

David Timson

STORIES FROM SHAKESPEARE

Read by **Juliet Stevenson** and **Michael Sheen**

JUNIOR
CLASSICS



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STORIES FROM SHAKESPEARE

A Midsummer Night's Dream

A Midsummer Night's Dream is probably Shakespeare's most performed and most popular play. It is often presented in open air theatres where real trees and bushes add to the excitement! Though it is set in ancient Athens, the woods, the fairies and Bottom and his friends all seem very English. Indeed, the fairy Puck, also known as Robin Goodfellow, gets up to his tricks in many other British legends and folk tales. In 1692, the play was turned into an opera by Henry Purcell called '*The Fairy Queen*', though it was adapted so much, the original play is almost unrecognisable. In the 20th century, Benjamin Britten also wrote an opera that followed the play more closely. The most famous music connected with this play is that written in the 19th century by Felix Mendelssohn. His music brilliantly imitates the fairies flying through the woods, and in the overture you can even hear Bottom braying like an ass. The most well-known part of Mendelssohn's music is the wedding march written to accompany Duke Theseus's wedding celebrations, and played at thousands of weddings ever since.

Hamlet

Hamlet was probably written around 1601, and is one of the greatest plays ever written. It has been translated into almost every language on earth, and performed in countless theatres worldwide. It appeals to so many people because we can all identify with Hamlet, who seems to have feelings and ideas that we have had ourselves. Ever since the part was first played by Shakespeare's friend and colleague Richard Burbage, every star actor has wanted to play it. It has become a sort of test for truly great acting. David Garrick, the famous 18th-century actor, played it with huge success continually for thirty years; John Gielgud was perhaps the greatest Hamlet of the 20th century, playing it four times. Even some actresses have played it, famously the great French actress Sarah Bernhardt in the 19th century, when she had a wooden leg! Laurence Olivier made a black and white film of *Hamlet* in 1948, and won an Oscar; the Hollywood star Mel Gibson also starred in a film version; and in 1996 Kenneth Branagh filmed the complete play without a line cut out, that lasted over four hours. *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's longest play, with

4,042 lines, of which 1,507 are spoken by Hamlet alone. Tchaikovsky wrote a fantasy overture based on the play, which was later turned into a ballet, and Shostakovitch wrote very atmospheric music for a Russian film of the play in 1964.

King Lear

Some people say that *King Lear* is Shakespeare's greatest play. Some go further and say it is the greatest play ever written. It is a dark, tragic play, that today can still be quite shocking when seen on stage. The King going mad, and his cruel treatment by his daughters, was so terrible for Dr Johnson in the 18th century that he declared he couldn't read it to the end. Many others agreed with him. Nahum Tate had written a happy ending for the play in 1680, where Cordelia does not die, but marries Edgar instead! This version was performed on stage for nearly 150 years as a more acceptable version than Shakespeare's. It wasn't until the end of the Victorian era that Shakespeare's true ending was again restored. Many of the world's greatest actors have played Lear, such as Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud, Ian Holm and Paul Scofield. Scofield also appeared in a film version by Peter Brook in 1970. A Japanese film version was directed by Kurosawa in 1983, called 'Ran'. It was an

epic with battle scenes, and instead of daughters, this Lear had sons!

Henry V

Henry V was probably the first play to be put on in the new Globe Theatre when it opened in 1600. It was a big success, celebrating the battle of Agincourt, when a few English soldiers beat a larger French force. Nearly three-and-a-half centuries later, in 1944, Laurence Olivier made his famous film version of *Henry V* at the height of World War II to pay a similar tribute to the British airmen who had fought the German Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain. Kenneth Branagh made another film version in 1989, and was the youngest actor to play the part at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, in 1984, when he was 24 – younger even than the real Henry who was 28 at the time of Agincourt.

Twelfth Night

The title of this play really has nothing to do with the story. It was written around 1601, and may have been originally performed at Queen Elizabeth's Court on January 6th (Twelfth Night) as part of the celebrations that marked the end of Christmas. The joke played on Malvolio by Sir Toby and his friends would have set the right mood for

such a festive occasion. It is perhaps Shakespeare's greatest comedy, though it also has some sad moments. We end up feeling sorry for Malvolio, but happy too that Viola and Orsino have found true love. The songs that the clown Feste sings have been set to music by many composers over the years, particularly 'O Mistress Mine'.

