

# NOISES OFF

LOCKDOWN SPECIAL!

## MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

A newsletter under “lockdown”? It would have been all too easy to shrug and think that while the Theatre is closed for business, so are the APS. However, with unexpected time on our hands, we were determined to show that while we may be “down”, we are certainly not “out”. So as you read, you will discover that work on *Waiting for Godot* is continuing. We have a quiz for you to test your theatrical knowledge and how well you know recent APS productions. You will read about what the adjudicators made of *Table Manners*, and also the outcomes of the NODA annual Awards Ceremony, for which we had been given two nominations. And just as one of our contributors sees remarkable parallels between the current crisis and the strange world of *Godot*, we also have an article for you exploring the possibility that frequent seventeenth-century “lockdowns” also had a profound influence on Shakespeare’s work. As Editor of *Noises Off*, I have three aspirations for this edition. Firstly, that with no irritating distractions like socialising, trips out, visits to restaurants, etc, readers will have sufficient leisure to read from cover to cover, to marvel at our Society’s resilience, and, obviously, to take part in the Quiz; secondly, that as this edition takes its place in our archive of APS newsletters, it will in future years become an object of historical curiosity to generations of APS members as yet unborn (“*Look - this was written during the Great Pandemic of 2020!*”); and thirdly, that members will feel inclined to submit material for the next edition(s) to amuse, puzzle or entertain all of us. This edition is, of necessity, more of a magazine than a newsletter, so, please - anything would be welcome. An article of interest to do with some aspect of theatre/drama? “My best APS memories”? Another quiz? “How I have passed the time in lockdown”? Do please feel free to send anything at all to [newsletter@aps-sherborne.co.uk](mailto:newsletter@aps-sherborne.co.uk). Don’t be modest! (Names can be omitted if you wish.)

Meanwhile, best wishes to all APS members; stay safe. “We’ll meet again” in the Theatre, one sunny day!

## “TABLE MANNERS”

We have now received adjudication reports from both NODA and the Rose Bowl Awards. Readers are urged to read the full reports, which are available on the APS website. The summaries below attempt to give a flavour of their content.

**ROSE BOWL:** ...what a gorgeous venue...the perfect place to put on this play, making the audience feel very much a part of the ‘dinner table’, with its intimate layout...staged with a great understanding of farce and comic timing. The pace never wavered, a testament to the direction and the cast. The characters were well established and identifiable. A treat!

What was instantly clear, was the attention to detail in each cast member’s characterisation and

physicality within the staging....it was refreshing to hear every word with the execution of excellent diction from every cast member....The theatre complimented the intimacy of the set and its rather shabby dining room. The props were well dated and there was a lived-in comfortable feel to the stage dressing. The scene changes were swift and well executed. Using the same music for Act introductions and scene changes added warmth and a sense of familiarity which was charming. Lighting was natural and

unobtrusive throughout. The simplistic lighting plot was sufficient for this type of production and enhanced the setting and action, rather than detracting from it. The costumes added to each character in style and colour choice, allowing an ease of physical movement.

**NODA:** This production of *Table Manners* was a Mad Hatter's Tea Party for adults, full of colourful characters, much changing of places (or partners) and a rollercoaster ride of hope, frustration, excitement and despair. After the bouncy, whimsical opening music, the story was

clearly told, moved swiftly forward and the characters and their situations were well-established by the end of the first scene; the family dinner party was the highlight of the evening....Diction was perfect and characters were strongly-drawn.

....Full use was made of the stage, which was built in country house style and dressed with props and furnishings consistent with a property occupied by several generations of the same family: the audience commented nostalgically on the salad cream and home-made carrot wine. The garden doors led to a well-planted

conservatory, which was attractively lit to indicate both daytime and evening. Costume was appropriately low-key, befitting a brief weekend visit to the family home....

This was a tightly-directed production, with a cast of talented actors presenting an entertaining and thought-provoking evening. Congratulations to all involved.

*(Please note the full reports contain many highly complimentary remarks about all individual cast members)*

It is with much sadness that we have learned of the death of our longest-standing member, Meg Whittingdale. She died peacefully at home, aged 99, on April 7th.

