In defense of Shakespeare—a conversation with veteran Australian actor and director John Bell

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The recent film *Anonymous*, directed by Roland Emmerich and written by John Orloff, which argues that the Earl of Oxford, Edward de Vere, was the actual author of the three dozen plays attributed to William Shakespeare (1564-1616), raises a host of questions. (See "*Anonymous*: An ignorant assault on Shakespeare" and "An exchange: More on the contemporary assault on Shakespeare") At the center of the debate is the figure of Shakespeare himself and the enduring character of his work.

The arguments in favor of the Earl of Oxford are not serious ones and his champions largely attempt to take advantage of the generally low level of historical knowledge at present to gain a hearing. More serious, however, is the thrust of the effort, aimed, in our view, against the plays and Shakespeare's extraordinary contribution as a whole.

In the assault on Shakespeare, incomprehension in the face of genuine artistic genius combines with hostility toward the universality of the plays and the playwright, including the confidence of the Elizabethan playwright that he could cognize every corner of reality and bring it to life in a poetic manner. There is something threatening and disturbing to a certain contemporary social type, self-involved and self-centered, often obsessed with gender or ethnic identity, about an artistic figure of Shakespeare's depth and breadth.

Out of a concern with some of these general questions, I recently spoke to John Bell, the distinguished Australian actor and director who founded the Bell Shakespeare theatre company in 1990.

In his lively memoir, *The Time of My Time*, Bell (born 1940 in Maitland, New South Wales) describes his first eye-opening encounter with Shakespeare at a Catholic high school, when one of his teachers introduced an English class to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. On top of that, a viewing of Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* at a local cinema left Bell "stunned and blinking." He goes on, "I couldn't believe what I'd just experienced so I went back in and watched it all over again. … In the years following, Olivier's *Hamlet* and *Richard III* appeared and my fate was sealed."

At the time Bell went off to university there was no full-time professional theatre company in Sydney. He told an interviewer, "If you wanted a career in the theatre, there simply wasn't one [in Australia]." Bell traveled to England in 1964, and after six months, was invited to join the prestigious Royal Shakespeare Company.

He returned to Australia in 1970, taught at the National Institute of Dramatic Art and co-founded the Nimrod Theatre Company in Sydney.

For the Shakespeare company he established 21 years ago, Bell has played Shylock, Richard III, Macbeth, Malvolio, Coriolanus, Leontes, Prospero, King Lear and Ulysses, among other roles. In the last five years alone, he has directed productions of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Macbeth*, *As You Like It* and *Pericles*, along with an adaptation of Melville's *Moby Dick*, Heiner Müller's reworking of *Titus Andronicus*, Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Bell Shakespeare is Australia's only national touring theatre company. It currently tours three mainstage productions to each Australian state every year, in addition to a variety of educational programs.

In 2011, Bell published *On Shakespeare*, his thoughts and reminiscences of playing Shakespeare over the course of half a century.

We spoke by telephone.

David Walsh: *Anonymous* is the immediate occasion for this conversation, but our more general concern is the appeal of Shakespeare, his universality: what it is that still draws audiences, actors, and directors to the plays.

You write in your memoir about your first encounters with Shakespeare. Can you recall the experience and some of the elements that were attractive or forceful to you at the time?

John Bell: Yes, I can. I think my very first epiphany, if you like, was hearing *Julius Caesar* on the radio when I was 12 or 13 years old. I was struck by the language, the poetry was what moved me most. I'd never heard language like that.

I was very fortunate in having two very good English teachers in high school, when I was about 14 or 15. They didn't simply pass the book around the classroom and say, 'Please, paraphrase this.' The first one I had actually acted out the play for us, in the room, and took on all the parts, described the sets, the costumes, and lighting, the whole lot.

I guess the next thing, around the same time, when I was 14 or 15, was seeing Laurence Olivier's movie of *Henry V*, which had all those elements together: the language was so thrilling, the spectacle, the sheer excitement, and generally the rough nature of it. It opens in a reconstruction of the Globe Theatre, which is full of horseplay and the actors and audience adlibbing with each other, with a great sense of improvisation about it. This reminded me of my very first encounters with theatre, which were pantomime and circus.

