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20 things you never knew about Shakespeare

You thought there was nothing more to learn about the Bard? Here are 20 things you never knew about our greatest playwright

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We know the plays, but how much do we really know the man? As Simon Callow sets off on tour in a new one-man show, *Shakespeare: The Man from Stratford*, we felt it was time to put the Shakespeare industry to the test. After all, the Bard is probably the cause of more tree-felling than all other dead authors put together. Every minuscule aspect of his output is pored over by researchers and academics, the answers buried in impossibly dense books that suck the blood out of the playwright.

But Shakespeare was a professional writer and writers have love affairs, rivalries, cash crises, prejudices, off-days, children and mortgages. The assumption is that we know very little about this side of his life. But it's amazing just how much *is* known and how fascinating it is. So who better to ask about his life than the scholar Jonathan Bate, who is the author of Callow's show and several highly readable books on Shakespeare.

Callow has performed one-man shows before — as Oscar Wilde, as Charles Dickens — but has only acted in three Shakespeare plays. Four, if you include a radio production of *Richard III*. But he is also a professional biographer, who comes to the subject with an avid passion for the life and works. Gamedly, Bate and Callow agreed to join other experts in bringing their knowledge, guesswork and intuition to bear in 20 questions about Shakespeare you might have felt embarrassed to ask.

Was he gay, straight or just sex-mad?

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The sonnets are often cited as evidence of his bisexuality. He may have been in love with his patron the Earl of Southampton, the Earl of Pembroke, or even the playwright John Fletcher. "The fact is he was married and had children," Jonathan Bate says.

"But he imagined in his work every type of romantic and sexual love. It is probable Shakespeare, once in London, would have tried anything."

"If you'd asked him if he was gay he'd have been totally bewildered," Simon Callow reckons. "But his work is drenched in sexuality to an extraordinary degree and his plays cover the entire waterfront of human sexual expression. As Leontes says [in *The Winter's Tale*]: 'I am a feather for each wind that blows.' Whatever he was, at parties he would certainly have gone home with the best-looking person in the room."

Did his marriage to Anne Hathaway involve her father's shotgun?

Quite possibly. He was 18 and Anne Hathaway was 26. The parish records for Stratford-upon-Avon show that over the 50-year period of Shakespeare's life he is one of just three men in the locality to marry before the age of 20 and the only one whose bride was pregnant. He was so young, in fact, that he needed a special Bishop's Licence, on which his name is spelled Shagspere.

Which living playwright was he most like?

"Tom Stoppard," Bate reckons. "Because wit and wordplay are at the heart of his work. Shakespeare began his career fixing up old plays. He was initially a rewrite man. Hollywood producers get Stoppard to doctor scripts — he's also done a lot of adaptations of other authors work and, like Shakespeare, he's an outsider." Stoppard also cheerfully used Shakespeare as a source for several plays (not least his first, the Hamlet spin-off *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*) and a film (*Shakespeare in Love*), plot theft being a very Shakespearean habit.

What made him different from other playwrights of his day?

"Nothing apart from his genius," says Stanley Wells, a renowned Shakespearean scholar and the author of *Shakespeare: Sex & Love*. "The sheer fundamental brainwork in the plays is remarkable — and it's as a thinker I think he's a bit neglected".

"And don't forget he was an actor," Bate says. "His experience as a writer was grown out of his experience in the rehearsal room and on the stage. The language and jargon of the theatre is everywhere in his work."

What did he spend his money on?

"A substantial buy-to-let property portfolio," