

**“Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” –
Shakespeare and the Capacity to Sustain Complexity**

Keynote Address to ETAQ State Conference

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by Dr Rob Pensalfini

Artistic Director, Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble
Senior Lecturer, School of English, University of Queensland
r.pensalfini@uq.edu.au

PROLOGUE

Under your pardon. You must note beside,
That we have tried the utmost of our friends,
Our legions are brim-full, our cause is ripe:
The enemy increaseth every day;
We, at the height, are ready to decline.
There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat;
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

(Brutus, from *Julius Caesar*)

That seems like a very contemporary speech to me. A booming economy of questionable sustainability. An ageing hegemony held in place by military muscle and a strong desire to flex it, that seems to gather more enemies every day. Looming crises – political, environmental, moral... “We, at the height, are ready to decline/There is a tide in the affairs of men.”

INTRODUCTION

I would first like to thank ETAQ for the opportunity to speak today to this audience of committed and passionate teachers. Great teaching changes lives – it is inspiring, challenging, and empowering. Some of the things I have to say this afternoon may be controversial and confrontational, but it is only because of the great teachers who have inspired and encouraged me over the decades that I am able to articulate these heresies to you in the first place.

People often ask me “Why Shakespeare”? Why should we listen to Shakespeare’s words today, four hundred years after they were written, in a world that is surely vastly different to the one that Shakespeare lived in.

I think there are at least ten distinct sound answers to this question, but I propose to focus on just one of those as the theme of what I have to say today: Speaking and listening to Shakespeare can build our capacity to sustain complexity. The capacity to sustain complexity is a quality that is essential for humans to act as effective free agents in an increasingly complex world, and yet it is a capacity which is actively dissuaded by contemporary political, social, and cultural leaders – of all persuasions.

Speaking Shakespeare is therefore a radical act, in defiance of a dominant paradigm which demands that we simplify our thinking to black and white, right and wrong, with us or against us, Australian or un-Australian, hot or not, and who shall we vote off the island this week.

THE PRE-QSE DAYS

When I was in high school, in the 1980s, I hated Shakespeare. We studied *Henry IV, Part 1* and *Hamlet*. I remember my teacher writing "Drama = Conflict" on the Blackboard, explaining Aristotle's theory of tragedy and making us learn terms like *hubris* and *hamartia* and attempting to apply them to *Hamlet*. It made no sense to me, and what little I could understand of the plays did not seem to fit the neat dissection that my teacher was proposing. Seeing the plays just made things worse, as our exposure was either to the interminable BBC productions or else to allegedly live performances from actors declaiming with great enunciation and projection but no real passion in upper class British accents (or, for the clown roles, regional British accents), and prancing about in doublet and hose. Not my world. Not my accent. Not my story.

This distaste for, even dislike of, Shakespeare stayed with me through most of my twenties, as I became actively involved with theatre, first in my native Perth then later in Boston, where I had moved to do my PhD in linguistics. I became particularly interested in the political role of theatre, though I was put off by the often didactic and preachy nature of 'big-P' Political Theatre (especially Brecht). While I was in Boston, I had the good fortune to work with theatre artists who had been part of Grotowski's Second Studio. From them I learned about ensemble theatre, and the way in which ensemble theatres were typically driven by a desire to effect socio-political change, or at least disturbance.

At this point I began to conceive the idea of an ensemble theatre, an artistic community, and began to think about how I might achieve this once I returned to Australia. Shakespeare was actually final element in the mix, not the starting point. While I was in the USA, I saw productions of Shakespeare that completely smashed my previous ideas about what Shakespeare was. I saw actors speaking in their own accents and their own voices. When they spoke, the words made sense. They meant what they were saying, and they said what they meant. More importantly, the words awoke thoughts and feelings in me. I found myself hearing the words and thinking "yeah, I've felt that" or "that's so well put". Time and time again ideas or experiences I had had were being expressed in ways that were more precise and articulate than I could manage, but with all the passion I had always felt. And when ideas that were new or alien to me were expressed, they were expressed with levels of passion, precision, and presence that allowed me to understand them, to see a new perspective on things.

I was lucky enough, in subsequent years, to work with Shakespeare & Company, the largest year-round Shakespeare festival in the USA, and with Kristin Linklater, the legendary voice and Shakespeare teacher. They helped me to get Shakespeare's words into my own mouth, into my own body, into my own voice. And I found a way to express myself more fully, more articulately, more passionately than I had ever been able to before. I stopped wearing black.

Shakespeare seemed to me to be the perfect vehicle for an ensemble theatre. An ensemble made up of a multiplicity and diversity of creative forces deserves a playwright whose work embraces and encourages a multiplicity and diversity of perspectives, who embraces and expresses the complexity of the world, not reducing it to simple principles and symbols; a text that raises questions and shares experiences, not one that presumes a moral right and tells us what our experiences ought to be.

The Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble (QSE) was founded to fill a gap in Australian Shakespeare performance, where language had either become marginalised or intellectualised. Most Shakespeare performance in Australia is still of the sort that turned me off in high school. It is amazing to me how many actors, at all levels, still put on upper class English accents when performing Shakespeare, long after the British themselves stopped doing it! Why should a 10th century Danish prince or an 11th century Scottish king, being played by a 21st century Australian actor, in a play written by a 16th century Warwickshireman, speak in an early-mid 20th century upper-class London accent? The voice is neither historically accurate to the tale, historically accurate to the playwright, nor culturally appropriate to the audience. This practice only separates the language from the experiences of both speaker and hearer, and sends the message that we are not enough, or somehow not right, for these words, as we are.

On the other hand, and largely in reaction to this tradition, is the approach to Shakespeare that marginalises language. That represents the plays in simple visual symbols, stripping away the complexities and nuances found in the poetry and choice of words. Language, when present, is secondary to spectacle.