At the age of 15 or so, I was an absolute convert. All I wanted to do was be an actor and perform Shakespeare.

DW: I remember your comment about the circus. This is something that still strikes people: the remarkable combination in Shakespeare of vulgarity and poetry, of high-flown ideas and low-flown ideas, the mixture of genres and conceptions, personalities and social types, the rich and varied presentation of life.

JB: That's absolutely right. It's total theatre. You look at almost every other playwright, they're working within relatively narrow boundaries, whether it's Tennessee Williams or Noel Coward, Harold Pinter or Samuel Beckett. Shakespeare, as you say, crosses all genres, can go from the most vulgar to the most sublime within a single scene, in *The Winter's Tale*, for instance.

One is at the same time always aware that one is in the theatre, enhanced by the character of the Globe Theatre itself. The new one in London gives you some sense of what is was like: the audience surrounding the actor, this direct contact in broad daylight, no tricks, no scenery, no fancy lighting, no illusion …

DW: Shakespeare was apparently obliged to draw 1,500 to 2,000 people a day to the Globe.

JB: We tend perhaps to underestimate Shakespeare's audience. An audience that simply wanted to throw vegetables at the stage would have gone to the bear-baiting next door.

Also, Shakespeare is continually raising the bar, making it more difficult for his audience. If you go from the rough and readiness of *The Comedy of Errors* and *Henry VI* through to *Troilus and Cressida*, it's an extraordinary escalation in demands made on the audience's sophistication, listening power, patience and intelligence.

DW: In your memoir you suggest that the language transcended the purely rational and touched all the senses, I wonder if you have any thoughts about that.

JB: Language that captures the whole body and soul. The rhythms, the cadences, the after-effect of poetry is not just literal. The juxtaposition of words that you would not normally juxtapose, the rhythm that stays with you after you've heard the line, which all genuine poetry does, I think. A good many of the other prose plays of the period are just that, they are literal, they are prosaic, they even concoct a story, but it's the cadences in Shakespeare, the qualities of sound that stay with you in a good line of poetry.

DW: Can you speak about your experience with the Royal Shakespeare Company in Britain in the 1960s?

JB: I was there nearly five years and I'd had very little acting training up to that point. I had about six months at the Bristol Old Vic school, and then I was invited to join the Stratford company, and it was during the five years I was there that I really learned what the craft of acting was about, working with very good directors of course, people like Peter Hall, John Barton, Peter Brook, at their peak. And working with some very fine actors, like Paul Scofield (my very favorite), Ian Richardson, Ian Holm, Glenda Jackson …

This was a troupe of very fine actors, and it was through being in the rehearsal room, watching them at work, then being on stage with them, that I really learned what the craft of acting was. I learned a great deal about directing as well. So I found that experience absolutely invaluable. And the fact that one was at Stratford for most of the year, so that there were relatively few distractions and you gave yourself up entirely to the work … you had the leisure, the time to simply watch rehearsals and ruminate on the work and the things that were happening.

DW: Did you have the opportunity to be in any of Peter Brook's productions?

JB: I was only in one, unfortunately: *The Investigation* [by Peter Weiss], a dramatizing of the transcript of the Auschwitz trials. It was only a public reading [in 1965]. That was the only time I encountered him as a director, but he was around the company a lot, and, of course, I saw all his productions.

DW: What did you think of Paul Scofield's *King Lear* [directed on film by Peter Brook in 1971]?

JB: I never got to see his Lear on stage, I only got to see the movie, which I don't think does him justice. I don't think it's a particularly good movie. It's too tricksy and too affected, I think. From what I heard about the stage production, the director wasn't getting in the way, he simply had Scofield in that space. I was so conscious of the camera work in the movie, that it undermined the power of Scofield.

DW: Were you there at the time of [Peter Weiss's] *Marat/Sade*?

JB: Yes, I saw *Marat/Sade* several times. Again, much, much better than the film. I think the film lost a lot of the sheer, raw presence. It was at the Aldwych Theatre in London and I saw it a number of times, I was in the company by then, and the visceral impact of that piece on stage was astonishing. That was watered down considerably in the film.

DW: You mention in your book at one point that there was no permanent professional theatre in Sydney when you began to be interested in being an actor.