Romeo And Juliet

Romeo and Juliet is perhaps the most powerful love story ever written. It is a well-known Italian story, but Shakespeare added many of his own touches, such as the fussy Nurse and the dashing Mercutio. It has been adapted into films, operas, ballets and musicals. Most major actors and actresses have played in it. Not to be outdone, some actresses too have played Romeo. In the 19th century, the American Charlotte Cushman achieved a great success as Romeo, with her sister, Susan, playing Juliet. When David Garrick played Romeo in the 1750s, he was 44, and rewrote the ending so that Romeo and Juliet have a scene together in the tomb, before they both die. The same idea was used by Baz Lurhmann in his 1996 film version, starring Leonardo Di Caprio, which updated the story very successfully. There have been an amazing 77 films based on *Romeo and Juliet* – the first being a silent version made in 1908!

The most successful reworking of the play has to be Leonard Bernstein's musical *West Side Story*, filmed in 1961, which though set in modern New York follows the original play quite closely. In the 19th century, Tchaikovsky wrote a fantasy overture based on the play; and Prokofiev wrote a thrilling full-length ballet version in 1938.

The Tempest

The Tempest was probably the last play Shakespeare wrote – though he may have written one or two with other playwrights after this one. Its story about forgiving wrongs and returning home after a long time away, seems appropriate, as Shakespeare retired from the stage soon after *The Tempest* was produced in 1611, and went back to his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon. The combination of music and magic have made it one of the most popular of Shakespeare's plays. In 1667 it was turned into the opera '*The Enchanted Isle*' with music by Purcell, with lots of extra characters added, including a sister for the monster Caliban! There have been many other musical interpretations, including an overture by Tchaikovsky and incidental music for the play by Sibelius. In 1956, *The Tempest* was moved into a future with spaceships, when the plot inspired the science fiction film '*The Forbidden Planet*.'

Othello

Othello was probably written in 1604, and is based on an old Italian story. Shakespeare was very fond of Italian settings for his plays, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Merchant of Venice*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and so on. It wasn't until the 19th century that the part of Othello was actually played by a black actor – the American Ira Aldridge, between 1826 and 1865. In more recent times, the great American singer Paul Robeson played the part, both in America and at Stratford. Desdemona was the first part to be played by an actress on the English stage in 1660, when women were allowed to act, instead of young boys playing all the female parts. *Othello* is one of Shakespeare's most performed plays. Verdi wrote an opera based on it, and in the 1970s there was a rock-musical version called '*Catch My Soul*'.

Macbeth

Macbeth is one of the scariest of Shakespeare's plays. Witches, evil spirits, ghosts and murder are in almost every scene. It was written about 1606, and is based on Scottish history. Macbeth was a real king, though there is no evidence that he murdered anyone. The play was probably performed to celebrate the new King, James I, who was Scottish and had come to

the English throne in 1603. James I had written a book about witchcraft, which Shakespeare may have used when writing *Macbeth*, and the king was known to be descended from Banquo, who appears in the play. In the Restoration period, the 1660s, the theatre managers turned *Macbeth* into an opera, complete with singing, dancing and flying witches! In the 19th century, the great Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi wrote an opera based on the play and it, too, includes a ballet for the witches. *Macbeth* has always had a reputation for bad luck in the theatre, and many actors, even today, will not quote lines from it. Something always seems to go wrong when this play is staged. Some people think the witches chants round the cauldron might be the real thing, putting a curse on the play.

King Richard III

The character of King Richard III has always been popular, because he makes the audience laugh whilst committing his wicked crimes. Shakespeare went to great lengths to create his villain with a humped back, a withered arm and a lame leg, though there is no strong proof that the real King Richard was so physically handicapped. Shakespeare took his facts from a history of Richard III's reign written in the late

15th century by Sir Thomas More, who was trying to flatter the new king, Henry VII, who had beaten Richard at the Battle of Bosworth. Henry was the first of the Tudor family to reign over England, and when Shakespeare was writing his play, it was Henry's granddaughter, Elizabeth I, who was Queen; so naturally, Shakespeare wanted to exaggerate Richard's evil deeds to show her family in a good light.

The part of Richard has attracted the greatest actors. In the 20th century Laurence Olivier gave a chilling performance, which was later captured on film. Ian McKellen also made a successful film in 1996, when he played Richard in modern dress, as a Nazi.

