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“In shape and mind transformed”? Televised teaching and learning Shakespeare

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ABSTRACT Reality television offers the BBC the opportunity to fulfil its dual imperatives of education and entertainment, frequently constructed as anathematic. This article considers three recent examples of televised teaching and learning Shakespeare: *When Romeo Met Juliet*, *Macbeth, the movie star and me*, and *Off By Heart: Shakespeare*. It demonstrates the programmes’ fit with the reality genre through their common ingredients of authenticity, contained locations, hybridity, experts, fallible and flawed participants, articulation and reconciliation of social difference. Moreover, all three share an emphasis on a reality television staple: transformation, in terms of the participants’ knowledge, skills and personal growth, but also in relation to television audiences and the British education system. The programmes might thus usefully be understood as part of a reality television subgenre, evolving in Britain since the late 1970s, of Shmake-over. This article is published as part of a collection to commemorate the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare’s death.

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Reality television, branded “mind-numbing dross” by its critics, has been increasingly harnessed by the BBC in turning Shakespeare in education settings into entertainment: presenting “real” people learning his works for the audience’s delectation (Heller, 2003). Rather than audiences being lectured to on a topic—in this case, processes of Shakespeare in education—as in traditionally and overtly educational documentaries of the AJP Taylor ilk, they are invited by these programmes to witness pedagogic processes and form their own opinions about their success or otherwise. Programmes in this vein have seen participants and audiences learning, among other things, how to live in various historical periods according to their occupation and gender (*1900s House*, *Tales from the Green Valley* and their successor series), how to dress (*What Not to Wear*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*), how to perform a job other than your own (*Undercover Boss*) and how to be a good student (*The Unteachables*). People learning Shakespeare on the small screen have previously included actors rehearsing for a production as in Trevor Nunn’s televised workshops for Channel 4, *Playing Shakespeare* (1984). In recent decades, however, it has become more common for such programmes to document groups of non-professionals learning Shakespeare and “hard-to-reach” groups learning Shakespeare: black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, those in areas of deprivation (often represented by images of council housing estates) or school students identified as unteachables (LSCB, 2016). This shift is in line with developments in reality television generally that Wood and Skeggs argue have led to an over-representation of working-class participants—euphemistically referred to as “ordinary”—because of the economic incentives frequently offered by the genre (Wood and Skeggs, 2011: 2). However, where a life-changing cash prize is not explicitly a feature of the programmes, other potential aegises for transformation attract a wide range of participants. These may include fame, training and skills acquisition.

Reality television is an umbrella term used to group together a diversity of shows that may be aesthetically diverse but “make a self-conscious claim to a discourse of the real” (Wood and Skeggs, 2011: 2). It arguably includes the game-show, game-doc, docu-soap, pop-doc, observational documentary (particularly of professionals at work, from doctors to directors), make-over and social experiment. Reality television producer John Kroll has defined the output at its best as “documentaries for the masses” (Bottinelli, 2005: 306). This phrase highlights the way in which the genres have been traditionally polarized: documentary seen as erudite, “authentic, ethical and socially engaged”, reality as popular, sensational, commercial and irresponsible (Murray and Ouellette, 2004: 46). At the same time, Kroll resists the assumed separation between the genres’ worth in asserting reality television’s social weight. The BBC programmes that are the focus of this article complicate this binary, as they combine real experiences of learning and performing communicated through techniques common to reality television with a subject culturally constructed as a heavyweight, even elite, by publishers, theatre scenes and education systems worldwide: Shakespeare (Linnemann, 2010; Olive, 2015). Bottinelli has referred to such programmes as “substance-based” reality television. That this popular combination of information and pleasure (sometimes referred to as “infotainment” in the United Kingdom or “edutainment” in the United States) enables the BBC to “adjust to the demands of a new television age without reneging on those core public service values” of entertainment and education established by Lord Reith and enforced by its Charter (Kilburn, 2003: 3; Heller, 2007: 29).

Inspired by cultural materialist critiques of Shakespeare, which—from *Political Shakespeare* onwards—have brought together

