

Michael Pennington

Sweet William

Twenty Thousand Hours with Shakespeare

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Contents

	Preface	ix		
	Introduction	1		
1	The Rose of Youth	10		
	Sweet William – Poor Inches of Nature – William Page – Moth – Arthur – Marina – Perdita and Mamillius			
2	The Only Shake-Scene	32		
	John Shakespeare – Marriage and Flight – A Motley to the View – London – The Two Gentlemen of Verona – The Comedy of Errors – An Upstart Crow – Henry VI – The Rose			
3	Myself Alone	63		
	The Soloists – Richard III – King John			
4	The Tide of Blood	76		
	Henry IV Part One – Henry IV Part Two – Henry V			
5	Love, Love, Nothing But Love, Sweet Love	114		
	Fools for Love – Love’s Labour’s Lost – The Merchant of Venice – The Taming of the Shrew – Much Ado About Nothing – Romeo and Juliet – A Midsummer Night’s Dream			
	Interval : The State We’re In (Part One)	138		
6	The Great Globe Itself	157		
	Hong Kong – The Globe – Hamlet – As You Like It – Measure for Measure – Julius Caesar – The Merry Wives of Windsor – Othello			
7	The Time’s Plague	187		
	The Wisest Fool in Christendom – Macbeth – Timon of Athens – King Lear			
8	Your Actions are My Dreams	219		
	The Conscience of the King – The Winter’s Tale – Cymbeline			
9	Love is Merely a Madness	245		
	Antony and Cleopatra – Helena – Troilus and Cressida – Coriolanus			
10	Let’s Bear Us Like the Time	270		
	Ice and Fire – The Tempest – Henry VIII – The Two Noble Kinsmen – The End of All			
	Conclusion : The State We’re In (Part Two)	296		
	Index			

Introduction

In 1827 the composer Hector Berlioz went to see an English company perform *Hamlet* in Paris. He'd never seen a Shakespeare play before – in fact he spoke no English – but that evening he fell in love with the play, with the author, and with Harriet Smithson, the actress playing Ophelia:

Shakespeare coming upon me unawares, struck me like a thunderbolt... I saw, I understood, I felt... that I was alive and that I must arise and walk.

I have little in common with Berlioz, but Shakespeare hit me like a hammer when I was eleven. I had the advantage of speaking English, but no more natural affinity with Shakespeare's world than might any other Tottenham Hotspur supporter of that age. The play was *Macbeth*, at the Old Vic Theatre in London, and it certainly wasn't my idea to go; and my parents, who took me, were only supposing in the vaguest terms that it would be Good For the Boy to see a Shakespeare play at some point before adolescence carried him off into the unknown.

Little did they guess. The show started with a bloodcurdling scream that came slicing out of a darkness which then lifted to reveal a blood-soaked soldier staggering towards us and collapsing; and a moment after that, from a tangle of dead trees and twisted branches behind him, the figures of the three weird sisters arose to ask when they would meet again in thunder, lightning or in rain. Two lines in, I was on the edge of my seat; and, the play being what it is, I stayed there all night. *Macbeth* was

played by the fine Paul Rogers; as he contemplated the murder of King Duncan, he also saw what he was about to do to himself:

Besides, this Duncan
 Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
 So clear in his great office, that his virtues
 Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
 The deep damnation of his taking off;
 And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
 Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, hors'd
 Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
 Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
 That tears shall drown the wind.

I couldn't quite work out this wonderful picture, but its power and fluency sounded like a great rumbling organ with all its stops open. A few minutes later Macbeth saw his imaginary airborne dagger and followed it – slowly, slowly, slowly – towards Duncan's bedroom to do the deed:

Thou sure and firm-set earth,
 Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
 The very stones prate of my whereabouts
 And take the present horror from the time
 Which now suits with it...

