

JUDGE'S REPORT

SaveAs Writers' Shakespearean International Writing Competition, Canterbury Festival 2013

By Victoria Grainger

My judge's remit was not to take the amount of Shakespeare knowledge into account. The stories were the thing.

The shortlisted stood out because of how imaginative, thoughtful, thought-provoking and entertaining they were, as well as the accomplished writing they displayed.

Shakespeare, courtesy of chroniclers of the times used accounts and even existing plays for his sources. He more often than not re-wrote an extant tale - which many would argue is all that fiction ever is - an extant tale, retold. But the shortlisted here, have cleverly taken a character; an idea; a few lines from a certain play; in one case a stage direction, and have invented insightful perspectives, imaginative back-stories, complex new stories, and in all cases have painted a vivid range of Shakespearean imagery. It's been a joy to read all of what were very creative submissions, but especially these seven.

They've been sensitive, and not radically re-written the characters or plays, which is perhaps vital when using the most universally performed work of all time, especially with stories and characters people feel they know.

I suggested once in a class at the Shakespeare Institute, the possibility, from the text, that Ophelia could be pregnant with Hamlet's baby. "But Ophelia's not like that", someone said, utterly crestfallen.

There are trees worth of criticism that debates 'what they're like', and of course, on stage, the Shakespearean character and play can implicitly be anything, as at the same time they are only the words on the page. But with fiction, and competitions like this, they can be anything. I think though, that it's a subtlety, and a gentle in-keeping with character and play that makes them breathe, and it's this feature that has made the shortlisted seven stand out, and is why their stories work so fantastically well.

All with obvious knowledge of their subject, they've avoided the crow-bar, and with their own creative vision, written with the lightness of the shadow of the feather of Shakespeare's quill.

The tragedies were the most popular source, especially *Macbeth*. Two of the shortlisted used it, and a strange coincidence for even the Weird Sisters to cackle at - both writers took inspiration from the same line from a witches' rhyme in Act 1, Scene 3.

The top seven I've chosen feature two outstandingly creative and intrepid stories inspired by *Macbeth* - one, an imagined journey of a tempest-tossed sailor, and the other a complex tale set in 1960's post-empire Bengal, of murder, and psychological manipulation. One story takes one of the more minor female characters from *Much Ado About Nothing*, the young bride-to-be Hero, in a story that interestingly, takes place within the time of its play. There are the backstories of a nurse and a king, in pieces inspired by *Romeo and Juliet* and *King Lear*, and there's a stunning invention, a 'What happened next' to the jealousy-inciting, tragedy-inducing, old honey-tongue Iago from *Othello*.

EXIT PURSUED by Don Nixon

'A sad tale is best for winter', says little Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale*. 'I will tell it softly. Yond crickets shall not hear it.'

Don Nixon's *Exit Pursued* is a soft, sweet, inventive tale, inspired by *The Winter's Tale*, a play about jealousy, the lost and found, and famous for a sixteen year gap between acts.

'Ursus', Latin for 'bear', is the clever name of our narrator, an imagined bear who, in this story, inspires the most famous stage direction in history - 'Exit pursued by a bear'.

Ill-used Ursus encounters real-life Elizabethan figures, from the boy player Nicholas Tooley, to the Bard himself, and evokes Shakespeare's world, where plays would have run alongside purpose-built bear-gardens, where bears chained to posts defended themselves against vicious dogs. For an audience used to seeing real bears, it's likely they wouldn't have been as impressed by a man in a bear suit as we

Elizabethans have to be, and some scholars have suggested it's not implausible a real bear was used, and this story explores that possibility.

Through Ursus, with nice touches of humour, we witness 'Will' and chief player Richard Burbage, the first *Hamlet* amongst many other great characters, at the Globe, debating how to spruce up 'the middle section' of *The Winter's Tale*, and how to kill off the character Antigonus. An earthquake's "too expensive", an evil wizard has been "done to death" and something playwright "Kydd would have done", when they spot Ursus.

The story has pathos thanks to the bear's simple language, and the prescient ability he's given to sense 'the scent of death', first on his master, then on the retired Will Shakespeare, and finally his own, which serves to move along the plot and sweetly conclude it, as he contemplates his famous stage direction, which will be, he supposes, "a kind of immortality."