Meg joined APS in 1954. For several years she seems to have remained in the background, but from about 1960 she became more active and remained so for over 30 years. She took part in at least 28 productions, and when not on stage was more often than not involved with varying backstage tasks, including wardrobe, props, prompt, ASM, stage crew, set construction and programme sales.

## Meg Whittingdale

Meg served as Chairman of APS from 1970 to 1972 and from 1991 to 1992. She also served as Secretary from 1978 to 1984, followed by three more years as an ordinary Committee Member. In 2006 she was elected President and served in that role until 2012.

Meg was a charming, self-effacing person, devoted to The Players. She never particularly wanted to hog the limelight, but was always willing to help in whatever capacity she could. She will, perhaps, be best remembered for

the annual 'Give us a Clue' (charades) evenings she hosted for the Players during the 1980s and 90s. She lived quietly in her home in Newlands and during her later years one of her favourite pastimes was 'having a flutter' on the horses -- on a Saturday afternoon she could be found glued to the television watching the racing.

Meg will be sadly missed by all who knew her and our condolences go to her sons, John and Charles.

**Mark Lambert**

*See next page for photographs*

**Meg's APS Performances**



*And So to Bed* (1976)  
Mrs Pierce (Seated, far right)



*Rookery Nook* (1977)  
Mrs Posset (Seated, left)



*Waters of the Moon* (1983)  
Mrs Whyte (Centre)



*A Murder is Announced* (1989)  
Mrs Swettenham (Standing, far left)

**Other APS performances:**  
Janet Preston in *Home at Seven* (1961)  
Mrs Bradman in *Blithe Spirit* (1962)  
Mrs Gummer in *Afternoon at the Seaside* (1967)  
Miss Catamole in *Free as Air* (1967)  
Monica Reed in *Present Laughter* (1968)  
The Matron in *Doctor in the House* (1969)  
Nurse in *Antigone* (1970)  
Mavis Wilson in *Love from a Stranger* (1970)  
Lady Basildon in *An Ideal Husband* (1972)

*St Aldelm and Co* (1975)  
Mrs Pierce in *And So to Bed* (1976)  
Mrs Possett in *Rookery Nook* (1977)  
Joan Durbeyfield in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1978)  
Matilda in *The Gazebo* (1977)  
A lady of Sherborne in *Without Prejudice* (a revue) (1979)  
Lady Honoria Cumberleigh in *The Militants* (1980)  
Abbess of Argenteuil in *Abelard and Eloise* (1981)  
Grammar Oliver in *The Woodlanders* (1982)  
Mrs Hodges in *The Garden* (Community Play) (1982)

*Old Time Music Hall* (1983)  
Mrs Whyte in *Waters of the Moon* (1983)  
A lady in *Quality Street* (1984)  
Washerwoman in *Toad of Toad Hall* (1985)  
Audrey in *Ten Times Table* (1986)  
Mrs Swettenham in *A Murder is Announced* (1989)  
Mrs Elizabeth Endorfield in *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1991)  
*One Foot on the Stage* (a revue) (1992)  
*Those Radio Times* (1994)

## WAITING FOR WAITING FOR GODOT

**The following articles were submitted by four of the cast members of "Waiting for Godot", due to have been performed in early April. They are presented to you to update you on the current state of play, and also to allow the actors an opportunity to reflect on the experience of keeping the work ticking over, and on the ever-growing realisation that possibly no play ever written is more appropriate to this experience!**

"Nothing to be done" – the first words in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, notorious for its profundity, or pointlessness – or both, depending on how you see it. Six of us were preparing to perform this play until the announcement of an end to all social interaction. We now stay on top of the lines via the Houseparty app before we can resume. This has led to some startling revelations: is that really me at the bottom of the screen? How did I get so old? On the other hand, I have hair on my head rather than my face, unlike my variously grizzled and shiny-domed confederates.