considerations of television, education and Bourdieusian theories of cultural capital, this article considers three programmes’ fit with the reality genre (for a fuller history of Shakespeare on television beyond adaptations of his plays, see Olive, 2014a, b). It does so with a focus on their common ingredients of authenticity, contained locations, hybridity, experts, fallible and flawed participants, articulation and reconciliation of social difference. In the programmes considered below, Shakespeare and the television crews are welcomed by participants as vehicles for educational and personal transformation, a popular subject for reality television. The layers of educational experience on offer in such shows will be unpacked below with regard to both the direct (participants) and indirect (viewers) beneficiaries. Having considered the constructed and potential learning the programmes offer individuals and audiences, the article will conclude by arguing that the programmes also represent changes to the education system desired by Britain’s coalition government (as well as some continuity of Shakespeare therein). *When Romeo Met Juliet* screened in a popular evening slot on BBC2—although none of the shows were in the top 30 viewed on the day of broadcast according to the Broadcasters Audience Research Board. *Macbeth, the movie star and me* was shown on Sunday at 22:25 pm on BBC1 in the West Midlands, suggesting the expected audience would be small and regional. *Off By Heart: Shakespeare* was aimed at children and families with its early Saturday evening showing. The last two programmes were part of a dedicated Shakespeare season designed to celebrate the Cultural Olympiad, including the World Shakespeare Festival in 2012 (DCMS, 2006: 2–3).

Three hour-long episodes of *When Romeo Met Juliet* (BBC2) first aired in 2010. The series builds on the existing subgenre of hard-to-reach groups performing Shakespeare, which include *Shakespeare on the Estate* (BBC2, 1994) and *My Shakespeare* (C4, 2004). Added to the formula of these previous shows is the bringing together of two demographically different schools in Coventry to play the warring Capulets and Montagues of *Romeo and Juliet*. Cardinal Newman College is a Catholic school portrayed during the series as being better achieving, teaching “traditional” values, including more arts provision and less racial or linguistic diversity. Sidney Stringer is a community comprehensive depicted as large, diverse and under-resourced, at least where the arts are concerned. Students from the schools audition are cast, and begin rehearsals separately. While a meeting of assumedly incompatible groups is a mainstay of reality television, this highly orchestrated separation and union scenario may also be familiar to theatre audiences from productions such as the RSC’s *Troilus and Cressida* (2012), which saw the Royal Shakespeare Company’s Greeks rehearse separately from the Wooster Group’s Trojans. Only during the Summer holidays does Paul Roseby, Director of the National Youth Theatre, bring the groups together at Coventry University’s Ellen Terry Centre. Their rehearsals lead up to a performance at the Belgrade Theatre, which is relayed onto big screens for crowds to watch outside the theatre. In staging the performance, Roseby is supported by a small army of staff from his Assistant Director to a team of wardrobe mistresses. The actors Adrian Lester and Lolita Chakrabarti, with their own credentials in both Shakespearean theatre and television drama, work separately with the Montagues and Capulets. The fact that they are real-life husband and wife is also repeatedly invoked to add to the show’s dynamic tension between competition and collaboration. Apart from staging a successful production and bringing together two sectors of the Coventry youth community—who, as the programme would have us believe, rarely interact—Roseby’s aims include redressing Shakespeare’s image as “out of touch” with issues facing young people today, to sell Shakespeare to “those who might think that drama is poofy or sissy” (Roseby, *When Romeo Met Juliet*).

The programme deploys a range of material from the course of the production, including auditions, rehearsals, expert-coaching sessions and the final performance. It also incorporates elements familiar to reality television viewers such as interviews with students' families and confessional straight-to-camera material with the students, Roseby, Lester, Chakrabarti and other production staff backstage as well as at home. This varied content is held together by the disembodied commentary/narration of Angela Griffin, known to audiences as an actress in popular soaps and dramas, including her work with Lester in *Hustle*.

Macbeth, the movie star and me (BBC2, 2012a, b) is a recent addition to a subgenre of Shakespeare documentary, where chronicling and championing black actors' work with the bard is the central focus of the programme. Other programmes in this category include, in the same year as *Macbeth, the movie star and me*, *Perspectives, Lenny Henry: Finding Shakespeare* (ITV1, 2012) and in Paterson Joseph's *My Shakespeare* (CA, 2004). Like the former, it is a one-off programme rather than a series, containing documentary-style content about David Harewood's life and achievements in the narrator's voice-overs and the actor's confessional reflections on how he turned his own life around, narrowly avoiding expulsion and escaping the wrong crowd, through acting Shakespeare. However, it is arguably closer to *My Shakespeare* in purpose and premise, with a "rags-to-riches" actor returning "to their roots" to transform the lives of the less fortunate in their BME, disadvantaged home community by aiming to stage a production of Shakespeare in a limited space of time. In the closing shots of the programme, a tearful Harewood exclaims: "I think I see a lot of myself in them ... It's been fantastic cos it reminds you of how far you've gone and where you're from". Both programmes are presented as against-the-odds, game-show style challenges for actor/director and participant/students alike, with a philanthropic edge of the fortunate "paying it forward" to those participants whom they have determined to be the rough-edged, but deserving, next generation (a popular topic of reality television, as in the Channel 4 show *Secret Millionaire*).