EXIT PURSUED READING by Don Nixon

***IAGO'S LABOURS* by Julian Gyll-murray**

From the first line to the last, *Iago's Labours* doesn't spill a drop of language. It imagines 'what happened next' to the manipulative Iago, who with his malicious whispering, incites Othello, the moorish captain, to the murderous jealousy of his innocent wife Desdemona. Iago even ends up stabbing his own wife, and is a malevolent monster who verbally works hard to come across as a faithful, honest John. He's a man at whose neck 'men may lay their murders at', and when his crimes are finally exposed in the play, and he's asked "why?" - "Demand me nothing" he says. "What you know you know: From this time forth, I never will speak word". These are the last lines he speaks in the play. We never do hear more.

Until now.

Julian Gyll-Murray tells a gripping account of Iago himself, after his release from years of punitive torture. It's concise, vivid, never stays too long on any moment, its suspense linked to its deceptively simple brevity.

The use of first-person, present tense narration allows an intense, immediate and intimate perspective, and, in-keeping with his original characterisation he is intensely dishonest, but he is honest with us, the reader, which allows us that charming sense of privilege and once again bonds us to his journey. It uses the narrative much as Shakespeare does the soliloquy - in Shakespeare's soliloquies characters never lie, even the most grotesquely despicable of them.

This is a Venice of shadows, and Iago, a mutilated, hooded shadow of his former self haunts the canals, and becomes perversely fixated on a moorish prostitute. It is an utterly fluid, compelling read. With superb characterisation and a well-created, visceral world, it feels like a modern continuation of Shakespeare's Iago, and he hasn't changed an inch. We meet him, as ever, searching for ways to claw himself back some power.

"They will offer me their hand" he says confidently. "After all, what is a hand offered, but a hand to take, to bite...", as he goes about making Venice once again, 'Iago's arena'.

IAGO'S LABOURS READING by Julian Gyll-murray

***PIT OF INK* by Rosalind Brown**

Pit Of Ink, by Rosalind Brown, is written from the perspective of *Much Ado About Nothing*'s Hero, the young cousin to the more famous Beatrice, who Benedick tells: 'I wish my horse had the speed of your tongue.'

It is set in the time of its play, and we spend a night in an inky black tomb with the young maid Hero, ‘Leonato’s short daughter’ Benedick calls her, and who he also describes as being - “Too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise, and too little for a great praise”. This story breathes life into this ‘low, brown, little’ character, someone who is more of a plot construct rather than a great provider of any philosophical depth or verbal wit, like Benedick or Beatrice.

The story is set on the night Hero spends wronged, believed dead, disowned by her father, cast off by her groom-to-be Claudio at the altar no less, where she was mistakenly accused of giving away her maidenhood on the eve of the wedding. It is a ruse, conjured in the hope that the scandalous lie will be revealed, her honour will be restored, so she can marry Claudio, and forget that he very publicly cast her off, and accused her of being, shall we say, ‘lacking in virtue’, to the whole world.

The writer shows a creative angle in her choice of character, rather than using the more obvious Beatrice, she shows a different slant on the somewhat misogynistic turn of events in one of our most performed comedies, events generally forgotten about in the ensuing jollities that end the play, once everything’s come out in the wash - i.e everyone gets married, and to end, they - ‘Strike up pipers’ - Dance, and Exit!’

Because the narrative voice is never overtly complaining, the unfairness of her position is poignantly achieved. The intimate, accepting tone evokes Hero’s discontent, and our sympathy, and it thoughtfully addresses the tricky problem that applies to many female characters in Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*’s pursued Isabella, the starved and beaten shrew Katherine, *All’s Well’s* stalker-like Helena, and here, the accused maid Hero - who all end their plays with a seeming if ambiguous acquiescence, despite their tribulations.

The beauty of this story then, is its simplicity and thoughtfulness, and the way it represents the character as she was in the play, whilst adding some welcome flesh to her forgiving, maidenly bones.

PIT OF INK READING by Rosalind Brown

THE TAMING OF THE TIGER by Sarah Doyle

The Taming Of The Tiger has the heartiest use of language, beautiful torrents of vocabulary, chosen and paced to match the tempest the story describes. The writer has ingeniously taken a passage from the witches on the heath in *Macbeth*.

