Straight Outta Stratford-Upon-Avon - Shakespeare's Early Days: Crash Course Theater #14

Crash Course: Theater
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater and remember that guy we said we weren't going to talk about in the last episode?

Well, we're gonna talk about him for a while now. I mean, of course, Yorick's pal Shakespeare.

And yes, Shakespeare actually wrote all of Shakespeare's plays, though sometimes he had help. But hey, you don't become the presiding genius of English theatre without some assistance Today, we'll cover Shakespeare's biography, look at playwriting in Elizabethan England, and take on a genre our boy Bill helped invent: the history play. So once more into the breach!

Who's with me? Typical! INTRO So, who is this Shakespeare guy, anyway?

We first hear of him on April 26th… or 23rd… or even a little earlier… in 1564, when he's baptized in the sleepy market town of Stratford-upon-Avon. His father, John, was a glover, and did ok for himself. John held a number of civic positions including ale-taster of the borough, and eventually mayor… an unorthodox political ascendancy, but hey whatever works!

John's wife, Mary, was the daughter of reasonably wealthy landowners. And Shakespeare had four younger siblings who lived to adulthood including one, Edmund, who was an actor but died at 27. At the age of six or seven, William starts attending the Stratford Grammar School, where much of the instruction was in Latin.

He almost certainly read Plautus's comedies and Seneca's tragedies. Some scholars think he leaves school at 13, some think at 15. Maybe he works as a butcher; maybe he works for his father.

In 1582, he marries Anne Hathaway–NO THE OTHER ANNE HATHAWAY–who is 8 years older than him, and 6 months pregnant. She gives birth to Susanna in 1583, and the twins Judith and Hamnet a year and a half later. Hamnet!

At some point after the birth of the twins, Shakespeare moves to London. And no one knows why! There's one story about how he had to go to London because he poached a deer?

There are also rumors that he joins up with traveling players. But we don't really know anything more until 1592, when he's a popular actor and the author of several plays—and people are making fun of him by calling him "Shake-scene." Harsh. Around this time, one of the twins, Hamnet, dies at the age of 11.

Hamnet! And when the theaters closed due to the plague, Shakespeare writes some long poems. When theaters reopen, he joins the Lord Chamberlain's Men as an actor, a playwright, and a shareholder.

By 1597, Shakespeare has made enough money to buy the second fanciest place in Stratford-upon-Avon, In 1611, he retires to Stratford proper; and again, no one knows why. And in 1616, at the age of 52, he dies. His anti-grave robbing epitaph reads: Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear, To dig the dust enclosed here.

Blest be the man that spares these stones, And cursed be he that moves my bones. So, how did Shakespeare become a playwright? It's hard to say for sure, but traveling players performed frequently in Stratford when he was a kid.

If he really did join a traveling company during his lost years, it would have exposed him to all sorts of plays, and the three or four production techniques that English theater had at the time. Playwriting wasn't a prestigious occupation in Elizabethan England. A lot of plays were written in these decades as there was a hunger for novelty.

Established theaters were still a new thing, and these companies had no repertory of classics to fall back on. So each company required new plays every couple of weeks. Writing plays was often a group effort, and works from the beginning and end of Shakespeare's career were written this way... more collaboratively.

Though it had the potential to make a lot of money, many playwrights often depended on side jobs or patronage. Shakespeare made his money not so much as a writer, but as a shareholder in the company. He definitely didn't make his cash in royalties.

Most plays weren't even published, and most of the ones that were appeared in cheap quartos—a name for booklets made up of pieces of paper printed on eight sides and folded up to become four double-sided pages. Many of these quarto publications were based on pirated copies and bad memories and are full of error or variation, though some are accurate. Occasionally, several different versions of a play would get published, like an early quarto of "Hamlet" that reads: "To be, or not to be,/ There's the point." I know, Yorick.

These quartos were usually published anonymously, and even if an author's name did appear, he didn't receive any money from them. Copyright wouldn't be invented for about another hundred years, by the way. And yeah, any playwright of this era is definitely a "he".

In 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, two fellow actors in the King's Men, John Heminges and Henry Condell, decided to collect and publish Shakespeare's works in an authoritative edition, to honor their friend. Their luxury volume, known as the First Folio, included 36 plays organized as Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies. It left out Two Noble Kinsmen and Pericles, which are common now, as well as Cardenio, the one Shakespeare play that's definitely lost.

