

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 910th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place on Tuesday 9 May 2017. Dr Stephen Purcell, Associate Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick and Artistic Director of theatre company The Pantaloons, gave a talk entitled "*Troilus and Cressida* in Performance: A History of Radical Experiment", chaired by Susan Brock.

Exploring the genres to which the play might belong, with its historical setting and streak of satire and bawdy comedy as well as passages of heightened poetry, Dr Purcell looked at the early quartos which described the play as history, the Folio which printed it as *The tragedy of Troilus and Cressida* as did Chaucer and Henryson Shakespeare's sources for the *Troilus and Cressida* story. It is was a complex play and rarely performed until John Dryden's adaptation, subtitled *Truth Found too Late*, in 1679. As a neo-classicist Dryden thought much of Shakespeare's original 'a heap of rubbish' and sought to simplify it.

When Shakespeare's play was revived in the late nineteenth century directors did the same by cutting lines and destroying the ambiguities in characters like Cressida. It was often read as political and anti-war play – in the 1930s by Michael Macowan and Tyrone Guthrie in 1956. And in the 90s Thatcherite politicians Nigel Lawson and Michael Portillo quoted Ulysses speech on order. Dr Purcell then described in more detail several radical productions in the late twentieth century: John Barton's in 1968, the same year as Kenneth Tynan's show *Oh Calcutta!*, in which Barton explored sexual liberation with Alan Howard playing an effeminate Achilles in drag, and an adaption into a rock opera in the USA by Galt McDermott composer of the musical *Hair* in collaboration with Joseph Papp. Putting a variety of the male characters in drag became a way to subvert the performance of masculinity, a ploy used by Jonathan Miller in 1981 as part of the BBC TV Shakespeare with the drag artist the Incredible Orlando playing Thersites; by Ian Judge who had Pandarus as a drag queen in 1996 for the RSC. Female actors were cast as Thersites in 1913 by William Poel and by the American Shakespeare Theater in 2013 doubling with Cassandra. Closing with the Wooster Group's collaboration with the RSC in 2012 in which the Trojans were played by the American company driven by external stimuli such as internal soundtracks and films and the Greeks by RSC actors using the traditional character-driven method, Dr Purcell concluded that the experimental character of Shakespeare's play encouraged radical versions to explore Cressida's character and motive, Ulysses view of order, Thersites' cynicism and the meaning and portrayal of masculinity.

After a lively question and vote of thanks the Chairman reminded members that the next meeting would take place on Tuesday 10 October preceded by the Annual General meeting. She reminded members that nominations for committee members should be submitted to her a week before the meeting and that the Club's rules were available on the Club's website at stratfordshakespeareclub.org which also contained much new historical information including minutes of meetings back to 2010/11.

The meeting closed at 9.15.