mind in recreating Shakespeare's Globe, and that she was even totally out of sympathy with Wanamaker's authenticity ideals. The authoritative Dictionary of National Biography states that Wanamaker had a lifelong devotion to the Bard.

Bearing these statements in mind, the speaker re-examined Wanamaker's life story and views, asking whether in fact they should be seen as synonymous with "original practices".

Wanamaker was a complex man. His parents had escaped the pogroms of Ukraine for the USA. As a child he experienced poverty and anti-semitic prejudice, followed by unemployment. He always saw himself as a victim/hero. He later found success as an actor and director, triumphing on Broadway and in England. His is often seen as a typically American success story, but Prescott suggested this might not give the full picture.

The period when he came to work in London coincided with the McCarthy era in the USA when left-wing individuals, particularly in the arts, were accused of being Soviet agents. He had briefly joined the communist party and even here was under MI5 surveillance. In the UK he experienced considerable success and made his life here. This was not however out of any devotion to Shakespeare and it was a strange irony that there would have been no Shakespeare's Globe without Senator McCarthy.

Wanamaker longed to create a home. He took over the Liverpool Shakespeare Theatre but did not stage any Shakespeare there, performing plays by American authors like Tennessee Williams, new writing, and musicals. It was his aim to have the theatre open all day every day at a time when the concept of the Arts Centre did not exist. He seemed, if anything, to be avoiding Shakespeare.

In 1959 he came to Stratford in perhaps his most high-profile and controversial Shakespeare performance, as *Iago* with singer Paul Robeson as Othello, another man cast out from the USA for his political beliefs. By 1964 he was able to return to the USA to direct *Macbeth*, but returned to London where, in his early 50s, he founded the Globe Trust.

His aim was for the Globe to be part of the fabric of the community, with broad-based activities available. So far was he from the idea of complete authenticity that he even

consulted architects with the aim of making the theatre and its stage a more flexible space, but was told this would not be possible.

The statement of intent that was produced for the Globe was “To produce the plays of Shakespeare with the highest standards of creativity”. There was an agreement that one play per year would be staged authentically, but this was clearly not the main purpose. Before the Globe was built, productions were staged in a tent: none of them were in period. And one of his favourite practitioners, with whom he held many discussions, was the actor and director Stephen Berkoff, whose work was always modern and experimental.

Dr Prescott concluded it was lazy and misguided to think that Wanamaker would have approved of ditching Emma Rice whose joyous work had breathed new life into Shakespeare’s Globe. Rice was the Shakespeare Club’s President in 2018-9 and spoke to the Club about her experiences in December 2018. Dr Prescott noted that if she had had the full information he had uncovered about the Globe’s original founder, her experience might have been different.

The Club’s next meeting is on Tuesday 12 March at 7.30 pm at the Methodist Centre when Nick Birch will talk about *Stratford upon Avon’s “Great Little Lady”. The Life, Literature and Legacy of Marie Corelli*. Visitors will be welcome for £5. The talk will be held at the Methodist Hall, Old Town, at 7.30 pm. Full details are on the website www.stratfordshakespeareclub.org