JB: That was when I first joined the profession, that was in 1960. Actually, I was fortunate, because a company was established then and I worked with it for two years. There had been other companies previously that had been set up and failed.

When I came back from England, in 1970, there was a theatre industry, but it was nowhere near what it is today. I think that Australia has a pretty healthy theatre culture, and that has been a product of the last 40 years, quite extraordinarily.

DW: Obviously, the city and the country have undergone extraordinary changes and you belong to a generation that was responsible in many ways for those changes. How do you see your generation, what its challenges were and what it accomplished?

JB: I think the main thing I felt when I came back from England was that Australia was too hidebound, it wasn't creating its own theatre, we were still imitating the English system. So that each of the major companies would have one Shakespeare, one Bernard Shaw, one Neil Simon, one Feydeau farce, or whatever, and very little in terms of Australian content. So my generation was determined to turn that around and create an Australian theatre.

There was a group in Melbourne, the Australian Performing Group, starting that work, and then in 1970, myself and a partner, set up a little theatre called the Nimrod Theatre in King's Cross and we started producing Australian work, which I then carried on for the next 14 years. And that kind of took off. There was also the beginning of a fledgling film industry here, and I think the theatre fed the film industry with new scripts, new talent, and also an awareness of making our own voice heard. That was a significant development, it hadn't happened much before. We also produced international talent, like Cate Blanchett, who runs a theatre company here, and many other actors who got exported to Hollywood, unfortunately, but it was the beginning of the recognition of Australian talent that we hadn't had before.

DW: The presence of Australian actors is quite remarkable in the global film industry.

JB: It is quite striking. My only regret is that they're all putting on American accents and pretending to be Americans. Most of the world wouldn't even know they were Australian performers. I long for the moment when we can start using our own voice more and stop being phony Americans.

DW: That's a problem, and not just in Australia. Back to Shakespeare. You indicate the influence his work had on you, and you've established a company devoted to his work, so you obviously believe in the power of these plays to have that same sort of impact on other people, and not simply those from more privileged backgrounds. I'm curious whether you find it more or less difficult for contemporary audiences to respond to Shakespeare than it was, say, several decades ago, or what sort of changes, if any, there have been in audiences.

JB: I think 40 years ago we were very hooked on a traditional way, so-called, of performing Shakespeare, which meant imitating what people thought was the Old Vic or the Royal Shakespeare Company. This meant people putting on period costumes and a very English-sounding sort of accent. And so productions were very conservative, and people who went to the opera and ballet liked those sorts of productions, they were in line with their cultural expectations. Rather lavish, decorative, rather escapist, and obviously 'high art,' Culture with a capital C.

And what we've been trying to do is break all that down over the last 40 years. So that my company, which is now 21 years old, has always

performed Shakespeare in modern dress, using Australian accents throughout, or whatever accent you happen to have, whether it was Polish, Russian, Chinese, whatever. You don't hide your voice or where you come from. And we focused very much on contemporary issues in the plays, racism, anti-Semitism, gender conflict, anti-war sentiment, whatever is in the plays that can be brought out to make the plays resonate with an audience now. We've concentrated on that. We're hardly alone, that's been a global concern. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, as [Polish critic] Jan Kott called him.

I think Shakespeare is generally taught in school as badly as he always has been. We try to counteract that by having an education wing in our company, eight young actors who spend all year performing in schools all over Australia to some 60,000 students, bringing Shakespeare into the classroom as performance. We also run workshops and seminars so we can help teachers communicate Shakespeare, especially for classrooms full of children where English is the second language, a lot of Middle Eastern students, for instance.

We find when we go into Aboriginal communities, remote communities, and play Shakespeare for them, they take to it very readily, they have no problem. They have three or four languages of their own, this is just one more language. They pick it up quite easily and respond to the big issues, the symbolism, the mythology. When we work in those communities, we translate the plays into the various Aboriginal languages and they teach us their languages in return. So there's a lot of activity overall in education, in theatre practice, rescuing Shakespeare from the traditionalists and the conservatives, who want to keep the plays in a museum context.

DW: This is a sweeping question. At its best, in your opinion, what sort of impact does a Shakespeare or any major artistic figure have on an audience member?

