

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Abridged*, written by and starring Cathal J. Ferris, presented by Sixpenny Productions at the Baby Grand, Grand Opera House, Belfast, 4 March 2023.**

***Mister Shakespeare*, written by Michael Barry, starring Ciaron Davies, directed and produced by Stephen Church, presented at the Theatre at the Mill, Newtownabbey (Belfast), 10 May 2023**

Kevin De Ornellas  
Ulster University  
[k.deornellas@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:k.deornellas@ulster.ac.uk)

During the first half of 2023, there were three odd Shakespeare-based shows on in Belfast. There was a poorly received *Romeo and Juliet* at the Lyric Theatre. That production promised much: refreshingly eschewing the usual Troubles-themed, *Across the Barricades* parallels between sectarian Belfast and gang-infested Verona that we usually get, the production was set in a modern-day, well-to-do Italian resort town. The Montagues and the Capulets were influential Italian fashion designers who cared more for their family brands' prestige than their children's emotional satisfaction. It seemed like a good idea. But it just didn't work. The actors playing Romeo and Juliet performed as if they had never met each other: there was an almost comical lack of chemistry. Mercutio urinated on a shrub and the Nurse affected shock as she saw what bedlinen looks like after two teenagers have copulated on it – as if she had never seen a soiled bedsheet before. It was all very disappointing. As that Lyric production progressed to its merciful end, two other Shakespeare-themed plays appeared on Belfast stages. For different reasons, attending *Abridged* was a bizarre experience, and attending *Mister Shakespeare* was also a bizarre experience.

In publicity materials for *Abridged*, the one-man show by Cathal J. Ferris, we were told that Ferris would 'weave his wicked way through all of Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories and Tragedies in one wild ride that is both gripping and hilarious in equal measure'. He did nothing of the sort. I don't mean that his show was not gripping or

hilarious – although it was neither. What I mean was that there was no ‘ride’ through ‘all’ the plays, wicked or otherwise. This show just did not deliver what it was advertised as. The title and the publicity material promised a sort of Reduced Shakespeare Company-style comedy featuring facetiously short versions of Shakespeare’s plays. That was simply not delivered. There was a very brief, vaguely diverting, sixty-second, one-man performance of *Romeo and Juliet* – but that was it. It was basically false advertising – I’m not sure if the relatively obscure Sixpenny Productions or Grand Opera House personnel are to blame for that. What we did have was a sort of monologue – an account of the travails of training to be a professional actor. It was a cross between stand-up and memoir; Shakespeare got the odd mention.

The stage was bare, save for two stands that were covered in sprayed, street-style graffiti referring to how much Romeo and Juliet heart each other. Ferris entered, dressed in black strides and a black T-Shirt – honestly, I thought that he was a stagehand. But then he started talking to the audience. Helped by false advertising, the tickets had sold well – the auditorium of the Baby Grand (a larger than typical studio space) seemed virtually sold out. Ferris told us about growing up in the mean streets of Belfast – which were not that mean when he was growing up – he is too young to remember the daily impact of the conflict that dragged on between 1969 and 1998. His stories got slightly more interesting (and relevant for the Shakespeare-starved audience) when he talked about going to drama school in England – I think that he was referring to the Acting Degree offered by the University of Northampton. He told a story about one impressive fellow student on the course: an Irishman who performed the opening soliloquy from *Richard III*. This was a revelation for Ferris – it amazed him that an Irishman could speak Shakespearean verse. He, apparently, had, and has still not, ever heard of Charles Doran, Andrew Scott and Karl Shiels. Kenneth Branagh and Aidan McArdle are among the Irish actors who have portrayed Richard III himself on stage in high-profile productions in Britain this century. The play has been staged in Ireland, by Irish companies, many times too. The idea that it is a novelty to hear Shakespearean verse spoken well in an Irish accent is just spectacularly untrue.

Ferris was agreeably self-effacing about his efforts to support himself as he attempted to get post-training acting work. He spoke about serving cocktails in London for years – I would have liked him to make some connection between the theatricality of the hospitality industry (showing off one’s mixing skills; feigning fondness for obnoxious customers) and the entrepreneurship and salesmanship needed to get plays produced and seen. Before Ferris delivered his physically impressive but rather pointless sub-Reduced Shakespeare Company rendition of *Romeo and Juliet* he did make one good joke. At least I think it was a joke – it was possibly too true to be funny. The joke was about the then ongoing

*Romeo and Juliet* production happening two miles up the road, at the Lyric Theatre. He said something like: 'It is so good that you are here. And not up at the Lyric where they always do rubbish. Oops – they're doing *Romeo and Juliet*!' This seemed funny at the time – but one wonders if he was denigrating the Lyric's production with pique because he didn't get a part in it? Or maybe there was an element of Bardolatry – the joke being that the Lyric is always 'rubbish' but one should not say so when they are staging Shakespearean productions? Either way, the performance ended mercifully early. Ferris insisted on meeting every audience member at the door – there were about 150 people there. I didn't have many positive things to say about his performance so I didn't want to shake his hand lest small talk ensued. But I did, of course, shake his hand – anybody who has the ambition and audacity to perform professionally in a self-written one-person show is worthy of respect. I was annoyed that the advertised 'personal telling of all 37 Shakespeare plays' did not materialise. But theatre is never easy – enough has been asserted about *Abridged*.