The blurb for the programme runs thus: "Actor David Harewood has just five days to take a group of inner city teenagers and turn them into Shakespearean actors. David, who starred in the hit television drama *Homeland*, returns to his old school to select his cast and prepare for a final showcase performance in Stratford-upon-Avon. Can he inspire them to put on a passionate and polished production from one of the Bard's greatest works?" (BBC News, 2012). The school is Washwood Heath in Birmingham, and shots of Harewood at the Golden Globes and voice-overs—labelling him one of the "glitterati"—are spliced with the teenagers, "hardly Shakespeare's biggest fans" and "not exactly a roomful of young Gielgud's", declaring the playwright to be "outdated, his time's gone". The Gielgud reference is suggestive of the older, theatre-conversant audience envisaged for the programme. The production, it transpires, is not to be a whole play but some scenes from *Macbeth* staged in a private performance at the RSC's Swan theatre. The headteacher and drama teacher are largely rendered passive spectators, while Harewood gets to work playing drama games, auditioning and rehearsing with the help of his retired former school teacher, Eric Reader, experts from Globe Education and voice coach Patsy Rodenburg. As with *When Romeo Met Juliet*, the students have mixed levels of experience in the performing arts; there are moments of apparent crisis with forgotten lines and lost voices, but ultimately their production is declared to have been a rewarding experience by all involved, to have "done the school proud" and "rocked on stage". The programme is problematic and somewhat unsatisfactory for viewers compared with the others in this article because it offers no back stories for the

students: the audience does not gain a sense of their "reality", only Harewood's. Viewers have to accept his articulation of a disadvantaged childhood and assumption that this is the case for today's members of the same school/community, rather than navigating between multiple, sometimes contradictory testimonies as they are used to from the genre.

In contrast to the above two shows, *Off By Heart: Shakespeare* is a programme featuring arguably overachieving students who are already convinced of the playwright's worth. Building on a previous programme, *Poetry By Heart* (2009), in 2012 BBC2 aired a 90-minute documentary in which nine school students compete to declaim Shakespeare from memory to an audience at the RSC's Courtyard Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. These nine have been chosen from an original pool of 2000 participants through regional heats (which, unlike other talent shows such as the *X-factor*, viewers are not shown). Each contestant delivers a speech from either *Romeo and Juliet* or *Henry V*, before a shortlist of three potential winners is asked to present their take on Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Viewers are shown the students participating in movement and voice coaching from RSC experts to "polish" their performances during the 5 days preceding the public event. These finalists' performances are judged by a panel of expert "Shakespeareans", including Sam West, Imogen Stubbs and Simon Schama. As with *When Romeo Met Juliet*, there is a mix of backstage, rehearsal and performance footage, and interviews with the students and their families. These are often structured to give the students' back-stories, particularly around challenges they faced in succeeding with Shakespeare, enhancing the sense of the playwright's supposedly transformative effect. In a departure from more popular reality television, the producers stop short of developing these into *X-factor*-style "tear jerkers" (Walton, 2012). Similarly, the judges' deliberations take place behind closed doors, with the camera only revealing through-the-key-hole glimpses, as one reviewer suggested showing a "high-minded" difference from other reality shows or, alternatively, "kindliness" (Walton, 2012).

In spite of such departures from established ingredients, what features allow these programmes to be read as belonging to the reality genre? All three purport to document real people and real situations, that is, to be authentic, although they differ from some strands of reality programming in that they do not present "everyday" experience (Kilburn, 2003: 11). Instead, they present exceptional opportunities to work with Shakespeare. All feature contained locations—schools and theatres—generally familiar to audiences, which reduce the need for scene-setting by the narrator and also facilitate the closed community atmosphere, which viewers of the genre are accustomed to from successful, long-running series such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor*. Characteristically of reality television, the programmes revel in hybridity. They draw together elements from reality genres such as the game-show, game-doc, docu-soap, pop-doc, observational documentary, make-over and social experiment. These manifold genres are further delineated, and sometimes contested, in an already vast body of work on the genre, including volumes by Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, Dana Heller, Richard Kilburn, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay.