‘A sailor’s wife had chestnuts in her lap,
And munched, and munched, and munched.
“Give me,” quoth I.
“Aroint thee, witch!” the rump-fed runnion cries.
Her husband’s to Aleppo gone, master o’ th’ Tiger;
But in a sieve I’ll thither sail,
And like a rat without a tail,
I’ll do, I’ll do, and I’ll do.’

The witches go on to describe the storm they will subject the poor captain to. Sarah Doyle impressively imagines and relates a vivid story out of a few lines of verse, and with the use of highly skilled visual prose, opens and links back to the images suggested by the wife, to the storm, even to the chestnuts in her lap, as it achieves a brilliantly eerie conclusion.

It is wonderfully inventive, and imagines the Master of The Tiger’s supernaturally-interrupted journey. We follow the captain and crew sailing to Aleppo, encountering the storm where spectral fingers poke down from the sky, and with descriptive passages in an aptly formal and archaic tone, allows us to stand on deck and watch the curved crony’s fingers dipping into the sea and swirling up a storm, whereby masts crash down, and pandemonium breaks loose.

The language is eloquent and detailed and is perfectly paced with the scenes it describes - the choice of words and their speed and colour builds - and then calms with the storm, as we hear the poor sailor’s account.

As the witches say -
“Though his bark cannot be lost,

Yet it shall be tempest-tossed"

TAMING OF THE TIGER READING by Sarah Doyle

SUCH SWEET SORROW by Vicky Coles

Such Sweet Sorrow takes the perspective of a Shakespearean character, many years before the events that take place in the play it refers to.

It's a beautifully detailed narrative, about young Italian girl Alina, who works for a morally questionable apothecary, who she sees cause the death of a young girl. Omen-like, the girl overdoses on the herbal love-drug Belladonna.

Alina describes her horror and the apothecary's blithe unconcern - "I told her: Not too much" as haunting resonances with regards to the future events of the play are scattered into the story.

The detail is evocative, with the 'pungent aromas of foreign spices', there is 'alder bark and blessed thistle' piled on the rough wooden counter, and 'bunches of fennel and fox's clove hanging from the rafters'. We walk with Alina through the 'thronding streets of Verona' - through to her hired assistance at the birth of a noblewoman's baby, in a fine house with a stone balcony. Prompted by the title, we are, of course, leading up to *Romeo and Juliet*, and as Alina witnesses the birth of 'little Juliet' - we come to realise - Alina is going to become Shakespeare's 'Nurse'.

Vicky Coles takes a minor, but important character and cleverly fictionalises, and humanises her. In the original play, though predominantly nameless, there is evidence that the nurse is called Angelina. She's a character full of malapropisms, implied as being ugly, 'ancient', big as a ship, so this is a fresh and original take on a character who we're able to see three-dimensionally, and sympathetically, with a past in her own right.

With gentle and detailed prose that floats before the eyes, the writer creatively imbues the stereotypically portly, hysterical nurse with a fuller past life, as we picture a girl who might have been.

SUCH SWEET SORROW READING by Vicky Coles

OUR DEAREST CHILD by Janice Fox

Similar to *Such Sweet Sorrow*, *Our Dearest Child* also provides a back-story. This is the first-person account of King Lear himself, the snail who made himself homeless by giving away the shell from his back.

Janice Fox gives an exploration of the tragically foolish king who divides his kingdom to his three daughters before his rule is over, and who at the start of the play, asks each daughter to declare their love for him, from which he will proportion their third.

Cordelia, his beloved youngest 'Cannot heave her heart into her mouth' : "I love your majesty according to my bond. No more nor less." she says sincerely, for which perceived insolence the raging King disinherits her, and splits his land between his two other daughters, the malign middle-child Regan, and the evil eldest, Goneril.

In this piece, we hear Lear explaining the loss of his wife, who we never hear of in the play itself, but for one brief reference, - "I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb".

We hear of desires he harbored for a son, and his apathy towards his daughters, until Cordelia. It's formally told, as if from a King who cannot be truly intimate, and is set before his self-revelations, when his folly is so poetically revealed, and so fits in with the somewhat pompous and demanding character he is before those events.

In the play, Cordelia only has about one hundred lines, and only appears at the beginning and the end, and although nonetheless 'present', it's often a problem in performance of how to build up to such an inexplicable rage so quickly - how can he love her so much, to detest her so soon? The deep love for

Cordelia is explored in this story, and we learn that this is the day he is to divide his kingdom. Cleverly leading to the opening scene of the play, it offers a fascinating slant on why he is about to explode in such fury, and unleash such destruction on his family, and himself.

