

## Johns Hopkins University Press Podcast

Peter Kirwan, *Shakespeare Bulletin*

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Mary Alice Yeskey

Welcome to the Johns Hopkins University Press podcast. I'm Mary Alice Yeskey with the JHU Press Journal's division. Joining us today is Dr. Peter Kirwan. Peter was recently named editor of the journal *Shakespeare Bulletin* after three years serving as performance reviews editor. Peter is an associate professor of early modern drama at the University of Nottingham. He has two co-edited collections out this month: *Shakespeare's Audiences* with Matteo Pangallo from Routledge and *The Arden Research Handbook of Shakespeare and Contemporary Performance* with Kathryn Prince from Bloomsbury. He is the author of The Bardathon review blog and is currently working on a new edition of *The Winter's Tale* for the fourth series of *The Art in Shakespeare*.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Peter.

Peter Kirwan

It's a pleasure to be here, thank you.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I always like to ask folks, sort of like a superhero question, what's your origin story? In terms of, how did you end up focusing on Shakespeare as your area of study?

Peter Kirwan

Sure, so for me Shakespeare came quite late into my academic career. I was from a background where I didn't really have a lot of experience of higher education or theatre. I was one of the first in my family to come to university, and when I first came to university I came in with an interest, an amateur interest, in drama but had no real experience of seeing Shakespeare in the theatre and I didn't know. I felt Shakespeare seemed interesting, but I didn't have any particular pull towards it. It was during my master's degree really, when I was studying near Stratford-upon-Avon, and I was studying there from 2005 to 2007 which coincided with the Royal Shakespeare Company doing a complete works festival. They had 54 productions from around the world in all languages, all performance styles, different political agendas, and I was there, and I was entitled to five-pound tickets cause I was under 25 so I thought well, I'm never going to get a chance, so I went to see every single one.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Wow. All of them?

Peter Kirwan

All of them, all of them. So, 54 productions in 52 weeks.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Holy cow.

Peter Kirwan

(laughs) And that for me absolutely blew my mind, it completely opened up my eyes to what Shakespeare could be for so many different people. I think, whether it's seeing austere Japanese versions of *Titus Andronicus* or seeing kids from a favela in Rio doing a version of *The Two Gentleman of Verona* or seeing a cross-continental production from India of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with people speaking in seven different languages, no surtitles, just perform with one another through their bodies. It really made me see that this was a place of infinite variety and could mean different things to different people, and that made me say that this was what I want to do (laughs) and I've never looked back from that really.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's a really impressive thing to do in terms of your first, that's jumping into the deep end head first, you know what I mean? I feel like I've seen a decent amount of Shakespeare, but I could probably count on two hands and one foot how many shows I've seen (laughs). That's very impressive, wow. So, from that point how did you end up coming on as editor of *Shakespeare Bulletin*?

Peter Kirwan

So, during that complete works festival, I started keeping a blog called The Bardathon which has been going well since 2006 now, so 15 years, and that blog got me into reviewing Shakespeare, and ever since then I've reviewed every production and drama. I've seen several hundred now, and a few years ago I was asked if I would come on board with the *Shakespeare Bulletin* as the performance reviews editor. I'd been writing reviews for the journal for some time and Paul Prescott and Roberta Barker, my predecessors, I'd worked closely with them, and they asked if I'd like to come on and use my expertise as a performance reviewer to help edit other people's reviews. So, I've done that for a few years and that's meant I've been working very closely with Kathryn Prince, the journal editor. So, when Kathryn did make the decision to step down at the start of last year it was a fairly easy decision for me to step in and start working and start kind of managing that handover. So, in that sense, it was part of me being already in there and working with it but part of this as well is that while I've been performance reviews editor I've been working to diversify the journal's contributor base and particularly to think about the journal as an international journal. Making sure we're covering productions from all around the world, and in that sense, it allowed me when I came on as editor to also bring on a fascinating bunch of people to come advise on the journal, so we've extended the board. We've taken on a

fantastic new performance reviews editor, Katy Santos, and we're really exploring what the journal can be as a truly international journal, I think.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's outstanding, and that actually is a really great segue to my next question which you mostly just answered I think but to find out if you have any additional thoughts: What would you say, given that there are, you know, so many journals about Shakespeare, what makes *Shakespeare Bulletin* different? How is that different from other journals that are studying the works of Shakespeare?

Peter Kirwan

The particular remix of *Shakespeare Bulletin* is Shakespeare performance studies, and this is a discipline which I think still kind of in some ways exists in a very nebulous sense but has very importantly been defined by Bill Worthen and by some of the work which Kathryn and I have been doing in a recent editor collection that's in fact coming out this month. And Shakespeare performance studies really straddles the disciplinary boundaries of literature and theatre and performance studies particularly in ways that other journals don't have such a specific focus. So, with *Shakespeare Bulletin* we're covering Shakespeare as performance from the early modern period up until the present day and across media, but I think the other thing that *Shakespeare Bulletin* is, and we're not unique in, but we've particularly wanted to put an emphasis on accessibility. That we really want to be a positive force in soliciting and nurturing great scholarship from people at all career stages. So one of our things, we're trying to be distinct but also trying to really shape the field is in making it as easy as possible for people to publish with us and as open as possible and as open-minded as possible to the kinds of scholarship that we're publishing within that remix.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That leads me to something I wanted to ask about which was that the Fall 2009 issue has just been made open access, and I wanted to ask you about that and how that decision got made and sort of the why behind that.