QSE seeks a third path, to engage with the language and make it our own. We value embodied (“gutsy”) performance of language that speaks from our experience in our voices, to our fellow community members, in service of the community.



The 2007 QSE core ensemble and apprentices

QSE'S ACTIVITIES

Like most theatre companies, among QSE's major activities are public performances. We see this as only one branch of the company, albeit a very important and potentially our most public one.

In recent years, we have begun to develop innovative productions, mostly Shakespeare, which remain true to the complexities of the text while still reaching our audiences. What you see here are pictures from some of our performances from 2003-2007.



QSE's 2005 *Comedy of Errors* directed by Rob Pensalfini (photos by Emma Tonkin)

First of all, our 2005 re-gendered production of *Comedy of Errors*, which, by the way, will be re-mounted in 2008 in Roma Street Parkland. By ‘re-gendered’ I do not mean cross-cast. All of the male roles were re-created as female roles and vice versa. This was done with minimal textual changes, and always preserving the rhythmic structure and where possible the sound-sense of Shakespeare's text. Thus Dromio became Dromia, Antipholus – Antiphola, Luciano became Luciana, and Duke Solinus became Queen Solina. The world was one in which women do the adventuring, the fighting, carry on mercantile trade, and visit (male) courtesans. The men stay at home.

The reason behind this change was not conceptual. It was because of the actors we had in the company at the time. The ensemble at that point seemed well suited to this play, only that the genders of the actors best suited to the roles happened to be the opposite of those indicated in the text. One option would have been to do the play 'in drag', but we chose instead to re-gender the text because we expected that it would allow contemporary audiences to see the relationships and themes with a fresh eye. What audiences reported at post-production symposia was that indeed the gender relationships were highlighted, but also, somewhat unexpectedly and most happily, that the class relationships were heightened. The violence in the play, often trivialised or made invisible, was made more potent to an audience who might be somewhat numbed to traditional male master-servant violence but who were not used to images of a woman beating her maid.



QSE's 2005 *Comedy of Errors* directed by Rob Pensalfini (photos by Emma Tonkin)

Reviews of the play uniformly praised the clarity and lack of pretentiousness of the textual delivery. Several patrons who had not previously encountered *Comedy of Errors* expressed surprise upon learning that we had re-gendered the play, and said that they could not imagine it the other (ie original) way around.

One audience member, Dr Bronwen Levy, whose research focuses on women's writing and feminist theory and criticism, reported feeling 'giddy' at seeing women portrayed doing such a wide variety of activities (fighting, loving, cheating lying, wheeling and dealing, laughing, crying, yelling, seducing) and living such full lives on the stage. Even contemporary writing for the stage, she said, at best shows women doing one or two of these things only.





QSE's 2005 *Comedy of Errors* directed by Rob Pensalfini (photos by Emma Tonkin)

We later learned, through extensive searching for other re-gendered productions of Shakespeare, that this may well have been the first fully re-gendered text of a Shakespeare play anywhere. Note that this was in no sense a conscious 'feminist reading' or 'feminist interpretation' of Shakespeare. It was Shakespeare's language, pure and simple, with the genders simply swapped.

QSE steers away from overt and conscious 're-tellings', 're-interpretations', and especially 're-contextualisations' of Shakespeare. As Michael Bogdanov (the renowned English Shakespeare director) points out, such clever post-structural devices as setting *Othello* on a space station simply put another layer between the audience and the text that has to be waded through and unpacked before the language can be accessed. Furthermore, they invariably reduce the complexity of the text to one level, and often serve to instruct (and thereby offend the intelligence of the audience), rather than to engage and invite. To say that *The Tempest* is a play about colonisation misses the point entirely. True, there are resonances of that particular play for a post-colonial society, and these resonances should be allowed to sound out loud and clear. But there are also other resonances in the play – freedom, imprisonment, parental-filial relations (especially father-daughter, of a different flavour than those explored in *King Lear*), and much much more besides.

Nor does QSE promote the 'ruff and tight', if you will, approach to Shakespeare, dressing in Elizabethan costume. Shakespeare's company may well have dressed that way, but it wasn't because they were dressing up as Elizabethans. Pursuing that line, much like speaking in phony upper class English accents, simply sends the message that these plays are museum pieces. Possibly interesting (probably not), but nothing to be taken to heart and definitely not anything of relevance to our world and times.

On the other hand, it does not do to perform Shakespeare in jeans and t-shirts. The language, characters, relationships and themes are heightened, not naturalistic (a problematic term in any case), and the visual aesthetic ought to reflect that. QSE believes in a visual aesthetic that was Shakespeare's own (as can be seen in his language). Anachronism is welcome (after all, there are cannons in *King John* and clocks in

Julius Caesar), and whatever supports the themes that are inherent in the language, that arise from the language, rather than being imposed upon it, are welcome. You can see this clearly here, in the following pictures from our 2003 production of *Coriolanus* - as you can see the design hints at the classical world, but retains enough contemporary elements to ground it firmly in our experience of the world. Swords are swords (albeit here medieval rather than Roman weapons), not guns with "sword" written on them.



QSE's 2003 *Coriolanus* directed by Anne Pemsalfini (photos by Emma Tonkin)

QSE also produces new scripts, though these will typically be grounded in some way in Shakespeare or other classics. The next series of photographs are from our Matilda Award – winning (Best Director – Leah

Mercer) 2006 production of *Metamorphoses*. This fusion of physical theatre and strong textual practice took Ted Hughes' *Tales from Ovid* as its starting point. We focused on four of the stories in *Tales from Ovid*: Creation, Echo & Narcissus, Peleus and Thetis, and Tereus (the rape of Philomela). In this production we explored visual imagery created by human movement integrated with the physical substance of language – words and sounds. QSE's trademark live music was extended to an ongoing underscore provided by Gavin Edwards. The production was a huge critical success, though, typical of a lot of the excellent independent theatre that happens at places like !Metro Arts, not too many people saw it. Funding pending, *Metamorphoses* will be remounted at the Visy Theatre in the Brisbane Powerhouse in March of 2008.



