#ShakespeareMust Fall?

Why do we still care about SHAKESPEARE?

In the light of the recent calls for ‘decolonising’ the curriculum, what does this say about the teaching of Shakespeare in schools?

Below are two articles, one for and one against. Maybe you would like to get one of your classes to debate the issue, and then invite anyone to write an article on why he/she thinks Shakespeare should or should not be taught at school. If you submit any articles to us, we will reward the writer of the best article (provided it meets acceptable standards of writing) a prize of R400.
Shakespeare is still relevant in our schools, say Grade 12s

JAN CRONE

TWO pupils from the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls strongly defended the inclusion Shakespeare's plays in the school curriculum on the first day of the Franschhoek Literary Festival.

Grade 12 pupils Linda Shwana and Mpolise Kanase, from the school in Vereeniging, were in discussion with radio presenter John Maytham and theatre director Fred Abrahamse yesterday about whether the bard was still relevant for South African pupils.

The debate was held in the context of whether too many "Eurocentric" books and plays were taught in schools.

Shwana, 18, said plays like Othello raised issues that were topical to young South Africans. "When the play starts racism rears its ugly head. But what Shakespeare is saying is that racism is pointless."

Shwana gave the example of the character Iago, who uses racist language when describing Othello, who is black. "But whenever Iago needs to substantiate why he doesn't like Othello, his answers are meaningless."

She said the racist tropes that Iago uses show the absurdity of disliking other people because of their skin colour.

Her classmate, Kanase, said it was important pupils keep studying world literature.

"While local books are important, what we are trying to get across here is that we mustn't limit the learners' perspective of the rest of the world."

Abrahamse said reading about different cultures taught pupils about the universality of human experience.

The panel acknowledged the difficulty of teaching Shakespeare in under-resourced schools, especially if teachers were not familiar with or interested in the plays. "Nothing kills Shakespeare faster than the last double period on a Friday," said Abrahamse.

The small audience, which included many English teachers, took an active part in the debate. One teacher said, based on her experience, she wouldn't advise teaching Shakespeare to pupils for whom English is a first additional language.

In response Maytham, the moderator, said teachers needed to make the plays relevant and interesting. Simply reading them was not enough. They needed to be acted out on stage.

Abrahamse added a more practical reason. The casts of Shakespeare's plays were usually large. This meant there were enough characters for a class of 30, even if some pupils only came on stage as background fauna or fairies.

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A CASE AGAINST SHAKESPEARE

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It cannot be disputed that William Shakespeare's plays are an integral part of English Literature and that they form an important link in the historical development of English Literature. In their own right, as academic exercises, they are brilliant, sparkling examples of Elizabethan theatre and many of them (when pruned and enhanced by modern theatrical methods) have a startling dramatic impact on modern audiences. But as school setworks these plays have questionable value.

Elizabethan language, period humour, religious traditionalism, social mores: these all go against the basic ability of the modern school pupil and they raise questions which, in the context of the classroom, should be carefully considered.

1. Are we teaching modern English with its emphasis on concise, straightforward language, or should we deviate into Elizabethan English with its verbosity and peculiar nuances of meaning?

2. Do our pupils really benefit from the study of one Shakespeare Play at matric level? (And don't talk about intangibles — it just won't wash.) And what, especially, does a 'standard' level English candidate get from Shakespeare? (Even Standard 8 black pupils get it thrust at them like some magical piece!)

3. Shakespearean Drama is, by its very nature, drama of the stage and not drama of the classroom. The analytical strivings, stretchings and straining of the university lecture room have little place in schools and should continue to have little place in them. Instead of en-

couraging pupils to go and see Shakespeare acted out in all its brittle and exciting fervour, we are turning them into repetitious Shakespearean drought areas who couldn't care less if they never hear or see anything about Shakespeare ever again. (And, Mr Teacher, I'm not talking about the tiny percentage of pupils who will eventually move into the University English lecture rooms, but the vast majority of pupils who will never go near formal English lessons again.)

4. Do we teach Shakespeare only because we feel (Traditionally) that an English course without Shakespeare is like a human body without its trunk?

5. Can Shakespeare really be successfully taught without reference to the historical implications of the works? Like much of the poetry our pupils must suffer under, are Shakespeare's works not really part of the past — curiously shaped bricks that have gone to build up that body of the kirk called English Literature and interesting from that point-of-view only?
Too much of the work we expect our pupils to do is stale. In no other discipline (except where the discipline deals specifically with history or developmental details) is the largest proportion of the work dragged in from the distant past; Shakespeare is no different from the other writers of antiquity; to place him above them is to express an opinion, not to state a fact. What to do then, about this dilemma?

For the Traditionalist, for whom it is unthinkable to separate ‘English’ from ‘Shakespeare’, let us suggest a change of school approach: weed out those pupils who would like to do a course on the Historical aspects of English Literature — give them *Twelfth Night*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Canterbury Tales*; In fact give them *The Green Knight*, *The Battle of Maldon* and *The Dream of the Rood* too to complete the picture. For the rest, who will muddle through their language course as it is, let’s be realistic: it is time to offer the moderns and to offer an English course which is relevant to them and their limited experience. Most of these pupils have so much difficulty understanding their own language and expressing themselves in it; to give them works in archaic English is to invite half-baked understanding and drivel in return. This is fact; the English Higher exam (matric) returns fewer distinction candidates than any other subject, and the major pitfall is the literature paper with its musty subject matter and tailored university approach.

Let’s be quite honest about it, the English courses at our High Schools are hopelessly inadequate and it is time to review them. But the same mistakes will be made again that have been made in the past; the review committees will be made up of the Traditionalists with a small scattering of people with an eye on the future, and from the arguments of these groups will come nothing worthwhile. A labour of love will again be lost in a comedy of errors and Shakespeare and his ghostly peers will prevail.