Even then I knew that I was looking at an actor in property boots moving across a painted stage floor; but what I heard was the sound of their weathered soles on the flagstones of Glamis Castle, and I fancied I could feel the cold and the dark and the silence swirling around its battlements. Why was this man, so terrified but so delighted, indulging his fancies when he had such a single, brutal thing to do?

While he was about it, Ann Todd as Lady Macbeth thought she heard something untoward:

Hark! Peace!
 It was the owl that shriek'd, the fatal bellman
 Which gives the stern'st good night...

I caught the jagged phrasing: the shriek of the owl and the soft pounding beat of a solemn bell, both sounds held in the same instrument like the chanter and drone of the bagpipes.

Later on, darkness fell once more on the murderous but strangely sympathetic couple as they prepared for their banquet:

Light thickens, and the crow
 Makes wing to the rooky wood.
 Good things of day begin to droop and drowse
 Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.

Nowadays I recognise with some affection Shakespeare's profligacy – with the crow established, he hardly needed the wood to be 'rooky' as well; but since he was bringing night onto an open-air stage in the middle of the afternoon he perhaps needed to rub it in a bit. And as always with him, there's a subtler possibility: the crow is solitary and the rook social, and Banquo, with only his son for company, is about to be mobbed by a flock of assassins. I also know now that what makes the passage work is the brooding rhyme of 'drowse... rouse', its broad vowels opening out from the tight consonants of 'makes wing... rooky wood'. All I was aware of then was that darkness was closing in on Banquo as it had on King Duncan; I heard wings flap above my head and had the distinct sensation that I was growing up fast. Not to mention wanting to know how they did all the blood, and quite how that empty seat at Macbeth's dinner table had become scarily filled without my noticing.

It's remarkable how often in this play we are asked to imagine dreadful things just out of sight. Once Lady Macbeth, her sleeping eyes blindly open, had left the stage, I could almost hear her breath stop while Macbeth looked at us as if through a doorway of hell:

I have liv'd long enough; my way of life
 Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf...

I had no idea what 'the sear' was, but it had a tearing sound, like something that would never be mended again. But I knew well enough about the yellow leaves. Only a few hours before – a lifetime by now – I'd seen them as I trudged home unwillingly (for once) *from* school, knowing I had to go to this damned Shakespeare play that evening. It was quite a nasty autumn night, and the leaves from the plane trees on our street had blocked up the gutters under yellow streetlamps that made the pavements look yellow too. So this time it wasn't at all the grandness of Shakespeare's language that caught me but its near-at-handness, its easy presence in my world. Especially as I heard the bleak abstracts that followed:

And that which should accompany old age,
 As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
 I must not look to have; but in their stead,
 Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
 Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.

The play had begun with a scream, but now Macbeth's self-damnation was in whispered, ordinary words: though I was only eleven and certainly hadn't killed anyone, I understood what he felt about his life falling like autumn leaves.

Back home again and safe, I was like a child possessed, and my parents must have wondered if they'd ever hear comforting talk of Tottenham Hotspur again. I hooked *Macbeth* off the shelf and straight away, that night, started reading it aloud. And for days, weeks and months to come I kept trying Shakespeare that way – for years really, as I still can't read him in silence. I began to feel the oscillations in the language and the headlong narratives, events tumbling impatiently over each other as if intervening scenes in real time had been cut out. I saw a mind full of scorpions, a woman sensing devils murmuring in the room around her, the dead rising shrieking from the earth; but the play's most famous speech, about the tale told by an idiot, is, once it gets going, almost monosyllabic, a bulletin from a man glimpsing infinite, purposeless tomorrows. At the same time I was trying to find out whether the sound, so splendid but so intimate, would work coming off my tongue as well. And in fact it did, sort of, and so that was a first lesson learned: even a speech like that belonged to me, with my childish treble going on adolescent croak, and not just to the experts.

