MICHAEL MORPURGO

MORE TALES FROM SHAKESPEARE



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For my Mum and my Dad,

Actors both, actors together, who played their parts,
strutting and fretting, in many of Shakespeare's plays,
which they loved.

MM,

who would love to have been an actor too!



Introduction



So, why retell the tales of Shakespeare's plays? Do they not speak for themselves? Yes, indeed they do. But first we have to go to the theatre and see the plays. My retellings of these iconic plays, so familiar to many millions all over the world, were done because I know there are so many of us who for various reasons have never been to see even one of his plays. That is a joy in life everyone should have.

Shakespeare was and actor and a writer and a producer too. He loved making theatre and he loved making stories. I was lucky. I come from a family of actors and writers. From my earliest years we were read stories and poems; we acted out plays at home. We didn't know it at the time, but I know now

that this was in part how we found out about ourselves - and about the lives of others, about the world about us, how it was and how it is.

I would like to think every child should have the opportunity to grow up loving stories and plays as I did, not necessarily because it's a pathway to a life in the theatre or a life as a writer, but because it's a pathway to knowledge and enjoyment and understanding. At six years old I queued up for tickets with my brother outside the theatre in Stratford, Shakespeare's home town. I boated on his river, walked the banks where he walked. I went to see his plays. I acted in one at school. In Othello I was undoubtedly the best spear-carrier the world had ever seen! I was living the plays, living the stories of them 'in my mind's eye'. I loved acting, but as I grew up I discovered I loved stories more.

As a boy, I was given a book of Shakespeare's stories written by Charles Lamb and his sister, Mary. I read and read them. I was given tickets to go to the theatre in Stratford by my aunties, Bess and Julie, who lived there. What a gift that was! I first came to love those great plays of his through those retellings and through those early visits to the theatre.

Now in my eighties I've seen almost all of them, many of them often. His stories and plays have become part of my life. But the stories came first. Shakespeare retold the stories of others in his plays. The Lambs retold his stories, his plays, but that was a long time ago and in different times. I wanted to retell the tales of Shakespeare for the children of today in a language more familiar to them. Now with this second book of his tales I have retold almost all of them, all my favourites certainly.

We should remember always that Shakespeare was writing and performing his plays at a time when attitudes and assumptions about women – their place in marriage, in the family, in society – and about race, and religion, and diversity were very different from our own times. We have learnt over the centuries since his day that to persecute and exploit people of a different sex or culture is wrong – to think of them as other, as lesser, is wrong.

But the prejudices of his times often emerge in Shakespeare's plays, and would have been widespread amongst his audiences too. These attitudes are often central to the characters and plots of his plays. So when telling the stories of Shakespeare's plays, whether we like it or not, these issues are there – because they were there then, and because – shamefully and sadly – there is prejudice now, in our times too. We should not pretend otherwise.

For me, it is important not to cut out the themes we find difficult today. On the contrary, they can help us to comprehend our own history, and indeed what we feel about these issues in our own time, when we know full well that racial prejudice and hatred are still lurking in society today – in the wider world, on our streets, on social media. In many of Shakespeare's plays, we are brought closer to the living experience of prejudice – and therefore closer to an understanding of his times and ours, and that can only be enlightening.

Michael Morpurgo
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