

ROMEO AND JULIET.

ACT I.

SCENE I. *A public Place.*

SON and GREGORY, armed with swords
and bucklers.

GREGORY, o' my word, we'll not carry
men with us, we'll not carry
an word of it, you
you
quid



The World's playwright

Jo Caird reveals the highlights of this year's
World Shakespeare Festival

Visit London at any time of the year and you'll be sure to find a major production of the work of William Shakespeare appearing on one of the city's top stages. This summer, however, visitors to the capital will have an extraordinary range of options to choose from, as dozens of theatre companies from the UK and around the world come together for the World Shakespeare Festival, part of the London 2012 Festival, the culmination of the Cultural Olympiad.

Shakespeare may have lived 400 years ago and never set foot in the exotic locations where many of his plays were set, but his work feels as relevant and vital today as it has always done, both at home and abroad. Given the enormous influence his plays, sonnets and narrative poems have had on British cultural heritage over the years, it makes sense that the playwright is required reading for children in the UK.

You might be surprised to learn, however, that Shakespeare is studied by 50 per cent of the world's school children, some 64 million every year. From Denmark to Oman and from Sudan to the Philippines, Shakespeare is alive and well in the mouths and minds of young people around the globe.

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

But Shakespeare's legacy is not just limited to schools of course. One of the most translated writers ever to have lived, his work is performed in theatres all over the world. The World Shakespeare Festival, which launched on April 23 (Shakespeare's 448th birthday), is evidence, if any were required, of the truth of the great Elizabethan dramatist's continuing relevance. For Deborah Shaw, director of the Royal Shakespeare Company-produced festival, "Shakespeare's plays speak to wide-spread cultures and situations at different times... he's got great stories, but he also speaks of the universal themes that concern us." The festival, she says, is "a real snapshot of theatre from around the world at this moment."

This is strikingly the case in the six-week Globe to Globe season, one of the most ambitious and unusual elements of the World Shakespeare Festival. Presenting 37 of Shakespeare's plays in 37 different languages, it is taking place at the atmospheric Shakespeare's Globe, a 1997 replica of the theatre where the playwright himself performed with his company in the early 17th century.

Thirty-seven international companies, from countries as close to home as France and Germany and as far away as China and Mexico, will be gracing the iconic stage during Globe to Globe, each company performing two or three times in their own language without surtitles. Look out for the legendary Lithuanian version of *Hamlet* (June 2 and 3) that has been touring the world to great acclaim since it was first performed in 1997.

ON STAGE

Elsewhere in London the offering is no less inviting, no matter how you like your Shakespeare. Those who prefer a traditional approach won't want to miss veteran British actor Jonathan Pryce in *King Lear* at the Almeida Theatre (from August 31). The show's director, Michael Attenborough, says that he considers this story of an old man's existential crisis the Bard's "most extraordinary play". It's also, he feels, "the ultimate challenge" for a director: "I've always wanted to work on it. I always thought I would wait until the moment in my life when I had reached a sufficient age to understand what that feels like, and to have parents who have hit that kind of age."



Meanwhile, at the Roundhouse, the RSC is presenting *The Shipwreck Trilogy*, a trio of plays that explore themes of migration, exile and discovery (from June 1 to July 5). *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Comedy of Errors* will share a single company of actors, with each performer playing multiple roles. Jonathan Slinger stars as Prospero in *The Tempest* and Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. For him, what is most extraordinary about the World Shakespeare Festival is the range of

“there’s no one audience that owns Shakespeare”

work on offer from around the world: “It’s very much about seeing how other people in lots of other different cultures approach the work.”

This is a sentiment echoed by Deborah Shaw, who feels that British audiences have a lot to gain from seeing the work of their national playwright in international hands. “There’s no one audience that owns Shakespeare”, she says, “there’s no right way to do him... People will appropriate his work, they will pull it to pieces and put it back together, they’ll play with it, they’ll come at it from different angles.”

Theatregoers with adventurous

tastes will enjoy irreverent, modern interpretations of Shakespeare’s work such as *Desdemona*, a collaboration between acclaimed novelist Toni Morrison and Malian singer/songwriter Rokia Traoré. The concert-style performance, which is inspired by the tragedy *Othello*, will take place at the Barbican on July 19 and 20. Further highlights include the Iraqi Theatre Company’s *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* (playing at the Riverside Studios from June 28 to 30). Set in contemporary Iraq and performed in Arabic with English surtitles, the world’s most famous love story is told using Iraqi folklore, music and ritual.

IN ART

As if all those productions weren’t enough, visitors will be able to explore the world of Shakespeare and his cultural legacy even further via a

series of events and exhibitions taking place across the capital. *Shakespeare: Staging the World* at the British Museum (from July 19) is one of the highlights of this programme. Involving objects, digital media and performance, this large-scale exhibition examines the emerging role of London as a world city in Shakespeare’s day, as well the influence of the playhouse on issues of the time.

At London 2012, with its medals, world records and personal bests, there must be losers as well as winners. The World Shakespeare Festival, however, gives us all the opportunity to celebrate – wherever we’re from and however our athletes perform – the work of an extraordinary writer loved throughout the world. Here’s to Shakespeare, the world’s playwright.



- Shakespeare’s Globe
www.shakespearesglobe.com
- Almeida Theatre
www.almeida.co.uk
- The Roundhouse
www.roundhouse.org.uk
- Barbican
www.barbican.org.uk
- Riverside Studios
www.riversidestudios.co.uk
- British Museum
www.britishmuseum.org
- World Shakespeare Festival
www.worldshakespearefestival.org.uk