QSE's 2006 *Metamorphoses* directed by Leah Mercer (photos by Renita Neal)

The next photos represent more of our 'new scripts' and helped to give QSE its reputation as the Shakespeare Company for people who don't like Shakespeare. *Shakespeare's Shorts* is a suite of three half hour shows comprising *The Half-hour Hamlet*, *Instant Romeo & Juliet*, and *Midsummer Mechanicals*. The latter is an excision of the mechanicals scenes from *Midsummer Night's Dream*, with the six mechanicals made four (an audience member plays the moon). The former two are condensations of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* respectively, which retain the original language and characters, albeit greatly abridged. The idea came originally from Tom Stoppard's *Dogg's Hamlet*, though the specific cuts are ours. Some highly comic doubling is involved, such as the same actor playing Romeo and Lady Capulet, and the oedipal theme of *Hamlet* is heightened by having the same actor play Ophelia and Gertrude. The reduction of cast numbers to only four or five actors leaves room in each play for some audience participation (the play within a play in *Hamlet*, for example, is performed by audience members coached by the prince), and for some necessary contemporary references, such as Horatio's receiving the news that Fortinbras is coming via text message. However, as one critic observed "The play is quite definitely *Hamlet*. It is not 'inspired by', or 'based on', or (shudder) a 're-telling of'. It's *Hamlet*. It's just shorter" (Stephen Mackie writing in *Proctor*, the journal of the Queensland Law Society).



QSE's 2007 *Shakespeare's Shorts* directed by Anne & Rob Pensalfini (photos by Morgan Roberts)

Shakespeare's Shorts are designed to be mobile and in 2006 and 2007 played at a variety of festivals, such as the Abbey Medieval Tournament and the Brookfield Show, in Brisbane City Council libraries, at corporate events, and in some schools. We are currently trying to market the shows to wineries, and shortly you will see some pictures of a performance of *Instant Romeo & Juliet* at Jester Hills winery near Stanthorpe.

Shakespeare's own company was known to tour shortened and pared down versions of the plays around the country, particularly when the London theatres were closed due to the plague. They probably toured hour-long versions of plays with seven or eight actors. We've just taken things a bit further.

As a way of bringing Shakespeare to a broader audience, QSE has established a partnership with Roma Street Parkland and with the Queensland Multicultural Festival (held in Roma Street Parkland). One of *Shakespeare's Shorts*, *theHalf-hour Hamlet*, featured at this year's Multicultural Festival, and in October, QSE performed *Much Ado About Nothing* in the amphitheatre in the Parkland for a three week season, directed by Jo Loth. There was live music, pre-show entertainment and food available. This proved to be QSE's biggest-selling show to date, reaching a wider variety of patrons than any previous QSE production largely due to its casual and inclusive atmosphere. Photos from this production are not yet available.

Specialised training is required to maintain the kind of performance ensemble that QSE needs in order to embody the ideals I am talking about today. Most contemporary actor training programs train actors to be passive participants in the dramatic processes, often little more than meat puppets whose bodies, voices,

memories, and emotions are sold to the service of a director, and their job becomes to make the director's interpretation come to life. Many actor training programs actually teach actors to 'switch their brains off' or 'leave their minds at the door'. In many actor training programs, engagement with language is minimal and the importance of language is trivialised. Actors are taught to focus largely on "subtext" rather than on the specifics and intricacies of text. The result, when it comes to Shakespeare, is often an actor who washes a nuanced forty line speech with one emotion – "I'm angry/sad/happy."

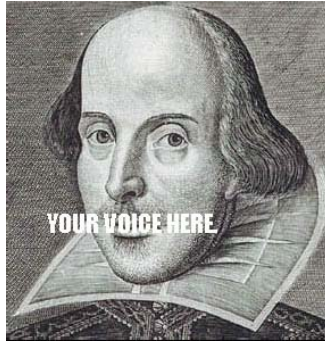
QSE therefore has its own training program, built principally on the work of Kristin Linklater and Tina Packer (my teachers), but now incorporating a variety of techniques and ideas from physical and political theatre as well. QSE teaches that speaking is an act of the body, that language is action, that words have meaning, and that acting is telling the truth – the actor's personal truth.



from QSE training programs 2003-2005 (photos by Emma Tonkin)

At the cornerstone of our training are two programs called "Speaking Shakespeare in Your Own Voice" and "Freeing the Natural Voice". These are programs which are available to the general public as well, though our core actors also undertake advanced training in improvisation, movement, verse-speaking, and use of Shakespeare's First Folio as an acting text.

In Speaking Shakespeare in Your Own Voice, actors are introduced to the idea that acting is about revealing aspects of ourselves, not hiding behind a character or pretending to be something we are not. Indeed, we eschew the notion of "character", preferring to think instead of Juliet, Prospero, Macbeth, Cleopatra and so on as "roles". In the same way that in my life I play the roles of friend, lover, husband, father, son, brother, teacher, colleague et cetera but I am still always myself, so the Shakespearean actor steps into a role in order to better express aspects of her own experience. Actors are encouraged to find their own resonances with the words, and explore through the experience of speaking the text what does it mean for them to say these words, here, now, and to these people.



from QSE training flyer 2006-2007

“Freeing the Natural Voice” is a term coined by Kristin Linklater, and it is Linklater’s voice work that is taught here. I myself am a designated Linklater teacher, one of only five in Australia, and the only one offering public classes in Queensland.

The ensemble itself trains together throughout the year, deepening the bonds that exist between the performers, creating an atmosphere of mutual support and trust, permitting risk-taking and vulnerability in performance, which further builds our capacity as an ensemble to sustain and convey complex social situations.

