

Bill Rea ? Annual helping of The Bard

It's interesting that there are some things we hate simply because they're forced upon us. Yet once we get to avail ourselves of them because we choose to, they're not so bad.

I think Shakespeare is one of those little issues many of us were forced to deal with during our school days, yet deal with in the adult world because we want to.

That was certainly the case with me when I was going to school. It was a little strange, because a lot of the kids I hung around with were avid readers. I would eagerly read stuff about topics in which I was interested, but the rest of it was really a struggle.

Not much has changed since then, despite what I do for a living. I will pass considerable time researching topics of interest to me on the internet. But finding the time to actually sit down and read a book is a real chore. I have lots of books (my late mother was an avid reader, and she had lots of sources of books, including me, since they were a convenient fallback if I was stuck for a Christmas or birthday present, so guess what constituted a good chunk of my inheritance when she died nine years ago), and I usually check out the book displays at yard sales and bazaars I have to cover. I might find time for them all, if and when I retire.

And Shakespeare was on the list of things in schools that I would have taken it or left it, if I could. The fact is interest in my academic salvation took priority. Besides, my mother and father yelled when I got bad grades (they yelled a lot when I was in high school).

So it mattered not a thing what I would have done. What I could not do was leave Shakespeare alone. I had to take it.

The rubbish we kids had to put up with in our day.

I spent five years in high school (these were the days when there was still Grade 13), and there were four helpings of Shakespeare (for reasons I have never quite understood, we were spared The Bard in Grade 9).

Grade 12 brought us Othello, and I well remember the teacher (he was head of the school's English department) introducing this section of the course with the humourless realism for which he was well-known, observing we were about to embark on the most dreaded part of the academic year for students.

So I studied these works because I had to. The truth is I normally handled Shakespeare, compared to other works studied during the year, rather well at exam time ? pretty good, considering I often had trouble figuring out what the various characters were trying to say (I never have been very good at deciphering iambic pentameter).

But I came to realize that in Western society, it's hard to escape The Bard. The classic science fiction movie Forbidden Planet is thought to be based, in part, on The Tempest. One of my favourite movies is West Side Story, a yarn inspired by Romeo and Juliet. In 1996, there was a new movie released entitled Romeo and Juliet, starring Leonardo DiCaprio before most of us had even heard of him. I went to see that film in the company of she who at the time was my girlfriend (she has subsequently become my wife and girlfriend).

There are two very lasting memories of that evening.

The movie impacted the way I spoke for a little while afterwards, as I described to Beth how we were to ?gress the theatre while our feet yea verily treadeth though vast quantities of corn, both popped and unpopped.?

Like I stated above, I was never very good at iambic pentameter, but guys do talk stupid when they're courting, don't they?

The other lasting impression involved the reaction of the audience. The theatre, which held about 300 people (rough estimate, based on memory), was packed, and there were maybe 20 in the crowd older than 30 (Beth and I in that group). The rest were mainly kids, of high school age, and The Bard was evidently part of their curriculum. I was fully aware of the age demographics when we took our seats, and fearful that among this couple of hundred kids would be several, probably male (realism again), out to make some kind statement to impress the nearby females (I was once a kid too, you know). To be sure, there was a certain amount of rowdyism during the coming attractions, but once things got down to exploring the relationship between Juliet and her Leonardo DiCaprio, the atmosphere toned down dramatically. For the rest of the movie, you could have heard teeth (probably mine) breaking on the unpopped kernels of corn. Iambic pentameter ruled, with young men and women realizing they had exams in their near future.

I have taken in Shakespeare at Stratford a number of times. The first was 16 years ago last month, when Beth and I saw Richard III. I remember because that was the weekend I popped the question (yes, that question).

But such thoughts are in the past, as I deal with the present.

Beth and I had our annual helping of The Bard last Thursday night, catching the Humber River Shakespeare company's presentation of As You Like It. If you're not in the habit of taking in these shows, which this troupe puts on annually, I would suggest you give it a try.

The performances are easy to get to, start on time (although they had to call off last Tuesday's show in Bolton because of weather

issues ? you take your chances when you hold outdoor events), and are very pleasant events. This is the sixth year they have been putting on these performances throughout the Humber River Watershed, including Caledon, King Township, Vaughan and even Toronto, and Beth and I have attended every year, and seen some great performances.

There are some who might wonder about what is so great about Shakespeare. The obvious answer is the guy and his writings still have relevance, which is a little remarkable, considering we're now less than three years shy of the 500th anniversary of his death. But it is a fact that his works have never been out of print or favour, and never will be.

Yes, it can be a pain in the proverbial butt for high school kids, who have no choice when it comes to taking in Shakespeare. But I've graduated, meaning I attend the shows because I want to.

Go to www.HumberRiverShakespeare.ca for more information on other performances over the next couple of weeks

