

21st Century Shakespeare

Foreword By The Author

There are translations into modern English of the Bard's works available today, but none have been written from a playwright's perspective. As a writer and producer of drama, I wanted not only to translate the play line by line, but also to include the innuendos, the political satire, the puns and the bawdy humour in a way that would flow for actors to perform and yet still give the original meanings without going into lengthy explanations for a modern day audience. A faithful line-by-line translation that sounds as if it has been written for actors to perform today but keeping the feel of the original script and language.

For me it all started at about 8 or 9 years of age. I was reading a comic which contained the story of *Macbeth* serialized in simple comic strip form. I loved the story so much I couldn't wait to see what happened next so I rushed to the public library to get a copy of the book. Of course, when I got it home I didn't even recognise it as being the same story. It made no sense to me, being written in 'Olde English' and often using flowery language. I remember thinking at the time that one day I should write my version of the story for others to understand, although my original idea at the time was to bring the story forward into present times.

Years went by and I pretty much forgot my idea. Then quite by chance I was approached by Encyclopaedia Britannica to produce a series of dramatised classic English tales as an educational aid for Japanese children learning English. Included in the selection was *Romeo And Juliet* which I was to condense down to 50 minutes using modern English and then record with actors, music and sound effects for audio CD and an accompanying book. This brought flooding back the memories of being 8 years old, reading my comic and planning my version of Shakespeare. This led me to think that even if a reader could understand English well, this did not mean they could understand and enjoy Shakespeare. I could understand English and I didn't fully understand a lot of Shakespeare's text without serious research, so what hope did a person whose first language was not English have?

After some investigation, I discovered there was a great desire around the world to understand the text fully without having to refer to footnotes or sidelines. I also discovered that the desire was even greater in English speaking countries. The final kick that got me started was when I met fans of Shakespeare – "Shakespeare Groupies" - who knew scripts off by heart but secretly admitted to me that they did have trouble with the meaning of some of the lines. Plus, as I was having the script read through and checked by RSC actors, some of them confessed 'strictly off the record' that they just learned the original lines 'parrot fashion' and although they knew the storyline well they missed a lot of the subtlety and innuendos Shakespeare was so good at. This is hardly surprising in this day and age where a lot of the influences, trends, rumours, beliefs and current affairs of Shakespeare's time are not valid today.

Some of the hardened Shakespeare Groupies thought what I was doing was sacrilegious – how dare I tamper with the master's work. However, my belief is that the few that felt this way were enjoying the elitism of understanding the work while those around them did not. I do not pretend my work is any match for the great master, but I do believe in the greater enjoyment for all. These great works deserve to be understood by all, Shakespeare himself wrote for all levels of audience, he would even aim his work to suit a particular audience at times – for example changing historical facts if he knew a member of royalty would be seeing his play and it would cause them any embarrassment.

I have been as faithful as possible with my version, but the original rhyming couplets, iambic pentameter, (the tempo and pace the lines were written for), and other Elizabethan tricks of the trade that Shakespeare was so brilliant at are not included unless vital to the text and meaning. This makes for a play that sounds fresh to today's listening audience. It is also a valuable educational tool; English Literature courses often include a section on translating Shakespeare. I am often asked the meaning of a particular line, sometimes scholars argue over the meaning of particular lines. I have taken the most widely agreed version and the one that flows best with the story line where there is dispute, and if you read this script before reading the original work or going to see a stage version, you will find the play takes on a whole new meaning and is infinitely more enjoyable.

Stephen J. Hills. 31st July 2003. (Juliet's birthday)

S. J. Hills has written and dramatised over 50 works for stage, audio drama and radio. He is also a consultant in audio recording and a composer classically trained in violin. He records, edits, creates the sound effects and when time allows composes the music for the audio productions carried out by his company, *The Digital Toy Cupboard*.

He has also worked with some of the best-known names in the world of music including Sting, Pete Townshend, Benny Andersson (ABBA), Madonna, etc. He has worked on many Hollywood films as an audio consultant and can even be found training BBC staff in the art of recording drama productions from time to time.