Disconcertingly I find I am suddenly elderly and vulnerable, which gives me the leisure to reflect on the themes of the play. My single, albeit long, speech itemises 'the practice of sports, such as tennis, football..swimming, golf over nine and eighteen holes'....Not much chance of those at the moment. We do have digging, hoeing, mowing, cleaning, d-i-y-ing and the online search for flour, then yeast. We have our 'exercises', our 'relaxations', our 'recreations', but they take only so long, or pall. The sun rises, and sets. The days elide, punctuated only by nightfall. "There is no doubt it is still day" (a Saturday), but "is it not rather Sunday? Or Monday?....Or Friday?....Or even Thursday?" "Tomorrow, will we remember for sure where we were, what we did, and on which day?"

Silences permeate the play, whether as two friends contemplate their separate thoughts, or in conjuring the image of "the great cold, the great dark" in which the Earth glides soundlessly in space. "Time has



Martin (Vladimir) and Carl (Estragon)

stopped", but no: "Don't you believe it. Whatever you like, but not that." It continues to pass, "for reasons unknown", and we grow inexorably older in the all too rapid progress of a brief existence. A bare tree sprouts a leaf, then more, then it blossoms. Birds build nests, oblivious. A cloud passes in a blue sky.

"Habit is a great deadener." We will lose sight of our time unfolding when we attend to the routine of "labours abandoned" - commuting, working, buying, travelling and the rest – just getting on and doing, once again unaware.

The play ends: "Well? Shall we go?...Yes, let's go." But there is nowhere to go. And who is Godot? We never know: he does not appear. (Hardly a spoiler one would think.) So we wait. We go on.

#### Graham Smith (Lucky)

Not a situation that could possibly have been anticipated. But who can say with any certainty what events might transpire in the lengthy period between the initial conception of a production, and its final emergence before the gaze of a paying audience?

Jerome Swan approached the committee in May 2019 with a proposal to stage Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot", in what would be his directorial debut for APS. His proposal was gladly accepted, and dates established for a two-venue run, at Shaftesbury Arts Centre and Sherborne Studio Theatre, over consecutive weeks in early April 2020. The roles of Vladimir and Estragon were cast by the summer, and Carl Davies (another APS debutant) and myself met with Jerome for our first

run-through of the play on August 28th. Before that date, the two of us were not even certain which of the two roles would be allocated to us!

During the course of the autumn, the two remaining adult roles were filled by Adrian Harding (Pozzo) and Graham Smith (Lucky) - Adrian an APS veteran, of course, and Graham fresh from his triumph as Nerd/Commentator/Prince of Verona/Macbeth/Claudius in last summer's *Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*. So the majority of the cast met for a reading on 17th December. Having had plenty of time on my hands - and being acutely aware of the increasing challenge of cramming new material into an ageing memory - I had used the intervening months to get a good start on my lines. I felt quietly that I had avoided the shortest of the straws - after all, Carl has to master his words while strutting his stuff every day in a busy classroom, and Adrian's role (Pozzo) is full of nearly-identical repetitions, contradictions and non-sequiturs. Meanwhile, Graham has only two speeches, one of them very short. OK, the other one is the famous (infamous?) "Lucky's Tirade" (more than two pages, 79 lines, no punctuation, multiple repetition). Nevertheless, we all left that meeting fired with enthusiasm for this extraordinary play, and eager to get our teeth into it after Christmas.

Rehearsals began in earnest, and although coinciding with the later stages of preparations for *Table Manners*, this proved no problem at all, with a little careful planning and co-operative attitudes on all sides. Graham proved more than a match for Lucky; Carl evidently soaks up words like a sponge (or else his classes have been left to watch an awful lot of films while he works on his lines behind his desk!) Adrian and I, meanwhile, wrestled with our respective challenges...as was said at one point - "what is it that Beckett has got against actors?!"

A lengthy search for the final cast member, "The Boy" bore fruit as we were delighted to welcome Seth Collis, as the newest and almost certainly the youngest member of APS. He fitted into the play beautifully; our team was complete by mid-February. Work began on the minimalist set (although the challenge of creating "a mound and a tree" should not be underestimated); quantities of black cloth were purchased to drape the upstage flats; costumes and props were organised; publicity materials ordered; tickets put on sale. Rehearsals ran smoothly, progress was good - we were all increasingly confident that this extraordinary play would "deliver" in spades.

But.