The programmes adhere to reality television subgenres, particularly make-over and talent shows such as the *X-factor*, in their use of experts to effect and evaluate change as mentors and judges. *When Romeo and Juliet* features the National Youth Theatre's Paul Roseby as an experienced director of this age group and this playwright; Lester and Chakrabarti are similarly in-demand professionals; the expert credentials of the crew are emphasized from the Belgrade's set designers to the fact that the Assistant Director, Mike, is freshly qualified from LAMDA. *Macbeth, the movie star and me* centres on RADA-trained,

transatlantic film and television star Harewood and includes additional experts in the form of Patsy Rodenburg, who the voice-over reminds us has coached Hollywood actors Nicole Kidman and Orlando Bloom, and Lenny Henry, shown on-stage at the National Theatre rehearsing *The Comedy of Errors*. In *Off By Heart: Shakespeare*, the actor and director Sam West's Shakespearean credentials include roles in the two parts of *Henry IV*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, and leading parts in *Richard II*, *Hamlet*, and *Much Ado*. At the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, he directed *As You Like It*. The actor Imogen Stubbs has performed in Shakespeare's *Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Richard II*, *Othello* and *Hamlet* on stage, as well as *Twelfth Night* on film. In addition, she was previously married to the RSC artistic director Trevor Nunn, furthering her Shakespearean associations for some viewers. The historian Simon Schama is an established writer and presenter of historical documentaries for television. As part of the same BBC Shakespeare season, he presented a two-part documentary *Simon Schama's Shakespeare* arguing that Shakespeare's universal appeal can only properly be understood through awareness of his historical specificity. As he is not a practitioner of Shakespeare in performance as are the other judges, his presence is at once anomalous and affirmative of his success in crossing-over from academia to broadcasting. Further expertise is provided in the form of *Newsnight* and *University Challenge* presenter (read: gatekeeper of high-status knowledge) Jeremy Paxman as MC. The actor Miranda Richardson's voice-over might connote the early modern through her role as Queenie in *Blackadder*, as well as theatre/acting in general given her award-winning career spanning four decades. Other expert mentors, such as voice and movement coaches, make only fleeting appearances—perhaps because they are not instantly recognizable household names. Shakespearean experts in these programmes are overwhelmingly those with expertise in performing his works or in the playwright's life and times rather than academics engaged in textual, literary or theatrical studies.

Furthermore, the student stars of the shows fit the requirements of the reality genre in manifesting “an ability to project an aura of real-life ordinariness coupled with an ability to accomplish a series of tasks with some measure of aplomb” (Kilburn, 2003: 13). They are stylish and successful but also fallible performers—they dry up, forget lines and misplace props. They also meet the genre's need to be character-centred, “concentrating narrative attention on a select number of characters to whom viewers relate in much the same way as if they were characters in a soap” (Kilburn, 2003: 101). Audiences are invited to watch the success or failure of these characters in bonding with each other for the duration of filming. The older contestants affectionately look after and applaud the youngest in *Off By Heart: Shakespeare*. In *When Romeo and Juliet*, we are shown tensions in the dressing room with Kevin, who had arrived late and is reluctant to don his costume, shouting at his co-stars and the crew “Don't touch me, man”. Furthermore, as per reality television convention, audiences are called on to emotionally involve and invest themselves in these “characters” through their candid “unpacking of personal damage”—or at least personal difficulty—which the narrator, host-figures such as Roseby, and students themselves participate in (Biressi and Nunn, 2005: 20). *Macbeth, the movie star and me* barely engages in this on an individual level, beyond Harewood. Harewood, the titular movie star, provides the character-driven content and transformation narrative. Reflecting on the influence of his former teacher, he declares: “It's weird because everything I have, the clothes I'm wearing. The house I live in that I bought my family out of the proceeds of my profession, acting. If it wasn't for him I wouldn't have any of these. It's really bizarre to think about it”. Instead, it attempts to convey a generalized hardship with grim-looking

images of the neighbourhood and Lenny Henry's joke on meeting students in the Olivier theatre that “this'll be new to you. Like electricity [gestures to lights] and velvet on the seats”. Although the programme's title identifies three figures, *Macbeth* refers to the play rather than person and the “me” is never identified (substitute the homogenized, generic student body). In these shows, the lead narratives consist of successful struggles against social and language barriers, learning difficulties, bereavement and family upheavals. With the programmes dwelling on a background of adversity, the achievements of their “characters” with Shakespeare (poster boy for elite literature and learning) appear more transformation-like. Triumph over trauma is an established ingredient in reality television, particularly where there is a competitive element to a show. Demonstrating the ability to overcome adversity against the odds is often key to attracting judges' and audiences' empathy and admiration.