Just a few weeks after the *Abridged* debacle, another one-man Shakespeare play was performed in Belfast – on the northern outskirts of Belfast anyway, Newtownabbey. *Mister Shakespeare* was a touring production. On May 12 2023, it was performed at the Theatre at the Mill. This is a splendid new venue, located in, as the name suggests, a former mill. The mill was built in the 1830s; the four-hundred-seat theatre was opened in 2010. The theatre, built in the traditional proscenium arch tradition, is still glisteningly new. Unfortunately for the slightly mysterious company performing this play, however, the theatre was virtually empty. I say mysterious because it has been difficult to find out much about the play or its production company – there was no programme for sale. I have been able to find out the names of the play's sole actor, director and author only through Internet searching. I was one of, at most, twenty people in the audience. Several of those people left during the interval, meaning that during the second part the poor actor, Ciaran Davies, had an even more cavernous empty space to speak to than he had during the first part. Shame on the people who left at the interval. Why buy a ticket for anything if one is not prepared to see it through to the end? I really cannot understand their departure – because, honestly, Davies was magnificent.

The play is set during a London plague – the precise year, I think, is 1606 because a fear of being somehow associated with the Gunpowder Plot is one of many things stressing Shakespeare. Shakespeare is WFH – Working From Home. We are with him in the home, a grotty upstairs room. It is like a messier version of the home Shakespeare has in *Upstart Crow*: a dank, detritus-strewn space barely lit and clogged up with tools-of-the-trade books and discarded old candles and bottles. The blocked-up, unused fireplace seemed symbolic; this was not a warm, cute home and there could be none of what the Danish

call *hygge* in this awful, *Rising Damp*-style lodging. Shakespeare looked messy too – it was a really credible depiction, aided by terrific costuming. Shakespeare looked quite filthy: his tunic had a button missing and his white shirt seemed to be genuinely minging. He was unshaved and apparently even unwashed. He seemed to wear boots only to keep his feet warm because the lodgings were unheated. It was a delight to see a sort of sad bachelor Shakespeare, a man hidden away from the public eye, a man quite literally trying to hide from both plague and professional pressures. This Shakespeare has no real friends – the callers who bug him want things off him. He doesn't even have fans or acolytes – there is no Bardolatry in this almost dystopian depiction of early Jacobean London lowlife.

The plague will pass, so Shakespeare must continue writing: he struggles to write plays that will allude to the Gunpowder Plot but not too obviously. He wracks his brains trying to shape epic material into relatively manageable narratives such as *Antony and Cleopatra* and *King Lear*. Voices appear from off-stage – the play is rather like *Krapp's Last Tape* in that it relies so much on taped recordings. In the Beckett play, Krapp is dogged by the voice of his younger selves; in *Mister Shakespeare*, Shakespeare is dogged by demanding people who perpetually want things from him. Richard Burbage keeps banging on his door – Burbage always wants a new role, a new leading role that will bolster his already huge reputation. George Wilkins shouts up from the street too – Burbage may be aggressive and demanding but Wilkins is an absolute thug. Growling and long of vowels, he sounded like Bill Sikes in an amateur rendition of *Oliver Twist* – but the menace of his threats and his exploitative mishandling of women that he procures for men's sordid pleasures (including, alas, those of this Shakespeare) meant that he was no comedy villain but a vicious pimp akin to 'Sport' Higgins, Harvey Keitel's revolting character in *Taxi Driver*. Shakespeare is being pursued by people who want things off him for legal or illegal business – but he also receives letters from back home. His wife will not fade quietly into the background and his two surviving children want a father. They still miss Hamnet – they feel, simply, that Shakespeare has not grieved enough. But Shakespeare has this life in London – a life far removed from whatever is going on in non-plaguey Stratford-upon-Avon. It is a tough life – even in the haven of his grotty digs Shakespeare gets no peace. The loud London church bells penetrate the walls and windows to annoy and distract him. A fidgety, highly-strung Shakespeare indeed. It is a brave, unglamorous construction of a harassed Shakespeare, a Shakespeare bereft of sheen or glory.

This unkempt, restless, bothered Shakespeare seemed to speak to the 2020s post-Covid era better than any other modern-day construction of Shakespeare (a dashing young man, outgrowing Warwickshire in Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet*; a well-meaning but vain, public services-decrying everyman in *Upstart Crow*; a decent, retired, grieving family

man in *All Is True*). Of course, this Shakespeare is no more real than the Shakespeare who appears in Clemence Dane's *Will Shakespeare* play or the various Shakespeares who occasionally appear in *Doctor Who*. But it *felt* real – partly because of the dirt and partly because we can easily identify with the problems of trying to maintain a professional identity while hidden away from a contagious epidemic. But it also felt real because we saw Shakespeare really struggling to write. Writing is not easy for anyone – it just cannot have been easy for even Shakespeare to write in unsanitary, candle-dependent early modern conditions, plague-infested or otherwise. Davies made me care about and respect the historical Shakespeare to an unusual degree.

Davies deserved a standing ovation from a packed theatre. Instead, he got polite applause from the dozen or so people who sat through the whole show. I hung around for a while – I planned to give Davies a 'Thank you' £20 note for a drink in the rather nice Theatre at the Mill bar. But Davies had fled – perhaps, having noticed the tiny, shrinking audience, he was worried about being as friendless as the dramatist he so painstakingly portrayed. Like Will Shakespeare striving to shake off the thuggish Wilkins, Davies had tried to shake off his tiny public. Davies succeeded. So, a full audience endured the *Abridged* monologue but a tiny audience in a huge, empty theatre had the privilege of seeing an actor, Davies, work ten times harder for *his* monologue, *Mister Shakespeare*. Sometimes actors just do not get the success and acclaim that they deserve. Things just ain't fair.