The background noises emanating from China, and subsequently from Italy and elsewhere in Europe proved ever harder to ignore. We were reluctant at first even to consider the possibility of changing plans (after all, a cancelled rugby match in Dublin has little to do with us, surely? And our political masters seem so confident that this is a European problem, and we're not part of Europe any more, surely?) However, the strong advice from No 10 on Monday March 16th, (not yet *Lockdown*, you may have forgotten) suggesting that gatherings of more than few people would be a bad idea, especially for those unlikely to qualify as spring chickens, led us to the sad realisation that rehearsals could probably not continue for the time being.

At this point, none of us thought that this was something which could not be managed somehow. The Committee met to approve the postponement of the show, and we directed our efforts to reorganising the annual programme, such that *Billy Liar* might vacate a slot in late June/early July for a delayed *Godot*.

What a wonderful thing hindsight is. The imposition of the full lockdown the following week, and its subsequent

extensions, seem already to have made a mockery of our revised ambitions, given that it is hard to imagine that the easing of lockdown rules will allow for the early re-opening of theatres, especially small ones.

However, even more wonderful than hindsight is optimism. The whole cast and the Director are united in our determination that the show MUST and WILL go on. Obviously we don't know when. But in view of the enthusiasm, the commitment and the sheer number of hours already dedicated by the whole team (and I should also include and thank our very loyal and devoted prompter, Stuart McCreadie), we are unanimous in our determination to keep going. Thus it is that we continue to huddle in front of our computers and tablets for a couple of hours twice a week in order to "virtually rehearse". Yes, the technology makes this entirely possible. We can focus on the accuracy of our delivery, and discuss

interpretations and nuances in detail. (Admittedly, there's not a lot we can do about movement!)

The alternative would be to put the entire project on ice and resume rehearsals as and when. However, we felt that the prospect of the fading of memories of what we had to learn, and the idea of "starting up from cold" were too awful to contemplate. So courtesy of the "Houseparty" app, the show goes on.

You probably know (another spoiler alert) that in the play, Godot himself never arrives. That is not a metaphor for our performance. When the time finally comes, and whenever that is, please be appreciative of the work we have put in to keep *Godot* ticking over, and, as always, get your tickets early!

**Martin Williams (Vladimir)**



Virtual rehearsal in progress: (L-R) Jerome (Director), Graham, Adrian; Carl (with prop). Martin

MY MATE SAM...

When I first came into contact with Samuel Beckett it was in an English classroom on a rainy afternoon many decades ago. I remember being told that this man was 'bloody funny'. After reading *Waiting for Godot* that day, and laughing like a drain most of the way through, I had no reason to doubt what my teacher told me. Or that this was a writer who loved Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton.

My teacher knew that I was a particular fan of the TV comedies *The Young Ones*, *Rising Damp*, *Steptoe and Son*, and he told me that they all owed a massive debt to 'Laughing Sam' as he called him. He was right. First impressions are important, you should always keep them in mind, (or always keep them in Miami, as my auto-correct just tried to slip in under my typing radar.)

Every time I approach Beckett I bear this in mind. He's bloody funny and he found the world absurd, frightening and funny too. He's my mate. He writes plays with characters in pots, characters in bins, characters without bodies, characters waiting by a tree.

I like to think that, wherever he is, Samuel Beckett would laugh upon hearing that somewhere on the Dorset/Somerset border four men of a certain age and vintage were still rehearsing a production of his most well-known play, via an app called Houseparty (an unlikely party if ever there was one for anyone who might stumble upon it), with no clear date for performance. However, they had been due to perform it at the beginning of April, a date disappearing ever faster into the twilight.

I also think that Mr Beckett would have appreciated, as I did, the fact that in a world lacking in certainty in every other respect these four men know that twice a week, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, they have an appointment under a virtual tree to wait for a man who never turns up. They are determined though. Habit has NOT proved a great deadener for these men and they often laugh a lot during these rehearsal sessions. That's because it's a funny play.

When our production of *Waiting for Godot* was furloughed in the middle of March we all made a decision. A decision that the play should go 'on'. And it has. And it has achieved new life

for me as a result, an anchor point that keeps me laughing as the world around me has (quite rightly) stopped. The difference between carrots, radishes and turnips has all four of us in stitches on a regular basis...and the line "We are men," has managed to achieve an extraordinary resonance... having been filtered through the lens of William Shatner, the Village People and various others over the course of the last few weeks.