Now I'm an expert of sorts myself, having at a rough estimate spent twenty thousand hours of my life so far performing Shakespeare, leave alone the time taken rehearsing, talking, thinking and writing about him. So I know quite a bit about the torque of the engine. But sometimes during a performance I see a bespectacled eleven- or twelve-year-old down near the front, and it doesn't half make me raise my game. That's when I realise that all I've learned over the years doesn't add up to a hill of beans unless I can do something very simple with it: pass on to him or her that same intoxication of sound and meaning, its sudden impact on ear, eye and stomach.



In between, Shakespeare has been as pervasive in my life as white noise. If Jaques was right about the Seven Ages of Man, then having spent my First in routine mewling and puking, encountering the plays in my Second had made me not so much the whining schoolboy as a thoroughly narrow-minded adolescent who had soon, to his own satisfaction and unthreatened by any audience, played everything from

the Bawd in *Pericles* to Old Adam, from Titus Andronicus to Falstaff's Page – which I suppose has saved a lot of time learning the lines later. So, when the Old Vic put on the three parts of *Henry VI* for a short run that lay entirely inside my boarding school's term-time, you may imagine my shock at being refused leave by my headmaster to go home for a single day and night one weekend so that I could see a couple of them. He acknowledged that it would be 'a valuable experience' for me but was afraid, he explained to my father, of 'setting a dangerous precedent'. A dangerous precedent? Oh, happy dream – scores of young adolescent males rushing to see Shakespeare's least popular history plays rather than knocking each other's heads off on the rugby field. I still remember the dates we'd asked for, since I spent the hours of the performances facing more or less east, imagining the whole thing from the middle of Wiltshire; meanwhile my father, though terrified by his son's interest in show business, never forgave the headmaster for his elementary failure of vision, for such an illiberal reflex.

As for the Third of the Seven Ages, I was the lover in due course, sighing like furnace as Mercutio and Berowne, Shakespeare's great young fantasists I played at the RSC during the 1970s; and by the military Fourth, I was a hardened campaigner, sometimes bearded like the pard and frequently uttering strange oaths, asserting my own and Michael Bogdanov's views through our maverick outfit, the English Shakespeare Company. This was when I really started to learn something, for instance from playing in *Richard III* in East Berlin in 1989, towards the end of the Honecker regime, to an appalled silence: the glimpse of Richard's iron fist gleaming inside his velvet glove was not the merry irony it can be to Western audiences but a horrible daily fact. The silence would be broken minutes after the curtain each night as local actors, and not only actors, stormed backstage and wouldn't let us leave till we had all drunk and talked together for several hours.

Around the same time, I directed *Twelfth Night* with a Tokyo company in Japanese. I got on well with everyone except Toby Belch, the company's oldest member, whom I found very difficult until we went for a drink one night soon before the opening. Amidst the smoke of the *yakitori* barbecue and the fizzle of the Suntory he told me what of course I should have guessed: he was old enough to have served in the War and his reaction to all English-speakers, including directors and playwrights, was, he'd thought, forever prejudiced. Now, he declared as we reeled aerated out into the Tokyo night, Shakespeare had finally brought us together.

Another time I helped an eleven-year-old boy play Juliet's father Capulet in a workshop in a London comprehensive; as he uttered that terrible attack on his daughter for refusing to marry Paris, the boy suddenly grasped the pain not of being a misunderstood young lover (easy) but of being the middle-aged parent whom nobody seems to obey. I was also indirectly involved in organising a production of *The Tempest* in Maidstone high security prison, to be played by lifers who had never imagined Shakespeare to be a friend. They were visibly enfranchised by the physical sensation of speaking his language – not only by Caliban's repeated cries of 'Freedom... high day... freedom' but by his ache to offer his talents to unworthy masters, in his case a drunken butler and a clown:

I'll show thee the best springs; I'll pluck thee berries;
 I'll fish for thee, and get thee wood enough...
 I prithee, let me bring thee where crabs grow;
 And I with my long nails will dig thee pig-nuts;
 Show thee a jay's nest and instruct thee how
 To snare the nimble marmoset.