Finally, in 2006 QSE initiated a project which manifested our long-standing desire to work with disenfranchised groups, using the radicalising and mobilising power of Shakespeare to language the experiences of people whose voices have been, for one reason or another, silenced. The Arts in Community Enhancement (ACE) project trained a number of QSE’s core actors, already skilled classical performers, in the philosophies and methodologies of Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed. This is a form of applied theatre in which community members use theatrical forms to investigate ways of overcoming oppression to attain desires that have been thwarted. Oppression can be societal (racism, sexism, homophobia), inter-personal (within a relationship or social group), or internalised (what Boal calls ‘the cop in the head’).

The QSE facilitators, two men and four women, worked with a dozen prisoners in Borallon Correctional centre (a high security private prison near Ipswich), none of whom had any previous dramatic experience. At no point did we ask the prisoners to tell us why they were in prison or for how long, or to talk about their crimes, or even life in the prison, though many of them offered this kind of information at some point in the process. The initial phases of the project involved engaging the prisoners with Theatre of the Oppressed techniques in order to accustom them to the idea of using drama to express instances of rupture, or crisis, in their own lives. This phase also built camaraderie and solidarity among the group (comprising both the prisoners and the facilitators).

A large part of the success or otherwise of Theatre of the Oppressed hinges on participants’ ability to humanise their oppressors. This proved to be a difficult thing for many of the prisoners, and I believe that it is precisely this difficulty with seeing humanity in the adversary that leads to the sorts of choices that resulted in the acts that led to these men being in jail. As I will argue shortly, Shakespeare is a perfect antidote to this, as he humanises everyone in his plays, from the clowns to the kings, the monsters to the maidens. I should point out, however, that in Theatre of the Oppressed, humanising the oppressor does not mean agreeing with his point of view. The facilitator (or Joker, in Boal’s terms) is one hundred per cent on the side of the oppressed, and is at war with that which is thwarting his desire. However, our inability to see the humanity in our oppressors is a very big part of why we are thwarted. We demonise our oppressors, and that gives them the power of demons, unassailable, invincible.

On the basis of what was gleaned from this work, we offered each man a verse monologue from Shakespeare with which we believed they would have some connection.

At first, as would be expected, some of the men found the language difficult, even florid. "Why doesn't he just say it like a normal person?" We then employed the technique of physicalising the words, actually acting out the images in the text. It soon became apparent that every word was there for a reason. We also explored the rhythms of the verse, and the sounds of the words themselves. Some of the younger prisoners likened Shakespeare's writing to hip-hop for its use of rhythm, sound symbolism, and word-play.

I could give a number of examples of the texts used and the discoveries made through them, but one stands out for me: a man serving a long sentence, who at our first meeting seemed sullen, withdrawn, almost absent, and whose only words to us that first day were "thanks for coming, this is a miserable place", was offered Macbeth's final soliloquy. He found the words expressed his experience, not only in prison but of the addiction that (indirectly) led him there, with a completeness and accuracy that he himself could not have coined. You can imagine:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

He delivered this, at the end of the first phase of the project, with a simplicity and honesty that was devastating. I have heard dozens of actors, many excellent, speak these words, but I have never been so affected by them, for these words spoke him, not vice versa.

After that, he became outgoing and engaged. He turned out to be witty, fiercely intelligent, down to earth, and hard-working. He played Caliban in the production of *The Tempest* which was the next phase of the ACE project, pictures of which you can see here (the prisoners' faces are not permitted to be shown).



QSE's 2006 ACE production of *The Tempest* (photos by Jeremy Patten)

The Tempest was offered and chosen on the basis of a second round of Theatre of the Oppressed exercises, through which the desires of the group, and the themes they wanted to explore, were teased out. Power, love, isolation, loss, illusion, and imprisonment were the themes, so *The Tempest* seemed a logical choice. Rehearsals were held once a week for ninety minutes over a period of three months.

The project culminated in a single performance of an hour-long version of *The Tempest* in the prison, for an invited audience of family members, fellow prisoners, guards, administrators, and representatives of government departments.

I will never forget our Caliban delivering the following lines directly to the guards, without a hint of artifice:

I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king: and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o' the island.

As in all live theatre, some of the best moments of the performance occurred when things went wrong – lines skipped, entrances missed or several scenes too early. This cast, I dare venture more than most of the professionals I have worked with, rallied together and seamlessly continued, making sense out of mishap, order out of chaos. Our job was done.

Across the board, the participating prisoners reported that while they initially enrolled in the program as a diversion from the petty pace of prison life (and in at least one case, to meet girls), they benefited it from it in unexpected ways, principally through increased self-esteem and self-awareness. Specific comments included:

- “[the project] promoted participation, community and self-worth”
- “the project provided a contrast to the pervasive bluster and implicit violence that are common to the prison experience”
- “I began to actually feel the hurt that I had caused”
- “promoted camaraderie, friendship, and the ability to understand and communicate on an equal level with everyone involved”
- “It has allowed me to express my emotions rather than keep them locked up tight as is my usual experience as an inmate. In fact, I’ve been encouraged to do so. I’ve found this a liberating experience. I’ve been treated as a peer and my opinions have been respected.”
- “To be treated as just another person by people I respect has knocked some of the cynicism out of me.”
- “I now look to the future with courage and wonder instead of dread and fatalism.”

In short, the participants felt that they were humanised, and they responded with their own humanity. Note that the feedback did not specifically refer to Shakespeare, but the project would not have succeeded to the extent that it did without Shakespeare. Shakespeare was the vehicle, humanity the destination.

We are currently seeking funding to run the program again in 2008.