The play, far from being the existential misery fest of popular mythology, has revealed itself to be what I always knew it was. Bloody funny. A story of what we all do, to a greater or lesser degree, to pass the time before the important factors of life take over. A story of what we all do to make each other laugh as well as what we all do to make each other think. It's the story of an old comedy duo, a pair of clowns who can't live without each other. One of whom can't get his boots off and the other one who's dying for a piss. They make each other laugh because that's what comedy double acts do. Repeating jokes and catchphrases time and again because that's what they're used to.

The great sitcom *Father Ted* knew

this. There's an episode which features Ted following the actor Richard Wilson around the script bellowing 'I don't believe it' at him in his best Victor Meldrew voice. Ted finds it funny, Wilson categorically does not, and I never fail to laugh whenever I see the innocent look of glee on Ted's face as he prepares to surprise a curmudgeonly Wilson. Repetition is the key to the gag. Repetition and familiarity. Beckett knew this, the great silent comedians knew this. If Shakespeare can say 'the play's the thing', for me Beckett is right in there with him saying 'the joke's the thing' and 'repetition's the thing' and 'rude jokes are the thing' and 'vegetables are the thing'.

When you finally get to see our little production of *Waiting for Godot* try to come at it with a generous spirit. Come at it preparing to laugh at the absurdity of life. Come at it preparing to find joy and laughter in the smallest things.

And then you'll find a jewel of a play that is more rewarding than you can possibly imagine. Or then again, you might not.

"Nothing to be done."

Carl Davies (Estragon)

**STILL...**

# WAITING FOR GODOT

By Samuel Beckett

The play where nothing happens - twice

Presented by  
AMATEUR PLAYERS OF SHERBORNE

Presented by special arrangement  
with Samuel French Ltd and  
Concorde Theatricals Company

## STILL WAITING....

It's Wednesday, 2.55pm, and it's time to move to my improvised home office, spark up my laptop, and tap on the brightly coloured icon marked "Houseparty". As dependable as a Swiss Watch (or a genuine half-hunter with deadbeat escapement, as Samuel Beckett might say), at 3pm the screen bursts into life with four equal quadrants, each with the happy smiling face of a middle-aged (polite cough) man, each man eager to deliver his contribution to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

A month ago, we were only two weeks away from opening night for this seminal play, and just about ready to perform to an appreciative audience. Then life changed. Not just for us in the cast, but for all of us. All places of entertainment were closed down, social distancing regulations were imposed and all of our hard work came to an abrupt halt in the blink of an eye. It was a huge disappointment to those of us in APS who had directed the moves, learned the lines, designed the set, built the stage landscape, created a lighting and sound plot, acquired the costumes and collated the props. But what to do? Fundamentally, we had three options: abandon the project altogether, pick it up again at some indeterminate date in the future, or

keep going in isolation.

Abandoning the play was out of the question, and we quickly realised that if we just stopped rehearsals indefinitely, all of our hard work in committing the written word to memory would quickly be forgotten.

Anyone who knows *Waiting for Godot* will be aware that the dialogue is challenging, to say the least. Beckett uses unfamiliar vocabulary, finely-timed pauses, and frequent non-sequiturs. Questions asked seldom elicit the expected answers. Exclamations erupt out of nowhere. Enigmas are left unresolved. It is these twists and turns which keep the audience engaged, wondering what on earth will happen next. But these are the facets which provide the greatest challenge for the actors who have to learn their lines. The familiar question/answer, stimulus/response dialogue which is typical in most plays is totally absent in *Godot*. Each word has to be learned in its own right, with few cues to guide us