In line with Wood and Skeggs' observations of the reality television genre, the programmes claim to give voice to groups previously under-represented by Reithian programming: young people, non-white Britons, immigrants and, to a less explicit extent in these shows, those from working-class backgrounds. Furthermore, this objective is often subsumed in practice by a tendency towards witnessing and *overcoming*—not just personal, but also—social, racial, religious and linguistic difference (Bottinelli, 2005: 308). The programmes can be seen as, at least partially, presenting assimilationist narratives of inducting immigrants, and the children of immigrant families, into British traditions of Shakespeare and theatre. The entire premise of *When Romeo Met Juliet* revolves around the potential for clashes between different school groups (with one school characterized in voice-overs as more racially—and religiously—diverse than the other) and the need to eradicate them. It gives considerable attention to the fact that two key parts—Romeo and Benvolio—are played by teenage immigrants from non-English speaking African nations, with no previous experience of studying or staging Shakespeare. *Macbeth, the movie star and me* is silent on the topic of the students' nationality or race but it is inescapable that the majority of students participating, possibly reflecting the school's demographic, are black or Asian. The programme handles the issue of racial inequality elliptically, yet that inequality of opportunity exists is inescapable in the prevalence of white teachers and “experts”, in spite of Harewood's individual success (in *When Romeo Met Juliet*, inequality of opportunity is suggested by the demarcation between white directors and BME actors). *Off By Heart: Shakespeare* exemplifies and ostensibly celebrates diversity in Britain using vignettes of individual students' backgrounds. Yet the Sri Lankan emigrant parents of its winner—Nuha, a British Muslim girl—are challenged by the judges on their inclination, constructed by the programme as part of their creed and personal expectations, against their daughter acting for a living.

Throughout the programmes, narrative fictions typical of the reality genre are deployed to further elucidate social difference, tensions between different groups and to package up an otherwise “pedestrian sequence of events” (Kilburn, 2003: 83) creating climactic moments and cliff-hanger endings. These include radical transformations in the participants (students and their instructors). I use the term “transformation” in relation to construction of students' increasing familiarity and confidence with Shakespeare, as well as their professional and personal growth through these Shakespearean performances. In doing so, I wish to emphasize the way in which these programmes fit the reality television genre, with its interest and appeal in “ordinary people's” transformation to the “especially remarkable” (Biressi and Nunn, 2005: 148). Much is done by the shows in terms of using voice-overs and editing to cast growth and development as

life-changing. Fairy-tale transformations from amateur to quasi-professional are evoked by before and after comparisons of the students, by fairy-godmother-like experts who effect change. Students from all three programmes are given a glimpse of the ultimate transformation they could achieve when taken to see professional Shakespearean actors playing at the Royal Shakespeare Company, National Theatre and the Globe. The magnitude of the *When Romeo Met Juliet* students' portrayed transitions from "raw talent" and "not quite what [Roseby] was hoping for" to quasi-professionals receiving wolf-whistles, standing ovations and adulation from their director is further emphasized by the revelation of hurdles they had to jump to succeed. The programmes also raise the stakes, heighten the potential for transformation, through their insistence that this is a "once in a life-time opportunity", and their choice of Shakespeare, whom they assume to be a uniquely difficult author, as the goal that students must obtain.

The shows emphasize the importance of participants acquiring a similar body of knowledge and set of skills to transform their relationship and ability with Shakespeare. Vocally, these include the ability to articulate and project, be musical and "sound human" while delivering early modern verse. Physically, the students are required to use gesture and movement fittingly, "think like a sculptor about creating three-dimensional space", involve the audience through eye-contact and other strategies, and generally have stage presence. Regarding understanding, they are ultimately expected to be "in complete control of Shakespeare's language and meaning", understand iambic pentameter and imagery, "trust the verse" (abilities that connote both the RSC actor training espoused by John Barton and Cicely Berry and active methods pedagogies), make Shakespeare relevant to today's audiences, be persuasive and bring originality to interpretation of a speech or role. In terms of professionalism, they should be able to deal with nerves, respect each other—for example, by being quiet backstage, work quickly and to a high standard, memorize lines, overcome inhibitions—particularly physical and sexual, take notes and other feedback from the director during rehearsal, be punctual, demonstrate range, energy and enthusiasm. Roseby, for instance, insists in his address to the *Romeo and Juliet* cast on the first day of the month-long joint rehearsal period "you are professional actors as of today". He berates students who fall short of his standards: "it's you who's going to look crap and stupid". Inclusion of these students is important to remind the audience of the gap between themselves and the professionals, to highlight the participants' fallibility and stress the radicalness of transformation for those who succeed where their peers have failed.

