



Big, bold Bard

From prisons to schools,
Shakespeare still holds court,
writes **Blanche Clark**

DR Rob Pensalfini has an explanation for the perpetual appeal of Shakespeare.
“It’s gutsy, it’s immediate, it doesn’t back off,” the Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble artistic director says.

“The language, the words, the images, the poetry and the way this dude has put these experiences down into words is powerful.

“Shakespeare gives us the words to describe the sorts of experiences that normally shut us up or shut us down.”

But Pensalfini didn’t always extol the virtues of the Bard.

“I hated Shakespeare at school,” he says.

“It wasn’t until I was an actor and went overseas and saw what other people were doing with Shakespeare, that I thought, ‘Hang on, this stuff is really relevant’.”

The senior lecturer at the University of Queensland’s School of English, Media Studies and Art History is now taking Shakespeare behind bars.

Up to 12 prisoners at Borallon Correctional Centre, near Brisbane, will learn and perform scenes from Shakespeare’s plays this month.

It’s a pilot program, supported by the University of Queensland, in the lead-up to the World Shakespeare Congress next month.

Pensalfini says the aim is to help prisoners manage their emotions and to contribute to society when they are released.

Pensalfini says American Brent Blair, an actor and counsellor who founded the US Theatre of the Oppressed Centre, will train Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble actors for the four-week prison program.

Blair has found that though many prisoners

have poor literacy levels, they have no trouble with Shakespeare’s language, he says.

“They are experiencing the language through the spoken word, through the body, not as something you study off the page.

“I have to admit, I can’t sit down and open a Shakespeare play and read it silently. I get lost and have no idea what is going on.

“But if I sit around with a group of friends and read it out loud . . . bang, the whole thing comes to life.”

Bell Shakespeare’s Actors at Work program is offering Victorian schools the Macbeth Intensive and two other programs.

The actors perform key scenes, stopping at intervals to discuss the themes and characters.

“The scenes are a good length, little grabs that capture the essence of the story,” actor Chris Ryan says.

“You realise these characters are human and there’s a little bit of each of us in them, because they are flawed just like us.”

Ryan says dictators such as Saddam Hussein and events such as the Russian Revolution are explored in an accompanying script written by actor/teacher Ned Manning.

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Magic and mayhem

► The Victorian College of the Arts offers acting workshops for secondary-school students during the school holidays. The Magic, Murder and Mayhem workshop introduces secondary students, aged up to 16, to Shakespeare’s works and characters. Students will gain acting skills that can be applied to any text.

► **June 26-30. \$396. Bookings and information, ph: 9685 9229 or email foundation.info@vca.unimelb.edu.au**



Debut: St Catherine's Year 8 students Rosie McCann, Helena Proimos and Bronte Ratcliffe in a scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Picture: NORM OORLOFF

Big, bold Bard is here to stay

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"We talk a lot about the characters in a contemporary way that the students can relate to and it breaks down the idea that Shakespeare is archaic," he says.

A scene between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, in which she urges him to kill the king, Duncan, is presented as a heated conversation, then again with Lady Macbeth taking on a seductive quality, he says.

"We talk about how it is similar to something you see in *Desperate Housewives*," Ryan says.

He's impressed at how much students get fired up about the Bard.

"The great thing about Shakespeare is you can talk about it for a long time and clear answers are never given," Ryan says.

"He presents so many complex issues and you can have endless debates."

St Catherine's School drama head Michael Bond says it is important to take the scare factor out of Shakespeare.

"If students become familiar with Shakespeare at an early age, it's not a great shock when they get it at Years 9 and 10."

St Catherine's recent Year 7 and 8 production *Channel Surfing* was a modern-

day take of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Comedy of Errors*.

Bond simplified the language and explored the theme of our time-poor society with two concurrent performances between which audiences "flicked".

"The biggest problem the students had was understanding the story lines, particularly *The Comedy of Errors*," he says.

But Bond says students find it easier to study Shakespeare in Year 9 if they are already familiar with the plot.

"When the kids start to understand Shakespeare and the way it's written, they get a much greater appreciation of the language and how clever Shakespeare was," he says.

Despite the title *Channel Surfing*, Bond sees little value in drawing parallels between Shakespeare and television.

"I believe television simplifies and stereotypes characters and plot, whereas Shakespeare is broader."

► **World Shakespeare Congress in Brisbane, July 16-21. Visit www.shakespeare2006.net**

► **Bell Shakespeare, ph: 1300 305 730, education@bellshakespeare.com.au or www.bellshakespeare.com.au/education2006/index.html**