JB: I don't want to sound complacent or self-congratulatory, but I think we have made quite an impact on people. We've played before more than two million people, in this company, and the kind of feedback we get from younger and older people alike is gratifying. They didn't know Shakespeare could be so entertaining, so much fun, we didn't think we could ever understand it. People ask, who did the translation? Nobody, that was Shakespeare. So I think we've achieved something in performing it in a way that makes it very accessible and clear to audiences. That was my aim, that's what I set out to do. So I think we've had a record of success with that.

DW: Are there plays or parts that are favorites of yours, as an actor, director or spectator?

JB: I'm often asked that, and it's the old question: which is your favorite child? One has to love the play that one is directing or acting in, because you put about twelve months into every one, in terms of thinking about it, casting, rehearsing, getting it up. One devotes a year of one's life to each play, and one falls in love with each one.

I think the play I most admire and that I'm most in awe of is *King Lear*. I've done that several times, and never really gotten very far up the mountain with that one. I think of all the plays, my very favorites would be *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, in terms of the sheer scope and range of those plays, and the appeal they have.

DW: You mention *Henry IV*, and I was thinking about that the other day in relation to *Anonymous* and the Earl of Oxford. The scene of the carriers preparing to load their horses at the inn [Part I, Act II, Scene I], talking about the fleas and the price of oats… The notion that the Earl of Oxford could have written some of those scenes is so preposterous.

JB: Absolutely ludicrous. That scene you mention, I think, is a piece of verbatim theatre. I think Shakespeare was lying in bed and heard those two guys outside the window talking about the price of oats and the horses with the shakes, or whatever. It's so authentic, and, again, I don't see the Earl of Oxford knowing people like Bottom and Quince and Bardolph and Pistol and Mistress Quickly. This was totally out of his realm, it is so ludicrous, I agree.

DW: In our view, this is not just an attack on who wrote the plays, it's an attack on the plays. I think there's something offensive to certain people about the grandness and universality of the plays, they are so titanic, and certainly we reject the notion that women should only write about women, and Jews about Jews and Australians about Australians … There's something about the universal figure of this artist that is very powerful, I think.

JB: I totally agree.

DW: Do you have any thoughts about the 'authorship controversy,' or is it something you simply ignore?

JB: I tend to ignore it. It's been around for so long now, I heard about it at university, whether it was Christopher Marlowe, or Oxford, or Pembroke, or even Queen Elizabeth. Crazy, crazy notions. Look, people like parlor games, they like conspiracy theories, but I think there's such a body of good writing now from good scholars, like Jonathan Bate, James Shapiro, Stephen Greenblatt, even Bill Bryson, and they all have good answers to the conspiracy theories, and it's such nonsense. I guess there's always a certain intrigue for people, and there's a frustration because Shakespeare is so enigmatic.

Actually, we know a good deal more about his life than most of the playwrights of the period. We know nothing about John Webster, for instance, at all. He was up there with Shakespeare in terms of popularity. It's remarkable we know as much about Shakespeare as we do. But because he remains enigmatic as a personality, and his character is so hard to pin down, people want to create their own Shakespeare, someone they would like to see as the author of those plays. Gay people will say he must have been gay, Catholics say he must have been a Catholic, atheists insist he must obviously have been an atheist, we all want to create a Shakespeare who appeals to us. That's why people have this romantic notion of some English nobleman, rather than someone they find too shadowy to connect with.

DW: Any final words on why you continue to direct and act in Shakespeare, what the continuing appeal is?

JB: Sometimes, oddly enough, I feel it keeps me young, because it's a continual exploration, with the acting, directing and researching. I guess like some sort of crazy scientist, someone who's fascinated by one aspect of life, you go on exploring, researching, getting excited by it. I feel sorry for actors and directors who are jaded by their careers and say, 'I'm doing this crap just for the money,' 'I'm in this TV soap or this B-grade movie because I've got to earn a living.' I've never felt that. If you're working on Shakespeare, I think it's a privilege to devote your life to working alongside such a great mind. It can never be boring or exhausting, it's always revitalizing. I still feel like the 15-year-old I was when I first discovered Shakespeare.