Therefore, we decided unanimously to keep going. To meet up, twice a week, and run through the lines; Act 1 each Monday and Act 2 each Wednesday. Clearly, our get-togethers have been virtual, as it would have been unwise and unforgivable to meet in person. However, technology has come to our aid, twice: Firstly, by using a mobile App called, succinctly, "Line Learner", in which one can record all the characters' lines and replay them

between rehearsals, practising by interleaving our own lines in the gaps, in whatever order or whatever speed we choose. Secondly, by using the Houseparty App which has become familiar and popular with many of us since the start of the pandemic lockdown, enabling us to maintain social contact from the isolated safety of our own bedrooms, home-offices and kitchens. We just click on the waving hand of the Houseparty icon and, in seconds, we are speaking to the welcoming happy faces of our fellow actors as if we were in the same room. It works! Without a doubt, we miss the cues which would have come from a subtly raised eyebrow or the curl at the edge of a mouth, or simply from our position, posture and interaction on the stage. But we accept this modest compromise, and, by maintaining the discipline of our scheduled word rehearsals, we hope to keep our dialogue accurate, fresh and vibrant.

We don't know today when the current restrictions will be relaxed or lifted altogether. We don't know where, we don't know when we'll meet again. But, when the time comes, you can be certain that we'll be eager to stage our performance for you at the first opportunity. You won't have to Wait for Godot any longer than is absolutely necessary.

We'll be ready for you!

**Adrian Harding (Pozzo)**

## TAKE PART IN THE BIG QUIZ!

Here it is - the perfect boredom-buster! In the next section you will find our two-part Theatrical Quiz. In the first part, you will see pictures from 10 APS productions, all performed in the years since 2010 (not every year is necessarily represented.) FOR 1 MARK: identify the name of the play being performed, and FOR AN EXTRA MARK : identify the year of the performance by APS. This is followed by 25 questions relating to the world of the theatre in general - 2 marks per correct answer. Please write your answers in an email message to [newsletter@aps-sherborne.co.uk](mailto:newsletter@aps-sherborne.co.uk), to arrive not later than Monday May 25th.

**PRIZE FOR THE HIGHEST SCORE - a free ticket to *Waiting for Godot*, whenever it is performed. (No, there is no truth to the suggestion that second prize would be 2 free tickets - Ed)**

# THE BIG QUIZ!





**THE BIQ QUIZ PART TWO**

1. What name links a 1533 painting by Hans Holbein and the theatre where Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* was shown from 1952 to 1974?
2. Which Sheffield theatre hosts the World Snooker Championship each year?
3. Which theatre and gallery complex, situated on Pier 8 at Salford Quays, was officially opened in 2000?
4. What name is given to the amateur theatrical club, founded in 1883, that is run by students of Cambridge University?
5. In which town is the Royal Shakespeare Company based?
6. Which English actor-manager took complete responsibility for the Lyceum Theatre in the late Victorian era?
7. A modern reconstruction of which theatre opened in 1997, approximately 750 feet from the site of the original theatre demolished in 1644?
8. The Dylan Thomas Theatre is a venue in which British city?
9. From its foundation in 1963 until 1976, the Royal National Theatre in London was based in which theatre at Waterloo?

10. In 1988, which novelist bought the Playhouse for just over one million pounds?
11. The name of which street on the eastern boundary of Covent Garden is often used to refer to the Theatre Royal?
12. In which county is there an open-air theatre on a granite outcrop jutting into the sea?
13. The name of which road in Manhattan is used widely as the name of the heart of the American theatre industry?
14. The Maxim Gorky Theatre is in which European city?
15. Which theatrical genre of variety entertainment, featuring a mixture of speciality acts such as burlesque comedy and song and dance, was very popular in the US in the early 20th century?
16. Which performing arts venue in Clerkenwell, London, gets part of its name from the discovery of a natural springs on the founder's property?
17. It's considered very unlucky to wish someone good luck in the theatrical industry so what well known phrase is usually used instead?
18. The Comedy Theatre, in the West End, was renamed in 2011 after which playwright?
19. In 2018, whose ashes were laid to rest under the London Palladium's stage, with a blue plaque commemorating him on a nearby wall?
20. The Joan Sutherland Theatre can be found in which multi-venue performing arts centre?
21. The world's largest arts festival started life when eight theatre companies turned up uninvited in 1947. In its simplest two-word form, what is this festival often called?
22. Which Dublin theatre is also known as the National Theatre of Ireland?
23. What name is given to the room in a theatre that functions as a waiting room and lounge for performers?
24. What was the name of Andrew Lloyd Webber's theatre company, where Prince Edward worked as a production assistant in the 1980s?
25. Which Elizabethan theatre, built in 1587, was the first purpose-built playhouse to ever stage a production of any of Shakespeare's plays?

