

The Shakespeare Workshop — To enjoy or not to enjoy? That is no question.

Simon Fries

On Tuesday, 20 May, 2014, the members of the English advanced courses of Marienschule Euskirchen obtained the chance of attending a fascinating and enjoyable – but still informative – Shakespeare workshop conducted by Julius D'Silva, actor of the Royal Shakespeare Company, in the school's assembly hall. In advance of giving an account of the workshop itself, one has to mention that the advanced course teachers, some of whom had already partaken in the workshop in the past, did their best to make the workshop tempting to us, as they were apparently not able to desist from going into raptures about its delightfulness at any given opportunity so that they – possibly unknowingly – evoked great expectations. These expectations were not in the slightest disappointed; on the contrary, they were rather fully met and – as far as some are concerned – even exceeded.

The workshop was, as befits an English advanced course, held in English solely – apart from some German interjections from Julius who, having a German wife, was eagerly learning German at the time – so as to gently force us to speak English in order to improve and consolidate our faculty of interacting in conversational English. After a short introduction, in which Julius asked us to feel a bit 'bescheuert' so that we could let ourselves in for the following exercises which he clarified to be mainly concerned with acting, we spread in the room and carried out several coordination exercises and running activities, during which we had to run around at intervals of increasing and decreasing velocity without colliding with one another; the running was, at times, interrupted by clapping and jumping and extended by additional tasks (for instance, we had to choose a certain person whom we had to evade at all costs or, to the contrary, whom we had to approach without his or her knowing about it) so that, after merry and exhausting movement, we were in the 'right' mood for acting.

In the following part, we were playfully informed about Shakespeare's use of metre and, collectively reciting lines from numerous well-known Shakespeare plays such as 'Macbeth', 'Hamlet', 'Twelfth Night' or 'Richard III', learned about the iamb's formal and lyrical structure (and unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one so that the most important words or syllables are emphasised; cf. 'If músic bé the fód of lóve [...]')

and the iambic pentameter's – that is, the blank verse's – applicability (in Shakespeare, blank verse is well-nigh entirely used for important utterances or pronouncements made by significant characters of high social rank in general so that inferior characters do normally not speak in iambic pentameter and an interruption of the otherwise regular metre bestows special and severe emphasis upon an utterance) and bearing resemblance to human heart-beat (which is why blank verse is considered the most natural form of metre).

Having simulated a theatrical battle scene and fervently acted in the roles of killing or killed warriors, we learned about how an actor prepares for authentically playing a theatrical role (the term 'role', denoting the part or character which one has to play, undertakes, or assumes in theatre, apparently derives, as Julius explained, from the piece of parchment, paper, or the like, which was written upon, contained the textual part of an actor and was rolled up – hence the term 'role' or '(sc)roll', respectively – for convenience of handling or carrying), which he does by looking at what his character says, how he behaves and thinks, and what others say about him. Since our Shakespearian topic was 'Macbeth' at the time, the workshop was designed for dealing with Macbeth so that, in order to illustrate what the other characters say about Macbeth and how they behave towards him (at first), one member of the group was granted the privilege of portraying Macbeth while the others were equipped with citations from the play that contained information on how Macbeth is esteemed by his fellow characters at the outset (the initial appreciation of Macbeth gives way to utter disgust and rancour, eventually); Macbeth was placed in front of his appreciators who formed a row and, one by one, had to approach him in order to recite their respective citation of appreciation while acting in accordance to its meaning and involving Macbeth therein. After a first round, that procedure was repeated with the addition that the appreciators and Macbeth had to freeze and thus form a still pose once their fervent acting was done so that we obtained a vivid impression of how much Macbeth is celebrated at the beginning of the play (this illustrates that the true meaning of a Shakespearian play – or rather a play in general – reveals itself through enthusiastic acting rather than mere reading: Shakespeare was, as D'Silva appropriately phrased it, a *playwright*, and not a *readwright*). In the further course of the workshop, the appreciators were bereaved of their citations but were wondrously able to recite them in spite of their being absent (that instance sufficiently proves that learning and remembering unfamiliar texts is simplified by repeating and merrily acting or rather performing them so that pleasure and delight strengthen memory, remembrance and interest).

Having learned about the shape of a typically Elizabethan stage (Elizabethan stages were different from modern stages in as much as they were accessible from most sides and allowed the actors to interact with the audience in order to make the theatre play a shared experience) and theatre prices (commoners named 'Groundlings' or 'Stinkards' paid one penny for a standing place and put it in a box at the entrance of the theatre (hence the modern term 'box office'), while the nobles paid five pence for their seats), the course members formed groups of two and performed one part of the famous dialogue between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in Act II, Scene 1 of the play; the inventory of utterances which the group member playing Macbeth could give was confined to 'Prithee,

peace' and 'We will proceed no further in this business', while the partner playing Lady Macbeth had an unlimited choice of utterances at his or her disposal. It was Lady Macbeth's task to vehemently attempt to persuade her husband of killing the king (Duncan) in spite of all contrary winds, while Macbeth had to resist his wife's suasion at all costs (which was extraordinarily jocular).

After the respective groups had presented their dialogue performances to the other groups, the workshop ended with the initial running and coordination activities and well-earned applause for the enthusiastically involved course members and Julius D'Silva. This report may convey a strange impression of the Shakespeare workshop, and the activities depicted therein might seem odd or 'bescheuert' to some; but these may very well rest assured that all the course members and the teachers perfectly enjoyed the workshop and learned that Shakespeare – however old his plays may be – is still of importance and interest to young audiences. Should I be asked 'To enjoy or not to enjoy?' in relation to a Shakespearian play or the Shakespeare workshop, my answer would be straightforward: 'That is no question — To enjoy.'