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Hamlet, Jess, and Aubrey Whitlock, creators and hosts. The Hurly Burly Shakespeare Show!

Clio Doyle

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Hamlet, Jess, and Aubrey Whitlock, creators and hosts.

The Hurly Burly Shakespeare Show!

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hurlyburlyshakespeareshow.com.

The Hurly Burly Shakespeare Show! is exactly what its title promises—and a little more. Co-hosts Jess Hamlet and Aubrey Whitlock have, over the course of the last several years, created an archive of introductory materials on many of Shakespeare's plays and those of some of his lesser-known contemporaries. The episodes are divided into 101-level episodes, introducing a particular play to neophytes, and 201- and 301-level episodes that return to the plays with an eye to performance and to further interpretative discussion. There are also 202-level episodes, for works based on Shakespeare's plays, as well as episodes that do not fall into any of these categories, such as "[10 Things We Hate About Shakespeare](#)" and "[10 Things We Love About Shakespeare \(and Us\)](#)" (pretty self-explanatory), and "[Kim F. Hall-apalooza](#)" (an introduction to the scholar Kim Hall's body of work). But I find this classification system to be one of the most exciting things about the podcast, as it is possible to imagine a high school student or undergraduate crafting a syllabus for themselves from the available episodes in order to create, for example, a self-directed introduction to Shakespeare or his contemporaries, or a course on Shakespeare in performance. It also allows teachers to select materials here and there to supplement their own syllabi.

I suspect the interested beginner imagined above, whether self-directed or led by their teacher, is the main audience for this podcast, as the discussions assume interest in Shakespeare without assuming any prior knowledge. And the podcast is excellent at introducing texts. The episodes I enjoyed the most were ones on plays I, who teach a fair amount of early modern drama but specialize in non-dramatic texts, had not read, such as the 101-level episode on William Rowley's *The Birth of Merlin* and the 202-level episode on the 2007 detective novel about Shakespearean authorship by Jennifer Lee Carrell called *Interred with Their Bones*. The 101-level episodes on Shakespeare's contemporaries generally include an overview of the playwright and what is known about him as well as a detailed plot summary and a "Taste of Text" segment in which the hosts read a scene, or part of a scene, aloud. In the case of plays like *The Birth of Merlin* and Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *A King and No King*, this

structure provides both a great introduction to playwrights and plays beyond Shakespeare as well as some guaranteed entertainment, as in each of these cases the plot's complex ludicrousness is made evident, and celebrated, in the process of explaining it.

For academics, the opportunities here are less scholarly than pedagogical, but the pedagogical opportunities are exciting indeed. Episodes could be assigned as secondary materials alongside the early modern texts discussed, both to cover the basics of plots and character and—perhaps more importantly—to serve as models for engaging with a new text. One strength of the podcast is that the hosts themselves come from different disciplines. Jess Hamlet finishes her PhD in Renaissance Literature and begins an academic job at Alvernia University over the course of the podcast, and Aubrey Whitlock, who holds an MFA in Shakespeare and Performance, discusses the texts from the point of view of a theatre practitioner from her position as Associate Director of Education Programming at the American Shakespeare Center. Their individual expertise allows them to speak from the point of view of a particular discipline. They present the study of Shakespeare to the listener as an ongoing process and as conversation. This diversity of approaches is bolstered by their guests, who are (at least in the sample of episodes I listened to) early-career academics or people with interests in Shakespeare not working in academia. For example, the guest in the episode titled “*Mucedorus* 101,” who's identified simply as “Finch,” is a middle school drama teacher and director with an MFA. This plurality of voices, bringing together different kinds of knowledge and ways of reading and thinking about texts, contradicts any ideas the listener might have that only certain kinds of expertise and interest can be brought to bear on Shakespeare.

I found particularly striking the hosts' willingness to share and debate their personal preferences for certain plays. Although this kind of sharing of preferences and making of unthinking value judgements is familiar in everyday life as a reaction to popular culture, as the sociomusicologist and erstwhile English professor Simon Frith points out, this is not the kind of response that English departments tend to encourage students to share in class.¹ Taking this relaxed, judgmental, and personal approach to Shakespeare reminds us that his work is open to discussion, and perhaps more importantly, that it is all right to like—or dislike—his work on tenuous grounds, or indeed no grounds at all, to

1. Frith, *Performing Rites*, 4.

have reactions to it that have nothing to do with theory but instead are based on the more radical, embodied, irrational grounds of taste. The home page of the podcast website bears a quotation from Vocabulary.com defining “hurly-burly” as “a disturbance, hoo-ha, kerfuffle, a real to-do, the kind that wouldn’t be welcome in a library.” And there is something very determined in the podcast’s unruliness, in its willingness to disturb the ordinary ways of expressing, gaining, and sharing scholarly knowledge and opinions.

This eclectic approach to Shakespearean topics is mirrored by the rotating array of segments, which include the game “Line Roulette,” which requires guests to expound on a line chosen at random; “Happy Hour,” an opening discussion in which the hosts share something that makes them happy; and “Gossip,” a concluding exchange that involves the sharing of news, often drawn from social media, about academia and the theatre. These segments are not labelled in the episode descriptions; overall, the descriptions are very short and might be improved with timestamps to allow the listener to jump to the discussion of particular topics. This is not the only slight hiccup in navigating the podcast. Podcasts are often divided into seasons, which can be selected from a dropdown menu in some apps such as Apple Podcasts, though other podcast platforms such as Spotify do not show season information. The podcast is available on Apple Podcasts and Spotify to stream and download starting with episodes dating back from 2018 that are labelled on Apple Podcasts as “season 2.” Some episodes predating these (presumably “season 1”) are available only on the podcast website, and these episodes must be accessed by manually clicking backwards through several pages of episodes. The website does provide a “Full Episode Catalogue,” which divides episodes thematically into categories such as “101” and “201” as well as by author and other categories such as “mini-sodes” and “special editions.” These are very convenient classifications, but what is missing is the opportunity to search by year (as opposed to just clicking backwards through all the episodes). Episodes can be streamed on the website but not downloaded, so the earliest episodes (“season 1”) are generally pretty inaccessible.

But in a way, this slight clunkiness and the absence of season 1 from podcast platforms don’t really affect the listening experience. The podcast is deliberately unordered by anything like theme or chronology; rather, it mirrors the merry disorder of conversation with a friend, where one finds oneself touching repeatedly on certain topics that are shared points of interest while

avoiding others. The lack of a strictly defined path through the material allows for browsing here and there and following one's own interests. For example, the podcast often touches on performances of Shakespeare at regional venues such as the Blackfriars Playhouse in Virginia and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. These may be more interesting to scholars of performance or members of the theatrical community, and particularly to those based in the United States, than to someone based internationally or with less of an interest in performance. But the episodes are short enough to provide a brief introduction to a subject that one knows nothing about (ranging from approximately 40 minutes to just over an hour). And again, the clear labelling of episodes allows for a certain selectivity in the listening experience—so, I can follow a very particular path through the podcast in search of Beaumont and Fletcher that is very different from that of someone coming to the podcast with an interest in learning about, say, Shakespeare's tragedies in contemporary performance.

Overall, I found this podcast touching in its dedication to the celebration of early modern literature in all its frustrating strangeness. I think if this podcast had existed 10 years ago, when I was an undergraduate, I would have taken to it gladly as a resource for learning about early modern plays and as a model for how to become a gracious, humble, and interested scholar of Shakespeare (instead of, as I am, a cynical Spenserian).

CLIO DOYLE

Queen Mary University of London

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