

inVUE

EDITED BY ANINDITA GHOSE

SPOTLIGHT

Shakespeare and company

He's spawned more adaptations than things on heaven and earth. To mark Shakespeare's 400th death anniversary this month, we ponder on his timeless appeal. Here are six reasons he'll always be in *Vogue*

Because his social and political concerns are still relevant

Professor JAMES SHAPIRO talks about the enduring power of the Bard's words

A professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University in New York, James Shapiro is a bit of a time traveller. He lives between two time zones: the 21st century in which he's a Samuel Johnson Prize-winning Shakespearean scholar, and 16th-century England in which he claims to know what "the weather was like, what people thought and

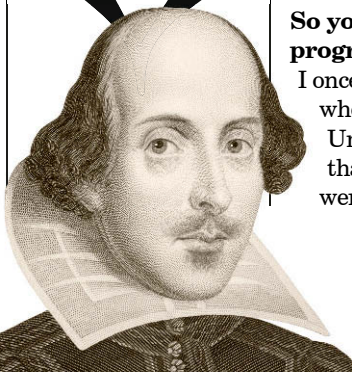
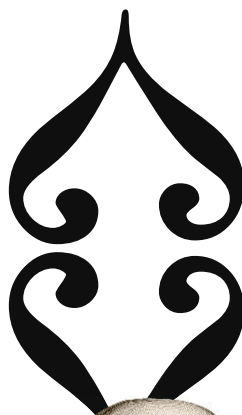
even when they had sex!" Shapiro, who has dedicated his life's work to the Bard, tells us why Shakespeare is here to stay.

What makes Shakespeare relevant today?

Shakespeare wrote at a time when race, ethnicity, globalism, capitalism and slippery gender identity were all coming into being. Now, 400 years later, we're still wrestling with these issues. Shakespeare is immediate, accessible and electric, especially when presented in creative and novel ways.

So you're saying humanity hasn't progressed in 400 years?

I once wrote that I would love to live in a world where Shakespeare's plays were irrelevant. Unfortunately, I don't think we'll live to see that day. During Shakespeare's time, people were married at the age of 25. Only three >





James Shapiro

per cent of births were illegitimate—they were obviously not having much sex. If men and women are denied sex, what do they do? Repression and male aggression play a big role in his work, and while the specifics might be different now, they are still very real issues.

Pick a Shakespearean work for 2016.

It's situational. For students on an American college campus, *The Rape Of Lucrece*, because it is an examination of political and sexual consent. If you're in Syria, then *Troilus And Cressida* (it looks at personal and political conflict). If you're concerned about gender issues, turn to *As You Like It*, and if you're dealing with ageing parents, there's *King Lear*.

And for India?

Hamlet is a great play for India right now. It's about surveillance and about speaking the truth and paying a huge price for it.

What role do you see Shakespeare playing in the digital age?

You can make a seven-second video with clips you find or have 1,000 people recite "to be or not to be" on loop. Discover archival footage on YouTube—watch The Beatles' *A Midsummer Night's Dream* skit, Ian McKellen playing King Lear or Judi Dench as Ophelia. The possibilities are huge and only being discovered. —Shahnaz Siganporia



An illustration from *Romeo And Juliet*

English stage actor Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth



GENDER BENDER

Elizabethan law may have prohibited women from performing on stage but Shakespearean heroines sure knew how to pack a punch. Here's to the feisty ones

1. LADY MACBETH (MACBETH)

Say what you will about her cold-bloodedness—after all, she convinces her partner that murder is a prerequisite to the Scottish throne—but this queen is theatrical shorthand for unflappable ambition.

2. JULIET (ROMEO AND JULIET)

This brave heroine practically proposed to Romeo on that legendary balcony ("If that thy bent of love be honorable/Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow"), proving she was proactive, courageous and way ahead of her time.

3. BEATRICE (MUCHADO ABOUT NOTHING)

This spunky lady, in no rush to be coupled off, is armed with zingy one-liners. Case in point: "I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me."

4. CLEOPATRA (ANTHONY AND CLEOPATRA)

Magnanimous monarch or manipulator, it's impossible not to be wowed by this Egyptian queen's political prowess or seduction. —Aarti Virani

2 Because he can win a rap battle

If Shakespeare was alive today, he would have probably been a rapper. Outrageous as it may sound, English rapper and poet Akala presents a convincing case for this premise at his talks around the world, where he blurs the lines between a hip hop song and a Shakespearean work.