So why does QSE carry out this variety of activities? QSE seeks to engage a variety of Southeast Queensland communities with Shakespeare, beyond the traditional theatregoing crowd. We believe that Shakespeare’s theatre is essentially political, and politically essential, because it can build in our communities the capacity to sustain complexity. We believe that this power is found in Shakespeare’s drama more than in the work of any English language dramatist before or since, largely because of the sociopolitical context in which he wrote, who his audiences were, and what has happened to the theatre since his time.

WHAT WAS SHAKESPEARE’S WORLD LIKE?

Playhouses open to the general public were relatively new institutions when Shakespeare began his career (and did not long outlive him). They were places where early modern Londoners (and visitors to London) of all classes would congregate to hear the questions of their age debated. What was this age like? I hypothesise that Shakespeare’s world, Europe on the cusp of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was very much like our own, the Western world at the cusp of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These two period, separated by four hundred years, have more in common with one another, sociopolitically, than either has with the centuries that separate them.

The medieval period in Europe, the centuries before Shakespeare, was typified by religious and ontological certainty. There was essentially one religion of power, a widespread belief in a particular rigid world order, and restricted access to knowledge.

The early modern period, Shakespeare's time, threw all these certainties into question. Partly as a result of colonial expansion bringing items and news of different cultures back to Europe, partly as a result of the re-discovery of classical texts (Aristotle, Homer, Plutarch and such like) following the fall of Constantinople, the strict order and hierarchy of the medieval world was breaking down. Other ways of seeing the world became possible.

At least as significant as the internet is today, the printing press (the first one in England established around the time of Shakespeare's birth) made it possible for information to be duplicated and disseminated and previously unthought of speeds. Major works, the Bible in particular, were translated into the vernacular and were available to anyone who could read. No longer did people have to trust the reading and interpretation of the clergy. This made protestant movement like that of Martin Luther possible. Even the word of the one true God was now subject to many readings. This was further compounded by the increasing influence of non-Christian views throughout Europe.

Simultaneously, the English language was now becoming truly enfranchised as a literary language, with playwrights and poets increasingly turning away from Latin and French (by this time few English nobles could even speak French). The modern English language, the younger form of the language I am speaking today, was born.

If we go back five or six hundred years before Shakespeare, we find the roots of our language in Old English. We find a poetry that is concerned with alliteration and sound sense, and its visceral impact on the hearer (though few of the words are recognisable to our ears). The opening lines of Beowulf, for example:

*Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,
þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.
Oft Scyld Scefing sceapena þreatum,
monegum mægþum, meodosetla ofteah,
egsode eorlas.*

Split the difference between Beowulf and Shakespeare, and we find Middle English, for centuries spoken by the lower classes only, but strongly influenced by the courtly traditions of France, and littered with Latinate roots. At this time, French was the language of power, of the institutions of state. Middle English poetry is concerned much more with form and rhythm, though rich in ribald humour. The opening lines of Chaucer's *The Tales of Canterbury*:

*Whan that aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of march hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heathe
Tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(so priketh hem nature in hir corages):
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages...*

By Shakespeare's time, the language had settled into more or less its modern form, with Germanic and Latinate roots living side by side, with both rhythm and sound symbolism playing a role. More complex

than Marlowe's clockwork iambic rhythms, Shakespeare plays jazz with his poetry, allowing the sounds and senses of the words to joust with the meter of the form, layering complexities and juxtaposing sequences of Germanic and Latinate roots, as in this speech from *Macbeth*:

*If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,*

It is said that Shakespeare invented many words, and this may or may not be true. If he did, then nobody in his audience would have heard these words, so it should be no obstacle to the contemporary audience that they don't understand all of Shakespeare's words, because neither did his audience. But if he didn't invent words, he certainly coined phrases, and he certainly had his finger on the pulse of new words that were coming into the language faster than at any preceding time in the history of English.

So Shakespeare's time was a time of new ideas, new beliefs, new ways of seeing the world, new words for those new ideas, beliefs and ways of seeing, and an emerging language. Where did people go to hear these words and engage with these competing world-views? The playhouse. Playhouses were hotbeds of pluralism. It was here that one could hear the debate between medieval morality and libertinism, as in *Measure for Measure*, engage in the argument between rule by divine right and consensus, as in *Richard II*, question the nature of honour, as in *Henry IV*, or filial duty, as in *King Lear*, and so on and so forth. And I would argue that Shakespeare genuinely invites debate, asking the questions without taking sides, without providing answers.

Playhouses were therefore ideologically dangerous places. Queen Elizabeth's government for some time would not allow the deposition scene in *Richard II* to be performed.

Whenever there is a time of uncertainty in society, and a multiplicity of viewpoints with none holding absolute sway, there is a concomitant rise in fundamentalism. The fundamentalists of Shakespeare's day were the puritans, who sought to restore a unified political and religious vision to the early modern world. The puritans disliked the idea of playhouses at all, and when they came to power in England, about twenty years after Shakespeare died, they closed the playhouses.

The playhouses remained closed for almost two generations. When they eventually re-opened, now no longer play-houses, but theatres, the style of theatre that was imported from the continent, and its content, was the mannered comedy of the Restoration. This was a theatre of the elite, with its clear division of actor and audience, with its unified view of propriety, and with its concern with form and behaviour over substance and debate. And, for the most part, this is the theatre that we have inherited.

SUSTAINING COMPLEXITY – SHAKESPEARE TODAY

By now it is hopefully becoming apparent why I argue that Shakespeare's greatest contribution to contemporary society lies in the ability of his texts to build the capacity to sustain complexity. I would like to spend the rest of my time today offering some examples of the kinds of complexity inherent in his dramatic texts and why these are antidotes to the kind of thinking that is encouraged today.

We need a capacity to sustain complexity in ourselves and our communities now, more than ever since Shakespeare's times. The illusory certainties of the Age of Reason, the Victorian morality, and the optimistic self-assuredness into which the baby-boomers were born are dissolving, and we find ourselves in a world of competing and conflicting belief systems, competing scientific theories, and world-views in conflict.