Apart from learning how to perform Shakespeare like professionals, the participating students learn, to varying degrees, how to be reality television stars: the sorts of behaviours the editors will enjoy. This includes seemingly no-holds barred self-reflection and idiosyncrasy. Kevin in *When Romeo and Juliet* demonstrates his awareness of this facility early on accosting the camera during auditions bragging "the camera loves me, don't you? Don't you?" and playing up to it with his face and body. Another student from *Macbeth, the movie star and me* shows his awareness of the programme's reality television aspect to the camera through a comparison with one of the most successful examples of the genre: "it's like waiting for *X-factor*. I feel like one of the contestants". There is, however, one crucial area in which the students may have failed to adopt (and the producers to instil) the mores of reality television: the students' transformation narratives are rather muted, as shown by Glody below. *Macbeth, the movie star and me* opens by establishing students' lack of appreciation for and knowledge of Shakespeare. One student declares "I haven't read it but I still wouldn't get it because it's

about a man who becomes a donkey", while another says "it's not fun to read cos they're all based in the Victorian times like back years ago and this is the twenty-first century so we don't really want to be reading books about that", in doing so revealing her confusion over Shakespeare's period and dramatic genre. It does not, however, conclude with any explicit articulation of their increased knowledge or understanding of Shakespeare's life, works or language. The audience are left to infer students' development in this area from their ability to run through one scene with few missed lines and entrances. My inference as a viewer, and sometime theatre critic, is that difficulties in handling the language, conveying the meaning of lines, character and intention were still overwhelmingly persistent. This might explain why we see so little of the actual performance in the programme. In addition, a new-found love of Shakespeare or desire for an acting career is more difficult to communicate to the cameras than the tangibly new hair 'dos or waistlines paraded elsewhere in the reality genre. Or maybe the love just isn't there. Those experts who are presented as delivering the initiatives, including Roseby and Harewood, are unsurprisingly the most effusive and unequivocal about what has been achieved. Roseby insists that in his project: "They came together. They weren't two schools: they were one". This sentiment is corroborated by the station announcer's evaluative exclamation "what a journey!", as the credits roll.

The experts are also much better at casting themselves as transformed by the learning experiences they created. Although declared "a natural" by his old teacher, David Harewood's inexperience and the possibility for his failure as a teacher is anticipated by the school's principal in her thinly veiled *schadenfreude*: "I'll be very interested to see how he works and copes and manages young people. To motivate them in the right way so they get something from it. We'll be really interested. We'll stand on the sidelines and may have a little chuckle occasionally". Having declared some ignorance early on, "I don't know how they do it, teachers, God it's exhausting", Harewood reflects to the camera throughout on his progress in acquiring the requisite skills. For example, reflecting on the short amount of time left before curtains up and their achievement so far, he says "[I] gotta be forceful, gotta push them a little bit", and later affirms his success on that score, [I] "think I really pushed them". The narrative of his acquisition of teaching skills is not that of a simple arc, however: he endearingly and self-critically acknowledges to the camera points where things are slipping backwards and his mistakes (in having a "big night" and acquiring a hangover)—in having unrealistic expectations and pushing the students excessively hard at times, and occasional lack of stamina and enthusiasm ("I let everyone down. I didn't have the spark"). While not taken up explicitly by the programme's commentary as something the students learn, Harewood's constant, candid self-evaluation and planning of improvements might be the most educationally valuable facet of the programme, not to mention the most interesting. Reality television "experts" are rarely so brutal in their self-appraisal, to the extent that an "I got it wrong" from an *X-factor* judge results in tabloid headlines (Sheridan, 2012).

That Harewood is both the expert and ultimate star of the show, transgressing a delicate balance that reality television requires, might explain why the programme feels less successful than its counterparts. My feeling on this seems to be supported by its banishment to a "graveyard" hour in broadcasting terms.

Another type of education experienced by the students, which is not exclusive to the programme's focus on Shakespeare, but for which Shakespeare instead provides a vehicle, is their personal growth. Self-work, self-actualization, self-understanding and

self-help are long-established subjects and goals of reality television, particularly the television make-over (Ouellette and Hay, 2008), as well as the National Curriculum for English, particularly as devised by Cox. According to Biressi and Nunn, advertisements recruiting participants to shows often emphasize possible personal growth, “do you really know yourself?”, or promise to “change the way you think” (27). As mentioned above, *Macbeth, the movie star and me* dwells more successfully on narratives of personal, rather than academic, growth. For instance, the self-doubting sporty student who realizes he has academic and creative potential: “The way we were taught how to speak and how to act just made me come out my shell a bit more cos I don’t feel silly coming out and doing it a bit more”. The presented transformation from opposite sides of a binary in under a week is clearly a prevalent and appealing narrative in reality television, given its extreme nature. In *When Romeo Met Juliet*, a similar example of the portrayal of a participant’s personal growth is that of Glody, the student playing Romeo. At the outset, Glody is presented as an A* Maths and Science student, a complete novice to drama, who is keen to prove there is more to him than his academic side. Envisaging broadening his skills and interests, he remarks “I cannot be in books all the time”. Although he continues to be a star pupil in this new context—we are told by Roseby that he is the first to memorize his lines—the final episode tells us that “Shakespeare has brought out a different side in him”. Glody himself is filmed in his bedroom reflecting on his evolving new identity: “I’m feeling more like a drama kid at the moment because I haven’t done much homework. I haven’t done any maths or physics for the last eight weeks. I feel much more artsy”. Elsewhere, he concedes the pedagogic value of the arts: “even drama can teach you something, apparently”. His new-found appreciation for Shakespeare’s craftsmanship as a dramatist is captured as he talks to the camera: “He was a really clever playwright, I don’t know if he intended to put everything in there that we see now. But even if he did it subconsciously that makes it even better ... If all his plays are this fun to learn about and do then he was amazing”. However, he concludes with a caveat that perhaps reminds us of his more positivist, scientific leanings: “I’ve only done one so I’m not going to say anything, his other plays might not be as amazing”. His ambivalent feelings about Shakespeare’s merit echo those towards his identity as a student. They may also evidence his resistance to the reality television genre’s demand for dramatic conversion narratives.