We'll start with the histories because they were some of the earliest plays Shakespeare wrote: King John, Richard II, the two Henry IVs, Henry V, the three Henry VIs and Richard III. Henry VIII was written a lot later. With the exception of King John and Edward III, the rest of these plays describe the rise of the Tudors, the royal house of Elizabeth I, queen during the early years of Shakespeare's career.

Why are these "history plays," but not Julius Caesar or Macbeth or Cymbeline? Well, these distinctions are fuzzy. They were created by the editors of the First Folio, not Shakespeare himself.

But as scholar Lily Campbell puts it: "Tragedy is concerned with the doings of men which in philosophy are discussed under ethics; history with the doings of men which in philosophy are discussed under politics." So Richard II is a history because it's about Richard's eventual defeat by Bolingbroke, but Macbeth is a tragedy because it's about Macbeth's personal conflicts. By the way, this isn't really a theater. So I'm perfectly comfortable saying Macbeth.

I'm no longer perfectly comfortable saying Macbeth. What was the point of history plays? Well, a straightforward history play is a patriotic exercise that celebrates past greatness and commiserates over past suffering, without stopping to question God's providence.

History plays were designed to keep people in line: Thomas Heywood wrote in the 1612 "An Apology for Actors," that these plays "are writ with this ayme… to teach their subjects obedience to their king, to shew the people the untimely ends of such as have moved tumults, commotions, and insurrections, to present them with the flourishing estate of such as live in obedience, exhorting them to allegiance." basically, when it comes to tumults and

insurrections, don't start none, won't be none. But Shakespeare isn't that straightforward. A couple of his plays are about men who usurp the throne from kings and then become kings themselves, so his works are hardly a wholesale condemnation of tumult, or a rubber stamp on the divine right of kings.

Early critics claimed that he upheld the Tudor myth, but later ones have argued that he's up to something more subversive. For an example, let's look at one of his best-known history plays, "Richard III." in the Thoughtbubble: Edward IV is back on the throne after putting down a rebellion. His little brother Richard, aka, "that foul bunchback'd toad," isn't psyched about it.

Richard contrives to have his other brother, Clarence, sent to the Tower of London and then seduces Lady Anne, even though he murdered her father and her brother… and she knows it. Richard has Clarence drowned in a large cask of wine, which helps push Edward IV into an early grave. Edward's sons will succeed him, though, so Richard has more murdering to do!

After arranging to have a bunch of people executed, Richard has the two princes held in the Tower. He tries to convince the people that the princes are illegitimate and he is the rightful heir to the throne. The other lords more or less go for it, but just to be sure, Richard has the princes murdered anyway.

Now that he's king, Richard poisons his wife so he can make a more dynastically savvy marriage. But all this villainy starts to catch up with him, and rebellions break out. One of them is led by Richmond who—spoiler alert—will become Henry VII.

On the battlefield, Richard is haunted by his victims, famously offers his kingdom for a horse, and then dies, with Richmond announcing: "Now civil wounds are stopped; peace lives again. / That she may long live here, God say 'Amen.'" Thanks, Thoughtbubble. So a happy ending! Unless you're Richard.

Or one of the many people that he murdered. It's easy enough to read this play as rah-rah Tudor propaganda. Boo Richard!

Yay Richmond! But while the play shows Richard as a tyrant and a usurper, it isn't a wholly negative portrayal. Shakespeare's Richard is a genius and a charmer… and a villain and a killer.

So while the historians were busy confirming his wickedness, Shakespeare also shows him as attractive and theatrical. He's the character you can't stop watching and the one that great actors want to play. Also, quick aside, people used to accuse Shakespeare of making up the fact that Richard had a hunchback just to make him seem extra evil, but a few years ago they found Richard's bones in a parking lot—and it turns out while he may not have been a full on hunchback, he did have scoliosis.

While we don't know all the circumstances of where and when and how Shakespeare became a writer, his early work shows him taking the straightforward form of the chronicle play and molding it into something more exciting and ambitious. He added breathtaking poetry, penetrating insight and fun scenes of people being killed. In wine.

Next time we'll look at how those scenes were probably acted, and we'll discuss Shakespeare's tragedies. But until then… curtain!