**For details of how to enter, please see page 7**

# SHAKESPEARE IN LOCKDOWN

What have we all been doing with our time during this period of enforced leisure? Can there be any excuse for not getting on with that best-seller we were always going to write? After all, a certain Elizabethan playwright managed to dash off not only *King Lear*, but also *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Macbeth* whilst in plague-enforced lockdown. Or so the story goes. How much truth is there in these claims?

As with many details of the Bard's life and career, much is believed, but little is known with certainty. Like all Elizabethans, bubonic plague impacted on his life in ways which our experiences of Covid-19 have enabled us to appreciate in a manner we might never have anticipated. As a small child, he survived a major outbreak which decimated the population of Stratford-upon-Avon, and as he grew up, there must have been almost a post-apocalyptic feeling in the town, a powerful influence in his formative years.

As an adult, and as actor, playwright and theatrical shareholder, the plague threatened not only individual lives, but the very existence of the theatrical industry. Since the role of rats in spreading the disease was not understood, mass gatherings were regularly banned whenever there was an outbreak - often in



the warmer months, which, of course, were the theatre seasons. The puritanically-minded authorities needed little excuse to jump at these opportunities to close the theatres, of course, as theatres were seen by them as hotbeds of lewdness. (Do you remember the obsessive determination of Master

Tilney to close the theatres in *Shakespeare in Love*?) Along with brothels and bear-pits, theatres were invariably the first to be closed. In a public-information pronouncement of such admirable simplicity and clarity it could be envied by our spin-doctors of today: "*The cause of plagues is sin, and the cause of sin is plays.*" In the 10 years of Shakespeare's greatest and most prolific powers, 1603-1613, London theatres were closed for no less than 78 months. Actors and playwrights had to take up other occupations, and obviously, many died. Unlike the impact of Coronavirus, however, children and adults up to their 30s were the most vulnerable. In efforts to remain afloat, it was common for companies to undertake tours outside the major cities.

The possibility of *King Lear* being a product of "lockdown" is therefore quite a fair one. The first known performance was on Boxing Day 1606; there had been a major plague outbreak that summer

leading to the closure of all the theatres. Shakespeare's own landlady, Marie Mountjoy, was killed. Three years earlier, an even bigger outbreak had killed more than 10% of the population of London. How can Shakespeare's writing not have been profoundly affected by this backdrop?

The text of *King Lear* is full of images of death, chaos and despair; and everyone seems to be affected. "Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father ... we have seen the best of our time." (Gloucester). "A plague upon your epileptic visage!" (Kent). Lear himself describes the "plagues that hang in this pendulous air", and "a plague sore, an embossed carbuncle in my / Corrupted blood" (a common symptom of bubonic plague).

*Lear*, of course, is not the only Shakespeare play to refer to plague. As early as the beginning of the 1590s, he had used it as a plot device in *Romeo and Juliet*, where the messenger is forced into quarantine and thus fails to

deliver the information about Juliet's faked death to Romeo. Mercutio's line "A plague on both your houses!" is, of course, one of the play's best-known.

But in the plays written after the 1603 outbreak, disease generally, and plague in particular, dominate the language and imagery. The word "plague" crops up no fewer than 14 times in *Timon of Athens*. *Measure for Measure*, (probably the

catastrophe: "*The dead man's knell / Is there scarce asked for who, and good men's lives / Expire before the flowers in their caps / Dying or ere they sicken.*")

So whether or not the writing of *King Lear* was a direct result of Shakespeare's enforced leisure during the closure of his theatre, we cannot know for certain, but there is no doubt that the prevalence of disease and



nearest Shakespeare ever came to depicting the London of his own time), has brothels and inns being summarily closed by order of the government. In *Macbeth*, which, like *Lear*, may have been written during the 1606 epidemic, daily life under the tyrant is depicted in terms suggestive of

the daily reality of living alongside it had a great influence on the language and imagery, and therefore the feel and texture, of many of his greatest works. It seems unlikely that there can have been any other direct benefits.

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