More collectively, Glody is shown as an aegis for personal growth for Beth and her friends from Cardinal Newman College as they learn to expand their acceptance of diverse cultures and languages. At first, they highlight Glody’s “otherness”, which is not only related to his schooling but also to his racial and linguistic difference to them. In the first episode, the narration explains that he came to Britain from the French-speaking Congo. Beth and her friends are shown joking, with xenophobic undertones, about his name: is it “Bloddy”, “Gloddy” or “Cloddy”? And later, when unable to recall his last name, one asks—possibly in reference to the 1990s television character Mr Blobby’s limited vocabulary—“It’s not Glody Glody, is it?”. Yet the Cardinal Newman girls are increasingly impressed by his excellent acting skills and kind personality in a way that begins to supersede their initial othering of him. Similar alterations, eroding perceptions of “otherness”, are evidenced across the cast. The Cardinal Newman girls—initially perceived by Sidney Stringer students Charlene and Kamillo as “too pretentious” and “fake”—are accepted, at least for the duration of the production, into their friendship circles. Boys from both schools are shown to share an interest in and facility for rapping. Glody remarks circumspectly on the transformation from the two schools seeing “almost everything” about each other in a negative

light to a situation where the groups might potentially “stay in touch”. Journeys of personal growth are also depicted in *Off By Heart: Shakespeare*. Three contestants (Ben, Jacinta and James) are shown as having developed confidence through their participation in declaiming Shakespeare and related drama activities. James’ father comments that it is “really nice to see him maturing and blossoming, asking questions around the thing”. One difference between the series that might explain the varying levels of transformation is their timeframes. The personal development in *Off By Heart: Shakespeare* occurred over at least the course of a year, although we see only a fraction of that; *When Romeo Met Juliet* took place over a few weeks and more ambitiously purports to show viewers evidence of the process of the transformation as well as its result; *Macbeth, the movie star and me* much more ambitiously takes only 5 days to cover similar ground.

While the students are—as the RSC’s Director of Movement Struan Leslie explains—asked to rethink “the way they walk, talk, breathe, think” for the duration of filming, the audience learns vicariously what it takes to perform Shakespeare well from the RSC’s perspective (*Off By Heart*). To paraphrase Hardy and Coronos writing on the relationship between reality history viewers and participants, we can’t *all* be sent to learn performing Shakespeare from these teachers, but we can have some sense of what it might be like by observing others (Hardy and Coronos, 2006: 126). The audience learns not only about the staging process but also the plays’ plots and characters. This acquisition of knowledge often occurs “alongside” the students through a slow-drip feed of information from the narrator and/or host. A final possible opportunity for change and growth is extended to the audience of *Off By Heart* through Paxman’s concluding comment that the “media caricature about the yooof of today, that they don’t know anything, aren’t interested in anything, is just not fair ... [they] appreciate words, drama and the human story”. The programmes, therefore, challenge audiences to transform their opinion of young people’s interests and abilities.

In addition to allegedly transforming the participants’ and audiences’ knowledges, skills and personal growth, the programmes can also be seen as reflecting change (and continuity) in education policy. Such synergy might be underpinned by the BBC’s being run at arm’s length from the state, not quite autonomously. The organization relies on parliament to set the level of the licence fee, paid by UK households, which funds it. In recent years, there has been debate over whether the proceeds of the licence fee should be shared with other broadcasters—putting even greater pressure on the BBC to impress the nation’s government with the content and delivery of its service. In addition, some sections of the BBC historically received funding directly from government departments. For instance, the BBC World Service was, until 2010, sponsored by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Beyond this, the government has always “influenced the construction and operation of television by acts of parliament and committees of inquiry” (Turnock, 2007: 4). A degree of intersection between government education policy and BBC education offerings might be expected to originate out of the broadcaster’s origins and structure, even if it is not explicitly demanded. All three programmes share a positioning of Shakespeare as a hard-to-attain gold standard, something predating but firmly established within the National Curriculum for English by Shakespeare’s position as sole compulsory author over the past 27 years. *Off By Heart*’s Sam West, for instance, declares his writing to be “the greatest stuff ever written ... it can be your friend and your inspirational for the rest of your life”. While acknowledging Shakespeare’s popular origins in early modern theatre, the Globe educator in *Macbeth, the movie star and me* also alludes to his status today “in books” as

