

# ***WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE @ LYCEE ALINE MAYRISCH and LYCEE MICHEL-RODANGE***

## **SHAKESPEARE ON TOAST**

*Or getting a taste for Shakespeare*

### **A conference and three workshops by Ben Crystal, actor and writer**

On 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> January ALEA –ASSOCIATION LUXEMBOURGEOISE DES ENSEIGNANTS D’ANGLAIS organised a conference at FORUM GEESSEKNAEPPCHEN, 2 workshops at LYCEE ALINE-MAYRISCH for 3eA and 1reA, and 1 workshop for 1reA at LYCEE MICHEL-RODANGE. This event was the successful outcome of a joint venture and collaboration involving ALEA, Lycée Aline-Mayrisch, Lycée Michel-Rodange and the Ministry of Education, whose SCRIPT department encouraged English teachers to participate as part of their effort at professional development.

SHAKESPEARE ON TOAST - What a surprising title for a conference and three workshops on William Shakespeare, who is generally regarded as one of the most important and greatest names in the literary canon worldwide! It is worth noting that this title, which might well strike one as slightly irreverent, is also the title of Ben Crystal’s latest publication *Shakespeare on Toast*, which was first published in 2008.

Who would think of linking the Bard, the very incarnation of the high art of poetry and drama on the one hand and a very humble dish like ‘*beans on toast*’ on the other hand? This seemingly incongruous connection needs a creative and ingenious mind like Ben Crystal. Indeed, what characterises Ben Crystal’s presentation throughout is the fact that he is equally passionate about both Shakespeare’s art and his own stated purpose, which is to enable others to share his enthusiasm about the Bard’s fascinating poetic magic. In his *Prologue* to *Shakespeare on Toast*, Ben Crystal describes his approach as ‘quick, easy, straightforward, and good for you. Just like beans on toast.’

What Ben Crystal manages to do so well in his writings and what is so fascinating about his conference and his workshops is the way in which he brings the Bard’s Elizabethan Age to life. It does need a gifted and passionate speaker like Ben Crystal to gradually draw his twenty-first-century audience into a willing suspension of disbelief and encourage his listeners to cast off their twenty-first-century complacency and share some of the terror Shakespeare’s audience must have experienced, to whom ghosts or witches, the invisible world of spirits were a reality. In the course of Ben Crystal’s presentation, students, teachers and Shakespeare lovers willingly ‘lose their heads’, or their present-day mindset, readily allowing themselves to be transported into Shakespeare’s time, on a tour around the Globe theatre in London with its noisy, sometimes unruly audience. Indeed going to the theatre in Shakespeare’s time must have been a very different experience from going to the theatre today. There was no ‘theatre etiquette’, which made the audience sit or stand still. Theatres were rowdy, drunken places.

Far from being a scholarly lecture, a guided tour by Ben Crystal turns into a fascinating, interactive and often humorous demonstration of the key role of the Bard’s creative and expressive use of received literary conventions, especially as regards iambic pentameter, for instance. Throughout the conference and workshops, participants are encouraged to catch the rhythm of Shakespeare’s verse

because the Bard made his characters speak in rhythmical poetry most of the time. What could be a boring long-winded commentary on metre and rhythm turns into an invitation to recognise unexpected rhythmical breaks or shifts as symptomatic of a character's state of mind or emotional turmoil. These breaks can be seen as clues to the actors and the audience that something more is going on, beneath the plain speaking of the words.

This review is by no means a complete commentary on Ben Crystal's admirable ability to enable us to meet Shakespeare's characters and Shakespeare the man through his verse and his dramatic magic. Ben Crystal's approach negotiates a very thin line very successfully. Shakespeare's poetry and plays are made accessible and enjoyable without, however, being dumbed down along the lines of 'Shakespeare-made-easy' guides. Instead of filling his listeners' heads with all manner of information on literary devices and conventions, Ben Crystal enables his readers or participants in his workshops to make Shakespeare their own. He does so by delivering a 'toolbox' for recognising the Bard's expressive variations on the received literary canon as pointers to deeper layers of meaning or emotional experience.

Under Ben Crystal's guidance during workshops, students can be seen to gradually free themselves from the stifling sense of apprehension so typically triggered by literary Greats like William Shakespeare. This liberating effect can be traced back to the fact that students are enabled, by means of lively and interactive sessions, to appreciate Shakespeare's art and its unique fusion of poetic form and meaning. What is more, being guided while enacting particular key scenes themselves, students become able to recognise the Bard's timeless significance, which springs from his psychological insight and his heartfelt understanding of the human predicament, as incarnated in his characters. As their teacher, watching my students all eager to enact selected scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth* during their workshop with Ben Crystal filled me with great joy because I knew then that they were living through the memorable experience of recognising that even four hundred years after Shakespeare's death, the characters that people the Bard's plays can touch our hearts and souls and speak to us of our shared humanity.

I would like to conclude with the following complimentary description of Ben Crystal's approach:

'Ben Crystal is a "restaurateur" par excellence for serving up a seemingly simple snack that actually has enough complexity to delight a gourmet.' *Times Educational Supplement*

*Josiane Weis*

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