One response is that of our contemporary Puritans, the various kinds of fundamentalist, that the world is not complex but simple, and there is a right path and a wrong path. Those who are on the right path shall

prosper, and those who are on the wrong path shall perish. But who gets to decide. George W. Bush said “I’m the decider, and I decide what’s best” and those words should ring ominously in our ears. He also said “You are either with us or against us.” Our own Prime Minister uses phrases like “un-Australian” and speaks of a set of “Australian values”, with the clear implication that there a correct view of what is acceptable. Political correctness is simply the equivalent fundamentalism from the other side of the political fence.

Literary fundamentalism encourages us to reduce events and texts to specific meanings and symbols, rather than allowing complex meaning to resonate. JRR Tolkien put it best, in his foreword to the 1966 second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, when he said “I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.”

Good Shakespeare always relies on the freedom of the audience, because Shakespeare steadfastly refuses to give us one unitary viewpoint in any of his plays. For a start, there are no heroes and villains in Shakespeare. No black hats, no white knights. Instead he gives us human beings, in all their beautiful flawed complexity.

But surely there are villains, you say? What about Richard III or Iago? These are certainly the prime candidates, and have often been played as two-dimensional villains, even as recently as John Bell’s caped moustache twirling Richard in 2002. It was a brilliant rendition of a melodramatic villain, but two dimensional and far less nuanced than Shakespeare’s writing deserved nonetheless. This is the danger with Shakespeare – the writing is so good, so complex, that even a single-layered approach to it **can** be enjoyable, but is far less transformative than it could be.

When I say that Richard is no villain, it is not to excuse his behaviour in any way. But a villain, in the sense of a fairy tale, melodrama or the chap in the black hat in a Western, is someone who commits evil acts out of an inherent evil. A villain’s motives are not subject to question, a villain does evil because he is evil. End of story.

The sociolinguist George Lakoff did a study of the language that was used to justify the first Gulf War in 1991. What he found was that the driving metaphor was that of the fairy-tale. A fairy-tale, says Lakoff, must have a villain, a victim, and a hero. A crime is committed by the villain against the innocent victim. Lakoff says “The fairy tale has an asymmetry built into it. The hero is moral and courageous, while the villain is amoral and vicious. The hero is rational, but though the villain may be cunning and calculating, he cannot be reasoned with. Heroes thus cannot negotiate with villains; they must defeat them.” In this war, Saddam was the villain – his motives and reasons were not to be questioned. Villains act that way because they are villains, amoral and vicious, by nature. Kuwait was the innocent victim, the damsel in distress, if you will. Damsels in distress are always innocent, it is not appropriate to ask whether they might possibly have provoked the villain. Damsels in distress are furthermore helpless and need rescuing. That’s where the hero comes in. He is moral and courageous, and rescues the victim because that’s what heroes do. End of story.

Richard III is an anti-villain by these standards, because he is humanised. His acts, while not excused, have roots in his experience of the world. Remember that this is a man whose own mother says of him, to his face:

Thou camest on earth to make the earth my hell.
A grievous burthen was thy birth to me;
Tetchy and wayward was thy infancy;
Thy school-days frightful, desperate, wild, and furious...

It is hardly surprising, then, that the boy so described by his mum grows up to be the man who says:

Now is the winter of our discontent
 Made glorious summer by this sun of York;
 And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house
 In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.
 Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths;
 Our bruised arms hung up for monuments;
 Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,
 Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.
 Grim-visaged war hath smooth'd his wrinkled front;
 And now, instead of mounting barbed steeds
 To fright the souls of fearful adversaries,
 He capers nimbly in a lady's chamber
 To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.
 But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
 Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
 I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty
 To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
 I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,
 Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
 Deformed, unfinish'd, sent before my time
 Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
 And that so lamely and unfashionable
 That dogs bark at me as I halt by them;
 Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
 Have no delight to pass away the time,
 Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
 And descant on mine own deformity:
 And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
 To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
 I am determined to prove a villain
 And hate the idle pleasures of these days.

We love to hate Richard, and hate ourselves for loving him. Surely this allows us to see far more of who we are as people, how we must act regardless of our motivations and cues, than a despicable villain at whom we simply want to boo and throw rotten oranges.

Iago, too, from *Othello*, despite being arguably the most purely villainous of all Shakespeare's creations, gives us plenty of reasons for his villainies. Speaking of Othello, he says:

'Certes,' says he,
 'I have already chose my officer.'
 And what was he?
 Forsooth, a great arithmetician,
 One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,
 A fellow almost damn'd in a fair wife;
 That never set a squadron in the field,
 Nor the division of a battle knows
 More than a spinster; unless the bookish theoretic,
 Wherein the toged consuls can propose
 As masterly as he: mere prattle, without practise,
 Is all his soldiership. But he, sir, had the election:
 He, in good time, must his lieutenant be,
 And I--God bless the mark!--his Moorship's ancient.

And later:

I hate the Moor:
And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets
He has done my office: I know not if't be true;
But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
Will do as if for surety. He holds me well;
The better shall my purpose work on him.

The genius of Iago, for which we cannot help but feel some admiration, is that he uses Othello's jealousy as a cure for his own, as "one fire drives out one fire" (which saying is from *Coriolanus*).

The Merchant of Venice's Shylock, whom many contemporary critics insist on seeing as an anti-Semitic caricature of the covetous Jew, is no such thing if we bother to actually read the play. Shylock's behaviour is certainly questionable, but no more so that the Christian merchants' use of Jewish usurers to keep their own hands clean and their ships afloat. If we needed any proof that the notion of a human Shylock is not a politically correct re-interpretation but is textually supported, we need look no further than Shylock's own words:

Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections,
passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same
diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer,
as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you
poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in
the rest, we will resemble you in that. The villainy you teach me, I will execute.