“very intellectual”. Shakespeare is figured as the elusive thing to “own” along with the likes of the thin body, unlined face, beautiful house, love of opera or pimped car touted elsewhere in reality television. Huff argues that reality television programmes, especially the make-over subgenre, “tend to offer things people couldn’t have in their real lives if it were not for the reality shows” (Huff, 2006: 69), that is, unattainable monetary, physical or educational fortunes. Since Shakespeare is supposed to have been rendered a universal experience through the National Curriculum for English, the programmes’ positioning of Shakespeare as a rare and luxury commodity (evidenced, for example, by students’ unfamiliarity with him in *When Romeo Met Juliet* and *Macbeth, the movie star and me*) is potentially troubling for policymakers and exponents of Shakespeare for all. If taking these programmes as indicative of students’ knowledge of the playwright, UK policymakers may feel that they have acted rightly in increasing the amount of Shakespeare required by the National Curriculum to its highest level yet (three plays across key stages 3 and 4). Yet perhaps the seeming novelty of student encounters with Shakespeare in these programmes can be explained by editors manufacturing students’ epiphanies while working to a generic remit. Or, the novelty may pertain to the value-added experience of producing his works in a professional theatre, with theatre practitioners’ expertise—something that theatre education departments have certainly argued makes a difference.

While the programmes unwittingly problematize the success of established education policy by suggesting that access to Shakespeare, as a gold standard author, has not been achieved for all students, their embrace of expert individuals and organizations beyond the school mirrors the outsourcing or privatizing of state provision by US neo-liberal/UK conservative governments. Oudellet and Hay have previously commented on reality television’s depiction of citizens’ or private organizations’ taking on what have been previously seen as governmental responsibilities (15). For instance, in other manifestations of British reality programming, a successful entrepreneur takes on the banking industry’s reluctance to loan money (*Bank of Dave* C4), celebrity cleaners Kim and Aggie tackle the spread of superbugs in NHS hospitals (*When Kim and Aggie Went to Hospital* C4) and chef Jamie Oliver deals with alleged falling standards in state school catering (*Jamie’s School Dinners* C4). With regard specifically to Shakespeare, for example, the coalition government (2010–2015) signalled a lack of trust in teachers to deliver his works by maintaining him as sole compulsory author in the National Curriculum for English (and rubbishing teachers’ and exam boards’ repetitive selection of American fiction) while proclaiming its confidence in their ability to choose appropriate literary texts when pressed on their apparent down-grading of world literature (DfE, 2011). This is arguably reinforced by the Department for Education funding the Royal Shakespeare Company and Shakespeare Schools Festival to deliver resources and training for students and teachers (Burns, 2012). The privatization and outsourcing of elements of the education system by right-of-centre governments over past decades finds an echo in representations of provisioning students with Shakespeare on television. Having the National Youth Theatre, a celebrated actor and the RSC, rather than teachers, tackle students’ failure to engage with Shakespeare, like the ongoing attempts in the United Kingdom to relocate teacher training from universities to schools, arguably constitutes popular evidence of a revived post-Thatcherite re-conception of the responsibilities and structures for the provision of education in policy and popular culture.

Whether the change involved in making and consuming these programmes is for participating individuals, audiences, the education system or all three of the above, *When Romeo Met Juliet*, *Macbeth, the movie and me* and *Off By Heart: Shakespeare*

are part of a discernible subgenre of reality television that repackages for twenty-first century Britons long-established, liberal humanist beliefs in the transformative power of Shakespeare’s works: even where any change might be more demonstrably attributed to drama methods, school excursions and the experience of being filmed *per se*. To harness the *X-factors*’ portmanteau coining Nicole Scherzinger, these programmes are examples of a reality television phenomenon, which we might call the Shmake-over. This blend seems a particularly fitting way to capture programmes that implode the binaries of education and entertainment, elite and popular culture. Furthermore, its alliteration with words like “sham” and the shm-reduplication prevalent in Yiddish and American English (for example, fancy-shmancy) helpfully problematizes the, if not quite fraudulent, constructed and overstated nature of the transformations therein.

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Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Additional Information

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