OUR DEAREST CHILD READING by Janice Fox

I'LL DO, I'LL DO AND I'LL DO by Geralyn Pinto

I'll Do, I'll Do and I'll Do is set in 1960's Bengal. It's a cleverly concocted story by Geralyn Pinto, that mirrors the themes in *Macbeth*, and uses Shakespeare in complex ways.

Our narrator is clever young doctor Vaskar, who describes his relationship with 'shadows-on-slate eyed' cousin Andrilla, who he's waiting to give evidence against. The plot revolves around a 'Shakespeare Game' Andrilla and Vaskar have been playing since childhood, quoting from various plays, and acting out scenes, especially, 'Lady M and the Doctor'.

If that Macbethian allusion isn't enough to warn us that this is not and cannot come to good, then 'by the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes' in the form of Vaskar's Richard the third-esque polio-deficient leg, a sly, physical portent that he's not all he seems to be.

Our narrator's manipulations insidiously appear, with references to his neurological specialism, and a particular interest in brain trauma - 'what happens to people's brains when someone's slugged them with bullets or sunk a knife into them, or if they're in a car crash. We learn Andrilla had a car crash, which left her with alien hand syndrome, a dangerously out of control limb she humourously calls 'leftie'. Her medication is overseen by the increasingly sinister Dr Vaskar, who she loves and trusts absolutely, there's also the small matter of the convenient murder of Vaskar's no-good, inheritance-sharing cousin.

It uses three narrative styles. Vaskar's smooth and engaging first-person; Andrilla's diary entries which evoke a lively voice that dulls as she degenerates, and Andrilla's medical documents. The villain becomes clear as we cut between Andrilla's innocent but incriminating diary entries and Vaskar's narrative confession.

It's a 'Shakespeare Game' in itself, that includes references to *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, even *Sonnet 18*, in an intricately plotted work, that reverberates with sinister undertones.

I'LL DO, I'LL DO AND I'LL DO READING, All the way from India to read for us tonight, Geralyn Pinto

PRIZES

Congratulations to all the shortlisted for reading tonight. They're thoughtful, creative, beautiful stories to be commended.

Now for the top three.

The top three show a supreme command of language. Their originality, wit, and invention leave the reader unnerved, captivated, and moved, and they each excel in their own way. One has complexity of plot and shows a versatile use of prose and narrative; one is fluid, vivid, and shows a skilled use language; and one excels in creating a vivid world and character, and has brevity, suspense and word perfection.

For complex plotting, and an insidious character that's woven into a slow-dripping plot, and with many thanks for coming all the way from India to read for us in Canterbury tonight, third prize and congratulations go to **Geralyn Pinto**, for the cleverly sinister *I'll Do, I'll Do and I'll Do*.

With its inventiveness, and evocative use of language, that chooses and paces vocabulary that echoes the action of the plot, and with a story that invites the reader to stand on deck and taste the salt from the sea on your lips and feel the wind from the tempest against your face - Second prize, and congratulations go to **Sarah Doyle**, for the beautifully written ***The Taming of the Tiger***.

I will never see *Othello* again without thinking of this piece, and when I next visit Venice, before I shake my head and blame the wine, I might just wonder whether, if in a streak of Venetian light, I did see a honeyed tongue floating fittingly in the grand canal.

It had me hooked, start to finish, burns after reading, there's not a superfluous sentence, it sustains your interest the whole way through, and creates a vivid and fully realised world with a believable, fascinating character. It manages to achieve a broad appeal, is suspenseful, and utterly compelling.

If, according to Polonius, 'brevity is the soul of wit, and tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes - I will be brief.' First place, goes to the gripping, meticulously written, and brutally-fitting imagining of what happened to old honey-tongue, the wicked Iago...First prize goes **Julian Gyll-murray** for the outstanding ***Iago's Labours***.

Victoria Grainger, October 2013

RESULTS

1st, 2nd & 3rd Prize

Iago's Labours - Julian Gyll-murray
The Taming of the Tiger - Sarah Doyle
I'll Do, I'll Do and I'll Do - Geralyn Pinto

Commended

Such Sweet Sorrow - Vicky Coles
Pit of Ink - Rosalind Brown
Exit Pursued - Don Nixon
Our Dearest Child - Janice Fox