Shakespeare on Radio: who is it for?

In 2020, the BBC broadcast two new productions of William Shakespeare’s plays on Radio 3. The first, Othello, was introduced by an academic, Dr Islam Issa, Senior Lecturer at Birmingham City University. The second, a week later, Henry the Fourth Part One, was introduced by actor Toby Jones, who plays Falstaff in the production.

Issa presents a short, scholarly talk, telling the audience, among other things, that ‘a moor could have been any person with darker skin or who wasn’t Christian, but it was a religiously loaded, often derogatory term, that usually referred to Mahometans’.¹ This is an important point for this production, as the part of Othello is played by Khalid Abdalla, the first actor of Arab heritage to take on the role for BBC Radio.

Jones, on the other hand, tells us ‘everything is for our delight, our enjoyment as an audience’.² This is, intentionally or not, a sales pitch – the underlying sentiment is ‘listen to this – you’ll enjoy it’. Whereas Othello is telling its audience ‘listen to this – it’ll give you food for thought’.

¹ ‘Othello: What it means to be a Moor’, The Shakespeare Sessions, [https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p08b2bxn] [accessed 22 May 2020].
² ‘Who is Falstaff?’, The Shakespeare Sessions, [https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p08bctzv] [accessed 22 May 2020].
The BBC’s first charter, in 1927, stated that it should offer a service ‘as a means of education and entertainment’. And yet throughout the history of Shakespeare on radio, those two words have seemed to be in opposition with each other.

Shakespeare was the BBC’s first choice when it came to putting drama on the radio. The BBC’s first director general, John Reith, wrote: ‘The plays of Shakespeare fulfil to a great extent the requirements of the wireless, for he had little in the way of setting and scenery, and relied chiefly on the vigour of his plot and the conviction of the speakers to convey his ideas’. However, Reith made no suggestion that this should be an educational experience for listeners. Shakespeare was regarded as entertainment, and something that should be accessible to all.

But not everyone wanted Shakespeare. In Wales, the BBC’s pioneering Cardiff station was putting on a two-hour play roughly once a fortnight late in 1923 and early 1924. And it led to what is probably the first argument in print about broadcast Shakespeare. Listeners were up in arms! Some hated Shakespeare and wanted him off the air, with one declaring ‘we do not want Shakespeare at all’. Some loved him and were delighted with the station’s efforts, stating that those opposed were ‘libelling their respective mental capacities’. Over the course of a fortnight, listener after listener wrote to the Western Mail. The man in charge of the station, Arthur Corbett-Smith, tried to appease them saying: ‘I don’t think we are “highbrows.” […] You must not think because we give you symphonies and Shakespeare’s plays it is because we are “highbrows.”’ Less than a year after the first

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5 ‘Cardiff Broadcasting Programme’, Western Mail, 15 February 1924, p. 9.
6 ‘Cardiff Broadcasting Programmes’, Western Mail, 19 February 1924, p. 7.
7 ‘Wireless programmes critics – Cardiff director speaks to Rotarians’, Western Mail, 11 March 1924, p. 7.
Shakespeare play had been broadcast, the idea that it was only for the elite was already gaining ground.

Val Gielgud, long-standing head of BBC Radio Drama, recognised ‘the rather odd proprietary attitude of certain individuals towards Shakespeare’. And in 1935, the critic and theatre producer, Herbert Farjeon, attacked the corporation under the headline: ‘Must Shakespeare be butchered by the BBC?’. He bemoaned what he saw as unjustifiable editing of texts, in particular a version of Henry V he claimed was only 75 minutes long: ‘Henry the Two-Fifths would have been more accurate.’ The actual broadcast lasted nearly two hours; longer, but still a heavily cut text. Gielgud told the Radio Times that he believed the average audience member was not prepared to listen for long periods, ‘not because Shakespeare is poor stuff, but because any listening to the spoken word is a business demanding acute attention and concentration.’

That same year, Peter Creswell adapted Macbeth for radio. His main concern was not the length of the text but its veracity. Writing in the Radio Times he told listeners: ‘I have cut only such passages as I myself, in the light of this evidence, have come to regard as doubtfully Shakespearean.’ Not only did he take great pains in the magazine to highlight his academic rigour – quoting A. C. Bradley and discussing ‘interpolations by Middleton or Rowley or Wilkins’ – he also gave his cast seventeen pages of notes, largely culled from Harley Granville-Barker’s ‘Preface to Macbeth’ in The Players’ Shakespeare, but also reflecting the opinions of Bradley, G. Wilson Knight, and Caroline Spurgeon.