Peter Kirwan

So, there was a really important call-out last year by the RaceB4Race executive board, a scholarly community dedicated to anti-racism within the discipline of pre-modern studies, and all journal editors were approached to say what are we going to do to help with this. Now, one of the things which we immediately noticed is that we haven't published a special issue on Shakespeare and race and related forms since 2009 and that's far too long. So, one of the things we wanted to do was make that last issue open access partly because it's a phenomenal special issue edited by Ayanna Thompson and full of some really exciting scholarship. But it also, I think, shows the broad range of the kinds of material that we can be doing and I'm particularly keen that the journal be a force in promoting critical race studies. Especially as both

in America and in the UK critical race studies has had something of a kicking from politicians despite the fact that it is absolutely crucial to understanding the structures of the world today and the problems that people of color are affected by and that indeed we're all affected by, and in that sense I was very keen to show this special issue which has interviews with practitioners, which has performance articles, which has fantastic reviews, which has historical focused essays, and show the range of how Shakespeare performance studies intersect with critical race studies in the hope of soliciting some more great work. And I'm really pleased that we've got a forthcoming special issue on Shakespeare and social justice later in 2021 which will be revisiting some of these ideas, I think, but also expanding them in many new intersectional directions and that's something we're really hoping to do, to kind of draw on the best of the work the journal has published and use that to inspire new work and to see what the journal can really be doing.

Mary Alice Yeskey

The social justice issue, that sounds outstanding, and you said that was coming out when? In the fall of this year?

Peter Kirwan

Yeah, it should be our winter issue, just waiting for everything to go through the processes.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I will make sure to put a link to the special issue on Shakespeare, race and performance in the show notes so our listeners can get right to that from this podcast. So, my next question is given that you've seen so many performances, what if any, is there one that just stands out as the most unique or the most memorable or just simply your favorite, the one that blew you away the most? Can you give us an example of a performance that really is stuck with you and will for the rest of your life?

Peter Kirwan

Yeah, there are a lot of really memorable productions but I think the one which is stuck in my mind the most, not necessarily for the happiest reasons but because it was such an extraordinary event, was the performance of a 2016 production of *The Taming of the Shrew* at Shakespeare's Globe in London directed by Caroline Burns. And it was a really fascinating production for many reasons, it was a part of one of the early productions in the globe's drive to have fifty-fifty gendered casting on the stage. It was set in 1916 to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Easter Rising, so a predominately Irish cast, and exploring *The Taming of the Shrew* through ideas of suffragettes and independence and all kinds of ideas. But this particular performance, there was quite a nasty accident just before the interval in that the actor playing Catherine, Catherine Rose O'Brien, broke her ankle on stage.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Oh my gosh.

Peter Kirwan

And I don't think she realized she's done it at first, but they had a particular set piece involving ropes and she clearly stood up and had hurt herself, and she got off stage, and I remember it was a long interval, about 45 minutes, during which we started realizing something was wrong, and eventually they came out and explained what was going on. It turned out she'd hurt her ankle but because it was in preview, they hadn't yet got an understudy ready. So, what they decided to do was to carry on with the performance, and basically, the guy playing Petruchio carried her for the rest of the performance, and I've never seen a production like it because it transformed the entire second half of that production of *The Taming of the Shrew* into something very complex as this taming happened, this abuse, but also happened with immense loving care as one actor literally supported the other and helped them around. It took away the fight from that and instead turned it into something where a physical collaboration of care was being juxtaposed with the language of abuse and it created such a bizarre performance, and such a moving performance in many ways. Bolstered of course by the fact that we were all, the whole audience, was absolutely rallying behind them and recognizing that they were going through something completely unplanned, and it was just breathtaking and one of the most extraordinary bits of theatre I've ever been in, and then she left the production just after that. She couldn't continue, she was too badly injured, so she was recast, and I spoke to her in Quebec after that because as it was in previews, I was one of the only people who reviewed the performance who'd actually seen her perform the role that she had helped create.

So, I pick just a moment of just why Shakespeare performance is so alive for me because it's, obviously one hopes that one doesn't see actors break their feet on stage all the time, for the better of something new, but it's a reminder of how alive these events are and how complex their meanings are, and that for me is what keeps things fresh and makes what we do so important, because it feels like we're kind of on the front line, really, trying to interpret what's happening and make sense of that and make it useful and meaningful for the people who follow us.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That is a terrific story. I'm trying to picture what that must have been like and felt like and how much that circumstance just fuzzed the line between love and hate and how, you know, you can play it pretty straight with, you know, them butting heads and then what happens in the end, but that must have been really moving, to sort of see how the binary of love versus abuse can have a whole lot of grey area, you know.

Peter Kirwan

Absolutely, absolutely, and I certainly don't think it solved the play at all, but it created something which I don't think could have been planned for.

Mary Alice Yeskey

And will never happen again. I mean, that's the thing about live performance. Again, like you said we don't want anyone else to break their ankle (laughs) but wow, what a great story. I got chills listening to you tell that, thank you. So, what advice would you give to scholars that are looking to submit to *Shakespear Bulletin*?

Peter Kirwan

I suppose one practical thing, which might sound facetious, is do read the guidance. We've worked really hard and one thing I've done since starting as editor is to overhaul our guidance and make sure it's as clear as possible. But more importantly, I think, don't be scared. I think that sometimes the stakes of submitting to a journal can seem extraordinarily high, I think people feel that it's a kind of all or nothing approach, that if it's not perfect then that will be the one chance, and one of the things I'm really trying to reinforce with the journal is that it's a collaboration right from the start. So for instance, if something needs a bit of work before I send it out to peer reviewers, I will absolutely give authors the chance to do that bit of work. I'll give them some feedback before we send it out, then when reports come back, I synthesize them, I give guidance, we discuss the next steps forward. I always give people advice on what to do next, if it's not right for the journal, and that I think is, I would really like people to see submitting to this journal as, you know, it still has all the rigor of course of full scholarly review and we work very very hard to make sure that the articles are the highest possible quality, but it's not a trick, it's not a game. The reason we do this work is because we're invested in creating the best possible work there is, and that to me is the process of collaboration. So, I'm always happy for people to get in touch with me, to run ideas past me, and to even ask questions before they submit a thing. It's not a test, you know. It's about working with the authors.

Mary Alice Yeskey

I think sometimes scholars, in their anxiety just like you said, somehow you just get this mentality that the editors are there to prevent you from being published, but the editors want you to be published so much and all the things you just described and all the decisions you make and all of the feedback is there because you all have the same goal. As opposed to, like you said, like there isn't this wall between you and the folks doing the research, so that's wonderful, that you've got such a positive outlook on being an advocate for the scholarship.

Peter Kirwan

Well, I think we all want to create the kind of journal that we would want to submit to, and I think that's really important because otherwise it feels like there are kind of hidden rules almost, and I suppose that's what I'm really keen to make clear. That there are no hidden rules. There's no hidden criteria, that the journal editor is just as approachable as any other academic and I would really like people to feel able to kind of talk to the journal and ask these questions and consider whether something is a good fit and work with us on those articles.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Excellent. Thank you so much. My last question is, for someone who has never read a line of Shakespeare and may think to themselves, oh I can't understand it, it's too intimidating, it's beyond me, it's not my area of study, what would you say to someone who wants to read Shakespeare but is intimidated to do so?

Peter Kirwan

This might not be surprising, but I would definitely say watch a performance. But I think one of the things I'd particularly push is watch a performance that emerges from your work. One of the things about Shakespeare performance, in particular, is that communities all over the world are doing that, and whether that's going to see it, in non-covid times, going to see it in the local park and seeing it happen in your community, seeing productions that are designed for people from your age group or from your home country, and I think looking for those points of access is important. But the other reason I say watch a performance is that there is so much in Shakespeare that comes alive in the physicality and the sound of it, but more importantly in letting it pass, letting it wash over you. I say this to my students that when they're trying to read a difficult play or a play they've not come across before, they get absolutely bogged down wanting to understand every syllable, every word. They feel that they've got to understand all the footnotes and it makes reading the plays into something that takes days at times when I think that if you're watching a performance somewhere, a film or theatre or what have you, you're watching it in real-time and you don't have the time to stop here and go back and read the notes and work out what the words mean. If something isn't clear you just have to go with it and get that broad sense of what's happening and for me, this is what I think: I think letting it happen to you I think in performance can be such a wonderful way of overcoming those anxieties about understanding every word and instead letting the whole thing have an impact. Having an emotional experience to it, having a body experience to it, you know, rather than thinking it's something you've got to understand in your head, and I think for me that's the way into it and that's certainly what worked for me when I was struggling.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's such great advice and as you said it stuck me to because I thought if you said to someone, read the script of this movie, a modern movie, versus go to the theatre in surround sound and watch this movie. What the difference is, and I think your metaphor was outstanding, that's really helpful to help people understand. I think people forget it wasn't meant to be read. I mean he's a playwright, it was meant to be performed. I mean, that was his point, that was why he did it, so.

Peter Kirwan

Well, and reading plays is a skill, you know. It's not something we innately have, and reading plays can be a wonderful thing and I think their written forms can be great as well but it's about to coming to Shakespeare in a form you're used to rather than thinking you've got to learn an entirely new vocabulary in order to even be able to engage with it, I think.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Exactly. Thank you so much for taking the time with us today Peter, I really appreciate it.

Peter Kirwan

My pleasure, thank you very much for having me.