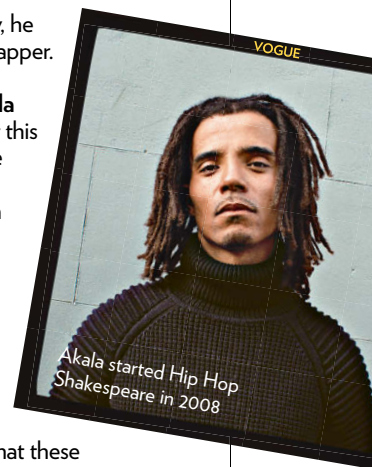
At TED conferences, Akala has surprised literary critics and college scholars with his opening set. Sample this: "Maybe it's hatred I spew, maybe it's food for the spirit—Shakespeare or hip hop?" he asks, only to reveal that these are lyrics from the Eminem-Jay-Z song 'Renegade'. "Shakespeare and great rappers are storytellers, masters of rhythm, poets of their day that experiment with words and create vocabulary," says Akala, who in 2008 founded his touring company, Hip Hop Shakespeare, which performs adaptations of the Bard's work and hosts writing workshops for young adults.

From Duke Ellington's jazz poems inspired by Shakespearean characters to Nitin Sawhney's score for Tim Supple's *Twelfth Night*—the Bard's mastery of meter has made him a springboard for musicians across the world. But Akala's mission is specific: to draw parallels between the rhythm of the iambic pentameter and the latest hip hop songs. He demonstrates it effortlessly, breaking into a rap song on an old classic, 'Sonnet 18'. "I think hip hop is today's iambic pentameter," he adds.

"Rap gets a bad name, but it's also about poetry and social commentary, just like Shakespeare's highbrow literature," says Akala, who will tour with his production of *Richard II* with BBC this month.

In spite of his repertoire of 37 plays and 154 sonnets, we may never know if Shakespeare was the biggest musician of his time, but we do know he had a rapper's concern when he wrote in *Much Ado About Nothing*: "I was not born under a rhyming planet."

—Megha Mahindru >



TOP 10

From love ballads to raging metal numbers, our favourite Shakespeare-inspired tracks

- 1) 'Romeo and Juliet' by Dire Straits
- 2) 'Love Story' by Taylor Swift
- 3) 'I'm the Walrus' by The Beatles
- 4) 'Pull Me Under' by Dream Theatre
- 5) 'Roll Away Your Stone' by Mumford and Sons
- 6) 'The King Must Die' by Elton John
- 7) 'The Evil That Men Do' by Iron Maiden
- 8) 'Cleopatra's Cat' by The Spin Doctors
- 9) 'Waiting (O Mistress Mine)' by Nitin Sawhney
- 10) 'Miss Macbeth' by Elvis Costello

BECAUSE HE MADE CINEMA MORE DRAMATIC

Shakespeare's plot lines have inspired a stream of global filmmakers



West Side Story (1961): The high-energy musical relooks *Romeo And Juliet*.



Ran (1985): Akira Kurosawa's stylised epic transports *King Lear* to feudal Japan.



Romeo + Juliet (1996): Baz Luhrmann's film took immortal romance into an ultra-modern setting.



Omkara (2006): With its haunting soundtrack, it's Bollywood's most thoughtful tribute to the Bard. —AV

Because 140 characters are enough for him

These Instagram handles, Twitter accounts and hashtags influenced by Shakespeare are #mustsee #mustread

@IAM_SHAKESPEARE: With over 48,000 followers, Willy Shakes, aka Joshua Strelbel, tweets a verse from the Bard's complete works once every 10 minutes. His handle proves that brevity—140 characters, to be precise—is definitely the soul of wit.

@PopShakespeare: From “Mine hips doth speak falsehoods” and “Thou shalt turneth downward for what?” to “Alas, firstly: allow me to taketh a self-portrait,” this giggle-inducing, highly quotable Twitter feed provides a Shakespearean spin to reigning Top 40 lyrics.

#MaximumShakespeare: When the *New York Times* invited students to recite their favourite *Hamlet* excerpts, over a thousand 15-second Instagram videos took over the Internet. Clearly, Shakespeare's words aren't lost on Gen Y.

#15SecondShakespeare: Scores of British celebs gave pop songs an Elizabethan-era remix and then encouraged their followers to donate to the Red Cross. Not to be missed: Minnie Driver's rendition of the Kanye West anthem ‘Gold Digger’.

@The_Globe: For a truly vibrant and spellbinding behind-the-scenes experience—think sneak peeks of dress rehearsals, awe-inducing interior design shots and intriguing backstage secrets (ever wondered how fake blood works?)—follow Shakespeare's beloved 16th-century playhouse, now a showstopper on Instagram. —AV

BECAUSE HE MAKES ETERNAL STUDENTS OF US

With his work offering multiple interpretations, Shakespeare makes for stimulating discussions

The scene resembles a classroom, but it's actually a living room, and instead of school children it is a group of savvy Mumbai professionals [*Vogue* editor Priya Tanna included] gathered on a weekend afternoon, holding on to every word of Shakespeare. Conducted by educationist **Bubla Basu**, the Shakespeare Reading Club meets at homes across Mumbai, from Altamont Road to Bandra. “It was in 1994 that I had my first out-of-classroom teaching experience. A commerce student, a friend of my pupil, called saying he would like to study *Hamlet* for pleasure. A group of six was formed of students who enjoyed literature beyond the syllabi,” recalls Basu. Today, juggling multiple sessions with eight or 10 participants, Basu conducts workshops that re-contextualise Shakespeare.