If we can see that Shakespeare wrote not types but humans, the problems of the so-called 'problem plays' disappear. Many contemporary critics and dramaturges have trouble with a play like *Coriolanus*, in which the tragic hero does not appear particularly likeable. The error here is in assuming that we have to like the hero, or that it's a tragedy in the Aristotelian sense, and therefore we are supposed to side with the hero alone. There is much to admire in the character of Coriolanus, but equally much to despise. And if we can see beyond the narrow lens of good and bad, we will find a play that is ripe for our time. Here we have a story of a man shaped by upbringing and accolade to serve his country in times of war, ill-suited for the new role he is thrust into against his will, a civic leader in times of peace. And where do the people fit into this picture? What we admire in our heroes, we despise in our politicians. And do we, the people, ever take responsibility for this?

You common cry of curs! whose breath I hate
As reek o' the rotten fens, whose loves I prize
As the dead carcasses of unburied men
That do corrupt my air, I banish you;
And here remain with your uncertainty!
Let every feeble rumour shake your hearts!
Your enemies, with nodding of their plumes,
Fan you into despair! Have the power still
To banish your defenders; till at length
Your ignorance, deliver you as most
Abated captives to some nation
That won you without blows!

Shakespeare's heroes, too, are not the flawless knights in shining armour of adventure tales, nor the white-hat wearing redeemers of the Wild West. At every point their motivations are questioned and often questionable. It is hard to find a "hero" in Shakespeare. Romeo, who in his impetuosity brings about the death of half a dozen people, including himself and one of the most brilliant young women that ever lived, hardly seems a candidate. Many young students cite Hamlet as a hero, but that's really hard to see unless some very clear textual indications to the contrary are ignored, which is often the case. I shall return to Hamlet shortly.

The most likely candidate for a Shakespearean hero seems to be Henry V, but we are constantly reminded of his dissolute youth, and how he actively rejected his youthful friend and mentor because his company no longer suited with his ambition. His eponymous play has had twentieth century critics debating whether it is a pro-war or anti-war play, whether Henry is hero or villain. That they feel these questions need an answer, that they believe it has to be one or the other, is a testament to our age's inability to sustain complexity. In his most glorious moment, Henry asks of his closest friends and allies:

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;
Or close the wall up with our English dead.

Is this done purely in valour and battle-glory, in which case it is cruelty, or is it a sad and apologetic plea to his "dear friends"? Or could it possibly be both?

Just as there are no 'plain' heroes and villains in Shakespeare's plays, Shakespeare was not comfortable with the traditional confines of either comedy or tragedy. His comedies abound in harshness and violence, while his tragedies are renowned for moments of great lightness and even humour. I think *Macbeth* is possibly one of the funniest plays ever written. The more Shakespeare wrote comedy, the less comfortable he became with the easy wrapping up of the story and everyone getting married. It is not clear whether Isabella, in *Measure for Measure*, accepts the marriage offer of the deceitful Duke. Even as early as *Comedy of Errors*, the resolution is unclear for many of the characters, and the two Antipholus twins have nothing to say to one another. Malvolio's fate at the end of *Twelfth Night*, or the shadow of John the Bastard at the end of *Much Ado About Nothing*, along with Benedick's insistence on an upside-down nuptial with the celebration before the ceremony, all point to a world that cannot be contained neatly in the boundaries of traditional comedy.

Likewise Shakespeare's tragedies offer more hope than the traditional tragedies that preceded, or the revenge tragedies that (mostly) followed. The way in which Romeo and Juliet's "Deaths bury their parents' strife" and end the blood feud between the Montagues and Capulets is one of the clearest examples.

Later in his career, Shakespeare found the confidence as a writer to completely break free from the confines of comedy, tragedy and history, the accepted dramatic genres, and gave us the unclassifiable *Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, *Pericles*, and *The Tempest*. Here we have a further complication of the sense of order in the world, with even more good people behaving badly and bad people doing right, deaths real, feigned and unclear (does Hermione really die and is resurrected in *Winter's Tale*, for example), and endings that are the furthest yet from neat resolutions. Some modern critics, desperate to categorise these have even invented a new category, and call them Romances. A real sense of the unknowability of reality pervades these final plays, though they too are diminished by being categorised as 'metaphysical' plays alone:

You do look, my son, in a moved sort,
As if you were dismay'd: be cheerful, sir.
Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

Shakespeare's plays are complex not only in the complexity of their individual characters, but (as I have mentioned) in the multiplicity of perspectives on a given situation that they afford us. Many of the comedies show us different perspectives on love. In *Two Gentlemen of Verona* we see several

perspectives on romantic love, from both the male and female perspective, mistaken attraction, filial love, friendship, and the love of a man for his dog! The tragedies, like *Macbeth*, show us numerous aspects of power and duty – we see this from Macbeth’s perspective, from Lady Macbeth’s, Banquo’s, Macduff’s, and that of the witches, who themselves are responsible to a higher authority. And never once does Shakespeare take a side, tell us who is right and who wrong. I don’t think he’s even interested in that kind of answer, because the question itself makes no sense, even though it’s a question that contemporary critics and leaders seem obsessed with. Shakespeare’s questions, the questions that ought to concern us, are not of right and wrong, but the basic questions of secular humanism: The universal - What does it mean to be human? The social - How might we behave? And the individual – What can I do?

Even in *Hamlet*, the most mono-perspectival of all Shakespeare’s plays, so concerned is it with Hamlet’s view of the world, we are given plenty of scope to see that there are other perspectives. The political scenes, those concerning the Norwegians and Fortinbras, tell us something about the world in which the Danish tragedy takes place. These scenes are often decimated or cut, as in the 2007 Queensland Theatre Company / State Theatre Company of South Australia co-production, because they don’t seem to have anything to do with Hamlet’s interior journey. Perhaps they don’t, but without these scenes Claudius is nothing but a villain, and it is easier to see Hamlet as a hero. If Hamlet were king, Denmark would quickly have been overrun and annexed to Norway. In the end, thanks to Hamlet’s actions, this is what happens anyway. None of this is to excuse Claudius in any way, but maybe, just maybe, the tragedy of Hamlet is not his inaction, but equally as much in his eventual action.