As he spoke, the actor – as the prisoner had become – craned for a view out of the hall's high windows, even though it would only give him a vista of more prison cells. Caliban's dream was to be able to live in the moment, moving faster and seeing more than anyone else; his interpreter's was to take this one chance to join a different, forgiving world. No wonder the warders on duty were instinctively uneasy – this isn't a freedom that can be taken away by the slam of a door.

Having thus been round the block with Shakespeare several times – pausing at Buckingham Palace and the British Academy and dodging the rats falling from the rafters in Mumbai – in my Fifth Age (and never mind the fair round belly) I've been touring a solo show, *Sweet William*. A sort of Golden Anniversary of that night with *Macbeth* at the Old Vic, it's a many-coloured coat of prejudice, information and instinct, co-written by Shakespeare and myself. Like an earlier show I did on another great writer, Anton Chekhov, *Sweet William* approaches its elusive hero with due caution, palpable affection and even a sidelong sense of kinship – not as a writer of course, but as someone I have, after all, known all my life. Consequently the evening is not so much a daisy chain of Greatest Hits (it certainly doesn't include the Seven Ages of Man) as biography tangled with autobiography, elaborated with performances of many unfamiliar pieces as well as some famous ones.

It may also feature in my Sixth and Seventh ages, so please watch this space. At the time of writing, *Sweet William* has played over a hundred performances – up and down Great Britain, in various London theatres (including the former home of Ben Travers's Whitehall farces), in Romania, Hungary, Spain, Scandinavia and the US. The most common front-of-house poster design has a picture of myself with Shakespeare's face behind me; he has deep rings under his eyes, as if tired of being talked about so much. Abroad I work sometimes with surtitles and sometimes with a simultaneous translator; both methods are extremely rewarding when they work, but they can be fraught with imprecision. You don't want an audience, its eyes trained on the surtitles, laughing at the punchline of a joke before you've delivered it – or, conversely, after you've moved on to the next bit of narrative. Simultaneous translation involves a relationship of curious intimacy with the translator, as if you were being haunted by your own shadow, and often turns the auditorium into a kind of beehive, with two hundred pairs of headphones at full tilt. Both methods oblige you, for your collaborator's sake, not to change anything or make any accidental cuts on the night: both require a slower pace of delivery, especially if, as sometimes, the foreign language is of its nature less swift than English. (Our monosyllabic 'love' translates into two syllables in Catalan, three in Hungarian and stretches to four in Swedish.) The challenge is to speak slowly but very interestingly – not so easy, especially when you hope to give the effect of spontaneity.

The intimacy of most (but not all) of the spaces chosen for *Sweet William* more or less guarantees an unusually friendly audience – why would they be there if they didn't like Shakespeare and weren't tolerant of me? Sometimes they return my greeting at the beginning of the show enthusiastically; sometimes they seem on the brink of answering back during it; sometimes they stay behind for a while at the end to chat about anything that's intrigued them. The generations are – very agreeably – mixed. There was a woman not long ago who applauded when she sensed a cherished speech on its way, as if recognising the opening chords of a favourite song. She even murmured her way through one with me, each phrase a nanosecond ahead of me, which would have been difficult had it not been so charming. I felt I'd invented some new kind of entertainment akin to community singing.

Such experiences nicely demonstrate a point I make during the show. Shakespeare's theatres held upwards of two thousand people, but since their stages were little bigger than what we would describe as studio spaces, his actors probably moved with ease from the grandly rhetorical to the

televisually intimate. It's not enough to say such a thing: I have to demonstrate it in my practice and prove that anything can be done in alternative ways. Depending on the venue, the heroic can become intimate and the confidential blossom. The Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis holds seven hundred; though I had always imagined my show in a more concentrated setting, the excerpts flowed naturally into every distant corner.