From drawing parallels between John F Kennedy and Julius Caesar to showcasing rare archival clips, the sessions are for those ready to take time off from their busy schedules to engage in intelligent analysis. At Basu's class, a reading of *Othello* could set the group off to draw parallels with Naseeruddin Shah's 1980 film *Sparsh* or songs by Bob Dylan. “While Shakespeare can be read intellectually, appreciating form and structure, there's also a gut-level appeal that makes his work relevant today,” adds Basu. The Bard's audience may have been illiterate in his time, but his audience today is far from that. —MM >



PHOTO: PERLUGI MACO; AER: GETTY IMAGES; REVIEWS: SUJIT K. TARTAKO; STYLING: BARBERI MAGNANI; HAUTE COUTURE: HAUTE COUTURE; BLACK GLOVE: PHYLLIA



Because he continues to inspire the most exciting productions

Where there's a Will, there's a play. And thus, all the world remains his stage

Supple's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* reimagined the play with a cast of fairies who spoke seven languages



When it comes to avant garde performances, few can beat the British theatre company Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*. Spread across six floors of an abandoned hotel in New York, a roving cast of actors performs to a masked audience—you could end up in a room filled with candy or one with an orgy. Even as Shakespeare's stories inspire everything from the Bolshoi ballet to Benedict Cumberbatch, *Sleep No More* is so unusual that the Bard himself might have had trouble deciphering that it is a take on *Macbeth*.

Adaptations in India are getting increasingly radical as well: we've seen King Lear as a 21st-century CEO (Mumbai-based Yuki Ellias's *Dying To Succeed*) and Helena from *All's Well That Ends Well* spouting love ballads in Gujarati (Sunil Shanbag's *Maro Piyu Gayo Rangoon*). It seems that the only way to be truthful to the Bard in modern times is to follow what Peter Brooks once said: "Evoke Shakespeare and then forget him."

That's precisely what Tim Supple did when he reimagined *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a multilingual production with a cast of aerial performers. "Shakespeare was in no way original. His genius was to take widely shared stories and make them unique. We now think of Hamlet and Romeo as his... the stories he took on were already mythic but he rendered them archetypal," observes Supple. Director Rajat Kapoor's approach is singular too. In his works (*Hamlet: The Clown Prince* and *Nothing Like Lear*), Shakespearean heroes are played by clowns. "I cannot stand watching Shakespeare done in a conventional fashion. Hopefully, in each of my plays, the clowns become metaphors for different things," says Kapoor, whose latest

version of *Macbeth*, titled *What Is Done Is Done*, features a cast of scary clowns.

What makes the Bard a stage favourite through the centuries are his universal themes that allow for multiple interpretations. "The extraordinary thing about Shakespeare is that no matter how many times you tackle a play, there's more to discover," says *Sleep No More*'s director, Felix Barrett. It's the plot and character insights that make Shakespeare a popular choice for many. Director Atul Kumar, who in 2012 gave us *Piya Behrupiya*—(his *Twelfth Night* adaptation that premiered to rave reviews at the Globe), notes, "The world that Shakespeare creates is reflective of the human condition in its deepest sense. It cuts across cultures and language." No wonder they are the most translated works after the Bible.

There's no escaping Shakespeare this month. His hometown, Stratford-upon-Avon, will be the backdrop for much activity and the British Council plans to gear up with Shakespeare Lives, a global celebration of the playwright's unrivalled influence. Going by the rate at which his works are changing for the stage today, they all promise to be as inventive as Kumar's modern-day summary of *Hamlet*:

"(Hamlet enters)
Hamlet: Oh f**k!
(Exit Hamlet)" ■
—MM



LEADING LADY

Three minutes with actor **AYESHA DHARKER**, who plays Titania in the Royal Shakespeare Company's current production of *A Midsummer...*

What's your earliest memory of Shakespeare?

When I was five, I had a comic book of *A Midsummer...* I fell in love with Lysander and decided I had to look like him and went to the bathroom with a pair of scissors and chopped my hair off. Now that I'm grown up, I've thankfully got over the idea that you have to look exactly like the person you love!

What makes this show a must-watch?

Besides our core cast of 18 professional actors, it is a first for the RSC in that we are collaborating with 14 amateur companies. So I'm working (and rehearsing on Skype) with 14 different actors playing Bottom! It means that the show will be different every week.

You've played *Othello's* Emilia, and now you play Titania. The two are so different...

Yes, Emilia couldn't be more different from Titania, queen of the fairies, but they are both worldly women navigating their way through complicated relationships with their lovers or husbands! Visit Rsc.org.uk for show dates —MM