

York Shakespeare Project Newsletter 2009-10, issue 1

The times they are a- changing...

The king (Alistair) is dead (no longer doing the newsletter). Long live the king (me).

The York Shakespeare Project AGM has come and gone this year and unfortunately for you, Alistair Carr stood down from his position as Newsletter-Man. Even more unfortunately, I have replaced him. Now, instead of Alistair's strangely compelling, laugh-out-loud look at the world of York Shakespeare Project, you will have me playing with columns in Microsoft Word and downloading new Shakespeare-like fonts. And generally wishing I had Publisher so I could re-live those magical newsletter-designing Year 6 Geography years.

HELP!

In case you can't read that, it says 'HELP!'. We need your help to man the Front of House for the forthcoming production of Richard II. All you have to do is come along on an evening, sell some tickets, sell some sweets, watch the show, and have the time of your life. We need people every night, so whether you can be there every night or just once, drop Jeremy an email at j.e.muldowney@dsl.pipex.com and he'll get you rota'd in!

Richard II update

Disappointing that this sub-heading has nothing to do with 60s music, isn't it? (If it does in some way, please correct me at robbie.swale@gmail.com). Anyway, Hugh Allison, Director for YSP's next production, Richard II, sent this update on the rehearsal process so far – more from him in the next Newsletter, I'm sure.

At the time of writing we are in week six of rehearsals. We have blocked every scene, and we are underway in running each Act. Act One for example, which we ran Monday, is coming in at 35 minutes; everything is on schedule.

As of October 29th, we'll be running each half (pre-interval is Act One & Two; post-interval is Act Three, Four and Five) and then, as of week nine (starting November 2nd) we will be running the play as a whole at every rehearsal.

Sounds exciting, eh? In case you don't know, the show runs 17th-21st November at 41 Monkgate. If you don't know where that is, type it into Google Maps. Tickets are available through the Theatre Royal on 01904 623 568 or their web site here:

<http://www.yorktheatreroyal.co.uk/cgi/events/events.cgi?t=template&a=562>

A word from our leader...

Janet Looker, recently re-elected Chair of York Shakespeare Project, sends the following few words:

YSP had its AGM in September and had a very lively meeting at the Black Swan - numbers may not have been vast but debate and discussion was good, at times heated, and productive. It is good that YSP (and Shakespeare) still arouse our passions.

We have now elected a new committee, and with several people standing down we really are a new team; among the new faces are Jeremy Muldowney as Secretary and Membership Secretary, Sam Valentine as Treasurer, and Robbie Swale as newsletter editor and website guru. But you must still put up with me as Chair.

Some of the debate at the AGM which was around some of the fundamentals of the whole Project gave rise to the idea that we would have an Open meeting in November, after the current production of Richard II has finished, to thrash out some of the ideas that are bubbling about with members. We thought we would take a half day (lunch, and then keep going) to really re visit some of the original ideas around the project (should it be 20 years, or longer?) and also look at the order in which we are going to do the plays in over the next two or three years. I hope as many members as possible will come for what should be a lively - but constructive day - and we are thinking around Saturday 28th November. Jeremy will be emailing everyone to get a rough idea of numbers (for catering purposes), and I hope we get a really good turn out. It will be your chance to influence the direction of travel for the project over the next few years.

Meanwhile it is all systems go for Richard II - Hugh is promising an exciting and up to date performance of the play and I hope it is all well in everyone's diary.

In case you're wondering...

What Janet means about discussions of the fundamentals of the whole project is that there is a forceful suggestion from some quarters that the Project should be renamed the York Ninja Project – performing all of Shakespeare's plays. In York. In 20 years. With Ninjas. The next production would be either *A Midsummer Ninja's Dream*, *All's Ninja That Ends Ninja* or *Twelfth Ninja*. We would hope to raise some money from this production in order to fund a mammoth three-plays-in-rep summer season of *Ninja IV Part 1*, *Ninja IV Part 2* and *Ninja V*.

(This may or may not have been discussed at the AGM, and in fact may have been merely a conversation many months ago in the Tap and Spile between... uhh... some very clever and handsome individuals.)

In fact, “hilarious” ninja-jokes aside, the Open Meeting Janet is talking about will be brilliant chance to discuss the project openly and frankly and to give it some real direction and impetus as we approach half-way! Make sure you come along...

Some sad news...

I'm sad to write that Paul Shepherd, who worked behind the scenes on many YSP productions – including *The Merchant of Venice*, after he had become ill – passed away last month. Below are some words about Paul from Jeremy...

Many members will, I am sure, be sorry to hear of the untimely death of Paul Shephard. Paul grew up in York during the 1960s, and first became involved with Shakespearian drama at Nunthorpe Grammar School towards the end of that famously "swinging" decade! He once showed me a programme for a school production he'd been involved with in 1969. I may be a little younger, but 1969 - by chance - was the very year in which I had made my own teenaged Shakespearian debut down south. Thus I sensed a kind of bond from our first meeting.

Work had taken Paul away from York for many years, and it was his relatively recent return to the city of his birth which occasioned his involvement with YSP. I am particularly indebted to the stage-management skills he exhibited during my production of King John at Friargate Theatre in the winter of 2006. I will never forget the rather solemn manner with which he measured out the equivalent space in St Luke's Church Hall night by night with his retractable rule! (This, incidentally, is a tradition which has served us well and which we steadily maintain!) By the time we did Roger Calvert's "Glastonburyesque" As You Like it in the Minster Gardens (Summer '08) Paul had already been diagnosed with Motor Neuron Disease, but he turned up "regular as clockwork" and did what he could. He is rightly recorded in the programme for that production as Stage Manager, even though it was becoming increasingly clear that he couldn't manage on his own. Later that autumn, he gamely appeared night after night to manage a props table during Cecily Boys' acclaimed "Merchant of Venice" at 41 Monkgate. Rosalind Campbell and myself were Stage Managing this one, and we were certainly grateful for an extra pair of hands - to say nothing of a calm professional presence - back stage. Sadly, Paul was by now very ill, and it was not possible for him to work on the Summer '09 production of Julius Caesar.

By this time, he was in York District Hospital, and I last saw him one evening when I called on my way to a Caesar rehearsal. The disease was advanced, and communication was difficult, but it was quite clear that Paul knew who I was and was glad that YSP members were thinking of him.

Alistair, Krystal, Zoe and myself were able to attend Paul's funeral. The clergyman who officiated made several references to YSP, but innocently upgraded us to the York Shakespeare COMPANY. I like that; we are a company, and

Paul was very much a part of it during his final years.

Of course he had other interests outside theatre as do we all. He was a significant player in the local Scouting movement and, towards the end of his life, when hill-walking at last became impossible, he gave me a selection of Ordnance Survey maps from his extensive collection. As someone with an equal passion for the great outdoors, I can certainly identify with the bleak significance of this gesture. He was finally letting go of something he held very dear, and he did so with good grace. I will treasure those maps, whether I ever walk their crowded contours and dotted pathways or not.

The Committee

Just so you know, this is the committee for 2009-10. If you want to know anything, have any suggestions, or want get more involved, these are the people to ask. Email Jeremy and he will pass your message on to the relevant person:

Chair	Janet Looker
Secretary/Membership Secretary	Jeremy Muldowney
Treasurer	Sam Valentine
Education	Mark Smith
Newsletter/Web Site	Michael C Hall
Committee Members	Jane Collis Jamie Searle Margaret Hillier Ben Sawyer
Holding Trustees	Toby Gordon Julia Atkinson Raymond Baggaley

I didn't know what Holding Trustees were either, so I asked at the AGM, and it transpires that if the York Shakespeare Project ever owns any buildings, then they'll get to put their name to them. Toby, Julia, Ray – lucky, lucky people.

All that remains is to say a **MASSIVE** (font size 20) thank you to the people who stood down this year. In particular, Sally Mitcham, Ged Murray, Brian and Anna Sharp and Alistair and Jenny Carr have put blood, sweat and tears (and laughter) into the project. Come back soon.

Our gracious king...

Thinking 'What would it be good to include in my first newsletter?', I got in touch with Mark Burghagen – soon to perform in the title role in Richard II – to ask him a few questions. As it turns out, this has become a bumper newsletter of five pages. But instead of saving some of the wonderful content for next month (when the newsletter will likely contain just the words 'come to Richard II' over and over again), I've just put it all in. Woo!

So, presuming total ignorance (always a good idea where I'm concerned), tell us a little bit about your character, Richard II, and his story (without spoiling it).

The play deals with the events of Richard's last years - his exile of his cousin Bolingbroke, Bolingbroke's return, the king's downfall and deposition.

At the beginning, Richard is shown as an arrogant and irresponsible young man. His judgement is poor and his character does not suit his office. But later, as the reality of power escapes his hands, he gains in maturity and becomes the suffering and reflective king bowing to circumstance. Everything that was part of his former life is taken away from him during the cause of the events, until he is left with nothing but his faith in God. Richard the man gradually emerges from the trappings of office during the play. Shakespeare's portrayal of the king has been heavily criticized by historians and denounced as being historically distorted and over-dramatized. But the playwright's portrayal of the king, especially in his fallen state, brings us quite close to the historical figure. The historical Richard was highly self-conscious in his role as king, just as Shakespeare's Richard

is; he was also known for his volatile and unstable nature (a contemporary recalls him 'weeping most tenderly and greatly lamenting his lot, and sometimes fiercely denouncing his betrayers') which again is portrayed in the play. I believe that Richard's main crux was his disability to separate his human side with his office, which eventually had to lead to a disastrous end - but can you blame him, having been crowned at the age of 10?

Did you know when you were auditioning that it wasn't the hunchback one? Everyone I speak to about the play asks if it is.

During the week before I auditioned, I read the play (on a long train journey to Truro...). Before that, I had never come across RII in my life, but was familiar with Henry Bolingbroke, when I played Henry VI. But, yes, nearly everyone I speak to about RII, assumes that I'm talking about RIII. Some of them even start reciting lines from RIII, which always make me nervous that I still haven't even read all my lines...

This is your second YSP production - how has the process so far differed to Julius Caesar?

Difficult to answer, since the time commitment is so much bigger for me - it's taking over my life completely. So far, I have very much enjoyed both productions - whereas the rehearsal process is very different with a smaller cast, less rehearsal time and, obviously, different directors.

Given that English isn't your first language, doesn't that make it even harder to understand what the blazes is going on in a Shakespeare play? How do you cope? Spark Notes? (That's how I cope.)

I don't think it matters that much, since it seems that everybody else in the production has to look up an equal amount of words and expressions - personally, I find it much more difficult to follow Northern English teenage talk.. ;)

Regarding research, I worked on music at the time of RII for one of my MA essays, so I read quite a lot about the historical Richard and his time. Therefore, most of the materials I used are works on the historical figure, merged with my own personality.

I deliberately did not dive into the Shakespearean world of RII, since I did not want to be influenced too much by other productions. I do like Hugh's approach in that the audience should be able to relate to the characters as

modern day people. Though we're dealing with 14th century historical figures, human character traits haven't changed that much through the ages and I hope that people will be able to relate to the wide variety of 'timeless' emotions in RII which we as actors are exploring on stage.

Is there a particular part in Shakespeare that you've always wanted to play? Will you keep doing YSP until you get to play it? (Presuming it hasn't come up already and that it isn't Richard II or Cassius' mate.)

No, there isn't a particular Shakespearean character that I have always wanted to play. Once I start working on a part I really enjoy the process.

One of the things I feel like I'm missing out on by not being involved in the show is that I'm missing out on the in-jokes. Have there been any good ones so far?

We're working very hard on the play and there are extremely funny moments - but hopefully by the end, we'll be having a lot of 'out-jokes', which the audience will be able to understand too and join in having fun.

And finally, what one thing should we look forward to most about the show?

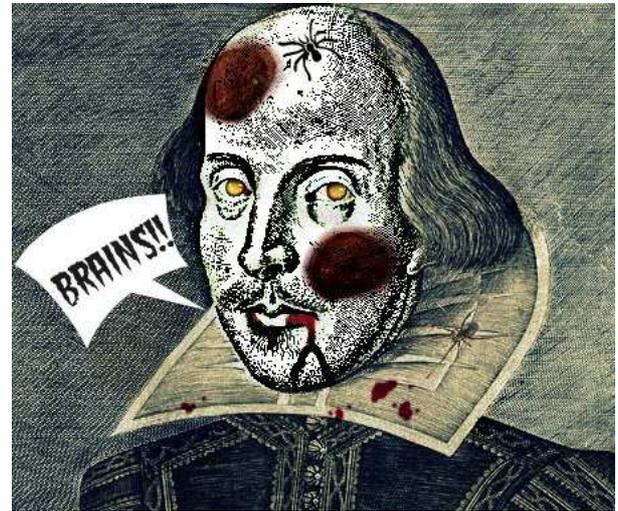
I think RII on the whole is a very powerful play and it is therefore astonishing that it's hardly known. Everybody involved in the production is doing a great job and I have so far enjoyed every minute of the process. I hope the audience will enjoy watching the show as much as I did rehearsing and (eventually) performing it.

That's all from me for this, my first newsletter. See you all soon! All questions, comments, thoughts and jokes to robbie.swale@gmail.com.

I'll leave you with pictures from Julia Atkinson – this should get you in the mood for the end of the month... Expect a newsletter not long after Hallowe'en!

Here, from Julia, are a couple of our favourite Bard's alter egos...

Zombie Bill:



And the infamous Count Wilhelm von Schutteleinspeer:

