

Shakespeare Club of Stratford-upon-Avon

The 914th meeting of the Shakespeare Club took place on Tuesday 9 January 2018. Theatre director Philip Breen gave a talk about *The Merry Wives of Windsor* titled, enigmatically, 'Shakespeare is difficult but then again so is life (largely so)', based on his new book *Walking in A Windsor Wonderland: Some Ramshackle Reflections on Directing Shakespeare's Greatest Comedy* which he described as 'punk academia'. The meeting was chaired by Janet Anslow.

Mr Breen's interest in *Merry Wives* dated from an invitation in 2012 from Michael Boyd to direct the play at the RSC. He confessed that he had been disappointed by the choice of play he had been offered but had come to place it in the top drawer of his favourites with *Blue Velvet* and *Abigail's Party*. It was pariah play, witness the judgement of critic Harold Bloom ('a weak play') and the fact that it was not taken seriously by directors, perhaps because of the story, started by Rowe in 1709, that Shakespeare had written it by command of Elizabeth I rather through inspiration. Breen endorsed Karl Marx's view that there was more fun in *Merry Wives* than in the whole of German literature though he said the humour lay in situations and character, not jokes.

Breen was a protégé of Terry Hands who directed the iconic RSC production of 1968 with Ian Richardson as Ford and whose text, based on the Bad Quarto of 1602, had been used by most UK directors since. But Breen went to the Folio text and approached it as he would *Hamlet*, looking for ways to make it work on stage rather than changing it to fit performance. He found that Shakespeare wrote the dialogue as people really spoke. The inconsistencies were there on purpose. Women, he stated, could discuss issues but men could not and this explained the different reactions to the situation of the play by the wives and their husbands. *Merry Wives* reflected the world of real marriage. He focussed briefly on two scenes often cut in performance: the Latin scene, 'the poetic Rosetta Stone' of the play, in his opinion, full of double entendres and obscenities revealing the social and emotional obsessions of Windsor society, and the German scene which provided a time lapse between Ford's exit and re-entrance.

Merry Wives was a crueller and darker view of marriage than, say, *As You Like It* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* because it was about adults not adolescents. Falstaff represented appetite and 'libido' and Ford's story was a sexual fantasy in which his wife behaved wantonly in his own imagined scenario. In conclusion Breen posited that Shakespeare's own marriage was more fully developed than was usually believed. Was Shakespeare jealous of his wife in the context of Stratford's middle class society with its private schools, sexual complexity and money? He didn't buy that Shakespeare didn't care about *Merry Wives*.

This idiosyncratic and lively talk closed at 9.00. Before drinks in the Conservatory, the Secretary invited Alan Haigh, co organiser of the annual Shakespeare Birthday Lunch, to speak about arrangements for 2018. This year the lunch would be held on Saturday, April 21 at the Crowne Plaza hotel in Stratford-upon-Avon, the same location as last year. The cost would be £44 per person, or £49 to include the boat trip from Holy Trinity to the Crowne Plaza. Tickets would be available from the RSC Box Office from 16th February and online from the 19th. Club members were encouraged to purchase their tickets as soon as possible. A few tables would be reserved for ticket-holding Club members and arrangements would be advertised to the membership in March.

The speaker on 13 February will be the actor Robert Lister, who members may recall as the Master of ceremonies at the Club Lunch in May 2016 and as Lewis Carmichael in *The Archers*. His title is 'An Actor's Life for Me' covering his long career in radio drama, legitimate theatre including the RSC, musical theatre and music hall.

After lively questions and comments the meeting closed at 9.15pm.