Many modern adaptations have made a hero pure and simple out of Hamlet. First of all by making Claudius pure evil. Then by making Tweedledum and Tweedledee-like buffoons out of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, a foolish hot-head out of Laertes and a dullard out of Horatio. Hamlet can be cruel and dismissive to his old friend Horatio: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy”. Hamlet’s treatment of his friends, and his manipulation of them for his ends, is diminished if these ‘minor characters’ are dehumanized. Horatio is often portrayed as uninteresting, unemotional, in short boring. But by Hamlet’s own admission, Horatio is:

A man that fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks: and blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled,
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please.

He is Hamlet’s best friend, an admirable mixture of “blood and judgment”. It is high time we restored humanity to Horatio, Claudius, Laertes and the others, and allowed the plays complexities to resonate, rather than trying to understand its meaning.

We need Shakespeare with his heroes villainous and his villains heroic, with his “pure impiety and impious purity” (*Much Ado About Nothing*). Shakespeare can be an antidote to the fairy-tale allegories our media and civic leaders, and help us to repair our capacity to sustain the increasing complexity of our world.

That’s a very Shakespearean turn of phrase, “pure impiety and impious purity”. It’s right up there with “Beautiful Tyrant! Fiend Angelical!” – which is what Juliet says of Romeo on learning that he has killed her dear cousin Tybalt. These sorts of phrases show that even in the juxtaposition of words and images, Shakespeare acknowledges the complexity of our thoughts and feelings. Shakespeare’s language is evocative in its specificity. A lot of contemporary readers find Shakespeare wordy, but that is because they think that ““Beautiful Tyrant! Fiend Angelical!” translates to “O I am so mad at him” (which actually contains more words anyway). That is, they seek to find a single thought, to translate Shakespeare’s complex of thoughts and feelings into a single sound bite. In actual fact, any paraphrase that captured all the nuance of “Beautiful Tyrant! Fiend Angelical!” would take many many more than the four words that Shakespeare uses to achieve this.

“Whatever!” Our capacity to sustain complexity in language has been eroded significantly. And language is the one thing that all psychologists and biologists seem to agree distinguishes us from other animals.

Diminish our capacity for language, and you diminish our humanity. There is no “Whatever” in Shakespeare – everyone cares deeply about their world and articulates their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in precise, passionate language.

If you need evidence that our capacity to sustain complexity in language has been eroded, you need only look at the decline of political oratory even in the last fifty years. Compare Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, a snippet of some two hundred words that changed the course of a war, or Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream,” to late 20th century political rhetoric such as George W Bush’s “Read my lips: no new taxes.” Lest we think this is an aberration caused by Bush’s inferior intellect, it would be good to remember that Bill Clinton, by all accounts a towering intellect, is remembered most famously for his speeches “It’s the economy, stupid” and the wonderful imprecise “I did not have sexual relations with that woman.”

In case you’re feeling a sense of superiority over the Americans at this point, take a look at the political advertisements coming from all sides of Australian politics at the moment. The catch phrase and the sound bite have replaced rhetoric entirely.

Contrast these with Mark Antony’s opening oration at Caesar’s funeral, from *Julius Caesar*. While a full analysis of the speech is beyond our scope here today, we can readily see that the success of this speech with the crowd is in its choice of words, its balance of the branches of rhetoric – appeal to reason, appeal to emotion, and appeal to ethics, and it’s insightful use of the physical matter of language: rhythm, repetition, and sound (underlining my own).

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones;
So let it be with Caesar. The noble Brutus
Hath told you Caesar was ambitious:
If it were so, it was a grievous fault,
And grievously hath Caesar answer'd it.
Here, under leave of Brutus and the rest--
For Brutus is an honourable man;
So are they all, all honourable men--
Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral.
He was my friend, faithful and just to me:
But Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honourable man.
He hath brought many captives home to Rome
Whose ransoms did the general coffers fill:
Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?
When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept:
Ambition should be made of sterner stuff:
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And Brutus is an honourable man.
You all did see that on the Lupercal
I thrice presented him a kingly crown,
Which he did thrice refuse: was this ambition?
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
And, sure, he is an honourable man.
I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,
But here I am to speak what I do know.
You all did love him once, not without cause:
What cause withholds you then, to mourn for him?
O judgment! thou art fled to brutish beasts,
And men have lost their reason. Bear with me;
My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,

And I must pause till it come back to me.

Which brings me to my final point. We hear in the previous speech, as in all of Shakespeare's dramatic writing, a celebration of the whole human – mind, body, and soul. Shakespeare's rhetoric appeals to reason, to the emotions, to the body, to the heart, to the gut, to the groin. Shakespeare supports a complexity and integration of the human being that has been much in denial since Descartes. We typically believe, implicitly or explicitly, that we are capable of being either rational or impassioned, and that someone who is being emotional cannot be reasonable, and vice versa. Shakespeare's characters, particularly when they are speaking verse, simultaneously embody what I call the Three Ps of humanity: Passion (the emotional/spiritual), Precision (the intellectual/rational) and Presence (the physical).

I conclude with an appeal to you to support independent theatre, the small groups that struggle daily for existence and who do the real innovation. It is here that you will see Shakespeare's legacy continued. It is independent theatres that engages, rather than pacifies, our communities, that stimulates and celebrates our humanity, and, done well, that can build our capacity to sustain complexity. Take your students to see independent theatre. Bring them to see the Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble. We live at a crossroads for our culture, perhaps for humanity. Together we can make a difference. "We few, we happy few."

Thankyou.