THE THEATRE IN SHAKESPEARE'S DAY

If you've ever been to see a pantomime at Christmas or a musical in a West End theatre you will know what an exciting experience it can be. Sitting on soft velvet seats, listening to the buzz of the audience before the show starts, and then the magical moment when the lights in the auditorium go down, the audience holds its breath, the stage lights come up, the curtain rises and we enter the world of the play. But in Elizabethan times, going to the theatre to see the latest play by William Shakespeare was a totally different experience.

The buildings were not at all like theatres today. The theatre was made of wood, and many-sided, making it appear circular in shape. Shakespeare himself in his play *Henry V*, called his theatre, 'this wooden O' – and if you imagine yourself looking down upon it that is exactly what the Elizabethan theatre looked like. The walls of the theatre contained three galleries with seats, a bit like the stands at a football match. This is where the wealthier members of the audience sat, usually courtiers or professional men like lawyers and doctors who could pay as much as half a crown (or 12½p today) to see a play, which was a lot of money when you remember that many Elizabethans were earning only a few pennies for their week's work.

People from all backgrounds went to the theatre, however, as play-going was very popular. Two out of every fifteen people then living in London went regularly to the biggest theatres, such as the 'Globe', which could hold as many as 3,000 people. Most of the audience would be in the centre of the 'O', known as 'the yard'. These were the ordinary men and women of Elizabethan London, who paid a penny to enter and stood for the whole play. Projecting into the middle of the yard was the stage area, a large rectangular platform, raised about a metre-and-a-half high, and

the standing audience or 'groundlings' as they were known would rush in to get a good view near to the stage, as soon as the doors opened to let them in. At the back of the stage to right and left were two doors for the actors to make their entrances and exits. Behind these doors was the actors' 'tiring-house', or dressing room as we would say today.

In the middle of the wall at the back of the stage, was an inner recess which could be covered with a curtain – this was used by Shakespeare when he needed a scene to take place in another room, like a bedroom, as in *Othello*; or a cave as in *The Tempest*. Above this room was a gallery, and this could be used as Juliet's balcony in *Romeo and Juliet*; or the besieged walls of the town of Harfleur in *Henry V*. Above this was another gallery, where the musicians would sit and play music to give atmosphere to the scenes – and above the musicians' gallery was a hut. This was the highest point of the theatre and had a flagpole attached to it, from which a flag flew on days when there were performances, and perhaps a trumpet was sounded too. This hut also had a cannonball in it, which was rolled around the wooden floor to make the sound of thunder when needed in plays like *King Lear*.

This was the basic shape of the Elizabethan theatre. Not very much like a

theatre of today, is it? But the biggest difference was that the whole theatre was open to the skies. There was no roof covering the 'yard' (though the expensive galleries had a thatched roof) because the actors relied on natural sunlight to be seen, so all the performances of Shakespeare's plays took place in the afternoons. If it rained, the poor groundlings would have got a soaking, but there was a small roof over the rear of the stage area supported by two columns, which gave the actors some protection from wet weather. In some theatres the sun, moon and stars were painted on the underside of this roof, and so it became known as the 'heavens'; whilst the supporting columns might be painted to give a marble effect – 'that might deceive even the most prying observer'. In the 'heavens' there might be a trapdoor, from which all sorts of mechanical effects could be lowered to the stage level, such as Jupiter mounted on an eagle, as in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*; or as Ben Jonson, a playwright and close friend of Shakespeare's, noted, 'the creaking throne comes down, the boys to please'.

Another big difference between theatre then and now, is that the Elizabethans never used scenery, so Shakespeare always tells us in his plays where the scene is taking place. In *King Richard III* for instance he begins one

scene with Richard saying, 'Here pitch our tent, even here in Bosworth Field', or in *As You Like It* Rosalind says 'Well this is the forest of Arden', to which Touchstone, the clown, replies 'Now am I in Arden, the more fool I'. Also, because there was no artificial lighting to create the atmosphere of a scene, Shakespeare again had to tell his audience whether it was day or night: "'Tis now the very witching time of night, when churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out contagion to this world...' says Hamlet. Or we are told what the weather is like: 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen...' says Macbeth. No scenery, and no curtain either to be raised and lowered between scenes, meant that one scene could quickly follow another and so the plays were performed at a rapid pace. In *Romeo and Juliet* the Prologue refers to the 'two hours traffic of our stage' – but it is difficult to believe that a play like *Hamlet* with more than 3,500 lines, could be performed in that time.