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8 Gielgud, p. 95.
10 Gielgud, Radio Times, 6 September 1935.
Three years later, a production of *Hamlet* took a very different attitude. The leading actor, film star Leslie Howard, had played the role on Broadway and had extensive radio experience in the United States. He made it clear his production would be all about performance – and action. His Hamlet had ‘to meet violence with violence’.

This was reflected in a review in *The Times* which stated ‘the drama within Hamlet’s mind […] was of rather less importance than usual’ leading the play to be ‘active, bustling, an affair of moves and countermoves’. The reviewer also concluded: ‘This may well be better, for the purpose of a broadcast performance’.

In 1948, an almost full-text *Hamlet* was produced, starring John Gielgud. Including two intervals it lasted for nearly four hours. The original broadcast was aired with narration, but by the time it was repeated in 1975, this had gone out of fashion and was edited out. Chris Dunkley, who reviewed this repeat, was unimpressed by the decision: ‘I think the removal was a mistake […] tending to reduce the comprehending audience to dedicated initiates.’ As Dunkley states, one of the particular problems with *Hamlet* is the duel at the end: ‘it is very hard to understand from radio that Hamlet unintentionally kills Laertes with the poisoned rapier intended for himself after they switch weapons during a scuffle’.

However, in many ways the cutting of the narration gives a greater sense of momentum. Actor and radio producer, Felix Felton, writing the year after Gielgud’s *Hamlet* was originally broadcast, stated that narration ‘interrupts the flow of the dramatic action’. So in this case, reducing the play to something only for ‘dedicated initiates’ also turns it into better radio drama. But

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can you have it all? Good radio drama that pleases those who know Shakespeare’s texts, but is also accessible to everyone?

Perhaps. In the twenty-first century, Shakespeare is almost always aired on what is often perceived as the most highbrow British network, BBC Radio 3. But in 2011, its production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was unashamedly populist, billed as having ‘an all-star cast’. 

Although a good number of the actors would have been familiar faces on television, there were also many with a track record in Shakespeare on stage, the most notable perhaps being Roger Allam, who has taken many leading roles with the Royal Shakespeare Company and Shakespeare’s Globe.

Being broadcast – and repeated – in the era of social media, people did not write to their local paper about the play, but posted online. Twitter comments suggest the audience was not what might be stereotypically expected. They included a listener who chose to listen to it to calm him down after ‘football excitement’, and another who wrote: ‘It’s brilliant. Helena and Hermia have been bitchfighting for ages.’

The production has been posted (unofficially) on YouTube. As such, a number of unfiltered listener comments are available via the Chat facility. Many emphasise the play’s usefulness as an educational tool, with one comment even giving the timings for the individual scenes, making it easier for students to find the part of the play they need. There are also comments which emphasise the production’s entertainment value. Maybe this is a production that fulfils both ‘education’ and ‘entertainment’.

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19 ‘Radio – Drama on 3: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Observer*, 11 September 2011, [https://advance.lexis.com/api/permalink/6aeb1c56-1fc7-4d3c-9e7b-9d6a82f5e9d4/?context=1519360](https://advance.lexis.com/api/permalink/6aeb1c56-1fc7-4d3c-9e7b-9d6a82f5e9d4/?context=1519360) [accessed 25 May 2020].

20 Selected tweets: [https://twitter.com/PressOfficeMan/status/201750189336301568](https://twitter.com/PressOfficeMan/status/201750189336301568) ; [https://twitter.com/ellegist/status/112981392262049792](https://twitter.com/ellegist/status/112981392262049792) [accessed 8 June 2020].
This paper poses the question: who is radio Shakespeare for? The BBC’s current mission statement says its purpose is to serve ‘all audiences’. So perhaps the corporation would hope radio Shakespeare is for everyone. In reality, it is probably for fans of radio drama, the approximately 80,000 people who listen each week to the Drama on 3 slot on a Sunday evening. Radio 3 does not define its audience, although the corporation’s former Controller of Music, Robert Ponsonby, suggested only ‘philistines’ would ‘choose to call such a channel “elitist”’. But many would use that label. Which takes us full circle, back to Arthur Corbett-Smith’s defence that just because part of the BBC broadcasts symphonies and Shakespeare’s plays, it does not mean it is a highbrow network. Shakespeare on radio is – at least potentially – for everyone. It is available to all, for free, and many of its producers appear to have actively tried to make it entertaining without losing what Shakespeare purists might consider its essentials: the text, its poetry and its call on the audience’s imagination.

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