

INTRODUCTION
TO
BARD IN THE YARD: KING LEONARDO
&
BARD IN THE YARD: THE SCOTTISH PLAY

By Dominic Cavendish

Bard in the Yard: not just a script, but a document for the ages of a tour de force fightback against 2020's theatrical doom and gloom.

It's almost fading into the haze of a dream, or rather, an involuntary shudder at a hair-whitening nightmare: that protracted period when the unthinkable happened and theatres were closed, a misfortune felt particularly acutely during the opening round of collective bewilderment.

Shell-shocked days after March 16 2020 turned into dumb-struck weeks; an awareness that the darkness was set to last months, if not years, grew. 'A plague on both your houses' had sat for centuries as a quaint figure of speech. At a stroke, Covid-19 brought home the reality of that curse, its mortal connotation and implied ruination. Of course the health emergency – and daily news of personal tragedies – took centre-stage, but the related suspension of a regular pastime, theatre-going - now rendered out of reach, at best an 'online' activity – was a huge shock.

The theatre 'houses' in Shakespeare's day were shut by the authorities for protracted periods, including late 1592 and throughout 1593 – not so very long before *Romeo and Juliet* was composed, circa 1595/6; plague furthermore is an integral part of the plot that prevents a messenger reaching Romeo to keep him up to speed with Juliet's feigned death.

In due course, the National staged a 'lockdown' R&J, with Josh O'Connor and Jessie Buckley, broadcast about a year into the pandemic. Way before that, though, Bard in the Yard affirmed – daringly, in the flesh – just how much Shakespeare had become 'our contemporary' (to borrow the Polish critic Jan Kott's famous phrase). The brain-child of Victoria Gartner, artistic director of the Shakespeare-oriented Will & Co, this cleverly portable, and mass-enactable, one-person show couldn't have been more creatively or socially apposite that peculiar summer.

Amid a wilderness where once there had been plenty, it was the first significant green shoot of theatrical possibility, presented within days of the Government finally giving the go-ahead for outdoor performances, with social distancing, from July 11.

As the published text makes clear, it contained a good and topical *Romeo and Juliet* gag, anachronistically rejigging a line from the play to nod to the present malady. 'Will', conceived as inspiration-bereft, and plague-constrained, interacts with an audience-member, trying to use a

snatch of an old hit to get the juices flowing: “Oh that I were a glove upon that hand, / For health and safety reasons that I might touch that cheek.”

And there was plenty more wit where that came from. I particularly enjoyed: “Since the bakers in Southwark have all closed, I’ve also made a lot of sourdough bread. I’ve binged the entire works of Ovid, Seneca, Cicero and Holinshed.” Just prior to the pandemic, but felled by it, Ben Elton’s *Upstart Crow* had come into the West End as the reigning monarch of Bardic bio-spoof. It’s no hyperbole, though, to say that the comedy value was just as pronounced in Gartner’s script.

And the latter felt more like a collector’s item. A playful fancy that was previously an indulgence for waggish minds, Shakespeare-steeped or not, had become a play for today. The writer’s block conceit – familiar also from Stoppard’s *Shakespeare in Love* – achieved a rare urgency; the immortal genius’s own presumed and plausible moments of creative crisis meeting with our own need to rekindle theatre, find a way forward.

One obvious difference between 2020 and 1605 – another annus horribilis for plague, closing playhouses, and resulting, so it has been much suggested, in *King Lear*, conceived here as a work-in-progress called *King Leonardo* – was that back then there was no professional commentariat. For a critic trying to earn a crust in the pandemic, gratitude doesn’t come close to describing what one felt about those striving to ensure that the show must go on.

I remember hastily trying to track down Gartner on the phone, when the news of her venture was announced, much as if a new play by Pinter had been discovered. The journalistic tag-line immediately formed – thanks to a handful of other like-minded projects in the offing – of ‘Deliveroo theatre’. From that flowed some immediately interesting thoughts on how theatre as a form might reconnect, at a grass-roots level, with its audience. Here was the most elemental form of community theatre, in theory – providing a ‘to-your-doorstep’ service for those stuck at home.

It felt like a fascinating throwback to the peripatetic nature of theatre in Shakespeare’s day, especially during plague outbreaks in London. And the core proposition – one actor harnessing the imagination of the audience – felt like a provocative reminder about the ‘O for a Muse of fire’ essence of theatre.

Gartner and I talked for 20 minutes or so, during which she cheerily declared she’d had the inspiration during one of her daily walks and “like an insane person” had decided to make it happen, with the help of her producer Charlie Mackellar, in the first instance as a means of getting her industry back into work and out of its negative spiral of despair and complaint. Even with the best Will in the world, good ideas can dwindle in execution, and I was primarily glad to be out of the house, and visiting someone else’s, when I headed to Stratford, East London, on July 18th to watch my first live, in-person performance since March 16th.

It's no lie to say, though, that I will remember the hour spent in the company of Jonathan Blakeley, the first of dozens of actors to deliver the script that summer, for years to come. Here, in a small patch of garden, was an affirmation of the power and courage of actors per se – horribly denigrated in some corners of Government during the darkest days of that summer; and here was the miracle cure needed for a heavy heart. It felt as if this one little show didn't just let the handful of us watching it suspend disbelief, as we had been able to do as a matter of course before; it created a higher level of appreciation and connection. A lot of talk flew around at that time about our 'human' need for storytelling; suddenly, you felt that on the bone. Equally, assumptions about individual genius ever float to the fore; here was a reminder that 'nothing will come of nothing', society feeds us.

A profound work of art? In itself, sure, it was 'only' a divertissement, but the freshness and colloquial looseness of the material was an achievement in itself given the pressures of the moment. As a marker of what was possible in impossible circumstances, it deserves being preserved as a document for the ages, as well as a source of passing entertainment in its own right. The fact that Gartner produced a follow-up, which I didn't alas see at the time, but have since read, was even more impressive. Everyone was flagging in 2021. Rather than flogging a dead horse, she was still pressing the case for coltish energy.

'Necessity is the mother of invention' is a cliché exemplified by desperate times. Theatre can have it tough in the best of years. I hope no future generation of artists has to come up with the goods, in such a frantic fashion. But there are long-term ramifications to be found in these pages about the kind of theatre we venerate, and the kind of practitioners who get supported. Ronald Harwood subtitled his biography of the actor-manager Donald Wolfit – *His Life and Work in the Unfashionable Theatre*; Wolfit, the great pedlar of Shakespeare in the provinces, and a heroic rallier for him as a national figurehead through his wartime performances, was self-financed, on the margins, and to some extent sniffily under-appreciated.

Shakespeare is lavishly supported in some parts of the subsidised sector, but we would do well to remember – and Bard in the Yard was proof positive – that the biggest beasts can be outshone by the smallest players. As a logistical feat, an artistic boon and a social and professional 'good', a venture like this warrants official acknowledgment even if it couldn't hope to get full state support. All told, it afforded memorable delight by the yard. To quote Hamlet, 'For this relief, much thanks.'

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24 April 2022