What they lacked in scenery, the Elizabethan players made up for in their costumes. Often, the rich Lords who supported the theatre companies would give them clothes from their own wardrobes, so it is not surprising that a writer of the time described the stage clothes as 'gorgeous and sumptuous apparel'. Some of the players liked their

stage clothes so much that they wore them in the street and the taverns, to impress their friends; so the theatre managers had to impose a series of heavy fines for wear and tear! But the players made no attempt to wear costume of the period in which some of the plays are set, as actors would today; so Julius Caesar did not wear a toga, or Macbeth a kilt! Generally they wore the clothes of their own day – doublet and hose, though in one of the lists of costumes that has survived from Elizabethan times, there is an interesting entry: 'a robe to go invisible in'. This same list includes elaborate and richly decorated goblets, crowns and swords – not forgetting the ass's head for Bottom!

The actors in Shakespeare's day had to be able to play lots of different parts, for within one play an actor might play three or four different characters, and they had to be very fit, for they were expected to be able to fight with swords, do acrobatics, sing songs and dance as well. Shakespeare's plays are full of dances, and it was traditional that every play in Elizabethan times ended with an energetic jig. Perhaps the most skilled actors were those who played the parts of the girls and women in Shakespeare's plays, because no women were allowed to perform in public plays by law in Elizabethan times; it was not

considered proper. So all those wonderful parts were created by young boys. They must have been very talented to be able to play such difficult parts as Cleopatra, or Lady Macbeth. Maybe Shakespeare made it easier for them by getting so many of his heroines to disguise themselves as boys, as Viola does in *Twelfth Night*, and Rosalind in *As You Like It*. In *The Merchant of Venice* all the women at some point dress up as men! The boys joined a theatre company when they were quite young and would be rehearsed in their parts by one of the older actors, who had perhaps been a boy-player himself before his voice broke.

It is a shame that none of the original Elizabethan theatres has survived – but perhaps it is not so surprising when we consider that they were built out of wood and thatch, and fire was a constant threat. Shakespeare's Globe theatre did in fact catch fire in 1614 during a performance of his *Henry VIII*, when a spark from a cannon fired in a scene on stage set the thatched roof over the galleries alight; one man's breeches also caught fire, and had to be put out by pouring a tankard of ale over them! The whole building was destroyed in less than an hour!

However, nearly 400 years after Shakespeare lived, we now have a marvellous replica of the Globe once more on the banks of the Thames, only a few

metres away from the original site. Every effort has been made to copy the theatre exactly as it was in Elizabethan times – you can even stand for the whole play if you want to – so we can feel for ourselves what it was like to experience a trip to the theatre in the age of Shakespeare.

Notes by David Timson



David Timson has made over 1,000 broadcasts for BBC Radio Drama. For Naxos AudioBooks he wrote *The History of the Theatre*, which won an award for most original production from the Spoken Word Publishers Association in 2001. He has also directed for Naxos four plays of Shakespeare, including *King Richard III* (with Kenneth Branagh), which won Best Drama Award from the SWPA in 2001. In 2002 he won the Audio of the Year Award for his reading of *A Study in Scarlet*. He also read *The Return of Sherlock Holmes I* and *The Return of Sherlock Holmes II* for Naxos AudioBooks.



Juliet Stevenson has worked extensively for the RSC and the Royal National Theatre. She received an Olivier Award for her role in *Death and the Maiden* at the Royal Court, and a number of other awards for her work in the film *Truly, Madly, Deeply*. Other film credits include *The Trial*, *Drowning by Numbers* and *Emma*. She has recorded *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *To The Lighthouse*, *Persuasion*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Hedda Gabler* for Naxos AudioBooks.



As one of the most gifted of the younger generation of British actors, **Michael Sheen** has been seen widely on stage and screen. His major theatrical roles include *Henry V* (RSC), *Peer Gynt* (directed by Ninagawa), Jimmy Porter in *Look Back In Anger* as well as appearances in Pinter's *Moonlight* and *The Homecoming*. Among his film work is *Wilde*, *Mary Reilly* and *Othello*. Since leaving RADA, he has recorded extensively for Naxos AudioBooks, reading Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Great Poems of the Romantic Age* and *Oedipus the King*. He has also directed and read the part of Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* for Naxos AudioBooks.

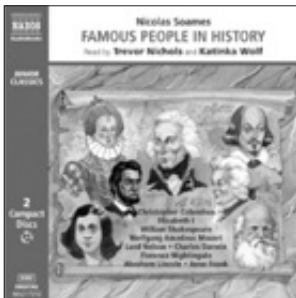
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David Timson

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The Tempest • Othello • Macbeth • King Richard III

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