Two hours alone is an odd contest with yourself, like holding your breath for almost too long. Or spending a whole match having to keep possession of the ball and never passing it. And it's lonely. It happens that the great Victorian actress Ellen Terry took her solo talk-and-performance Shakespeare show on the road when she was the same age as me – she had the same agent looking after her too, Curtis Brown. 'Sixty-three one-night stands... it's enough to kill a horse,' she complained; and when she opened in Melbourne she was surprised to find, on coming out for her second half, that the audience had gone, imagining the evening done.

She also admitted that 'Familiar faces are the only faces I understand... it takes so long to read the truth in new faces.' It's as good a description of homesickness as I know. It was in friendly Minneapolis, in seventeen degrees below, that the chronic solitude of the soloist bore down most on me. At the end of the evening I would go to the bar, logically enough, and hope – as much out of desire for company as vanity – that some member of the public would say hullo. Instead, as it eventually emptied, one or two would come over and hesitantly enthuse, politely saying that they hadn't wanted to disturb me as I had my drink. Oh please, disturb me... Then I would return to the apartment and the washing up in the sink. This is not a plea for sympathy – as a boy I told my mother I could put up with the barmier aspects of the profession – just a bald fact that Ellen Terry would have understood.

I can't help thinking Shakespeare would have enjoyed his status as international visa – he who never toured abroad – especially the steep contrasts. Dromio of Syracuse's utterly non-PC account in *The Comedy of Errors* of being pursued by a woman so fat that he could imagine her as a globe played a little less comfortably in Colorado Springs than at home: only just tolerant of the obesity joke, the audience did however like him saying that, among the countries represented in her, America inclined deferentially to the 'hot breath' of Spain. Surprisingly, Chicago and New York didn't pick up the Bush-ism of James I taking the credit for sniffing out the Gunpowder Plot ('God has inspired me to foresee the conspiracy and root it out'), but Minneapolis did. My only regret about

my US dates is that, to get the laugh, I have to turn myself into a fan of Manchester United rather than Tottenham Hotspur, the former being the only English football club everyone there knows, David Beckham having playing for Los Angeles. I imagined certain childhood heroes – Ron Reynolds, Ted Ditchburn and Alf Ramsey (and indeed my parents) – shocked by my expedient treachery.

I'm sometimes asked if *Sweet William* changes much from night to night, or week to week. Well, not much, any more than a play does, but it's also true that over the months I've discarded and replaced, rephrased and rewritten a little, since around the existing script is a host of alternatives, probably enough to make up another show. Or, it has now occurred to me, a book. This volume has its roots in *Sweet William*, but is in no way the script. All the plays figure somewhere here, some of them briefly (especially if I've done whole books on them before), others at length when they particularly serve the story, with no special favours done to the more popular end of the canon. I'm more or less following the chronology of Shakespeare's life – more or less: when particular themes present themselves, I double back or jump forward in time to pursue them. The narrative of Prince Hal and Falstaff, by some miracle, is both a great love story and a piercing anatomy of England, so it's dealt with, unapologetically, at considerable length. In fact it is noticeable to me in general how often the Histories crop up: but then they account for about a quarter of the canon and are in some ways the heart of the matter.

The theatre rejoices in its transience, but you sometimes need to get an experience fixed. The published versions of Shakespeare's plays that we depend on are a very different and much longer matter than what was actually performed, which was variable, sometimes depending on the weather and whatever was in the news that morning. The received wisdom is that he himself never felt the need to publish, but I'm not so sure – there is a suggestion that he cooperated a little in the preparation of the posthumously produced First Folio (blithely cutting some of his best stuff, including a major soliloquy from *Hamlet*). His Sonnets are obsessed with 'devouring time' and 'sad mortality'; so if he did help, it may have been his effort to have the last word – to be, so to speak, definitive for the moment. In that respect, if none other, we may be alike.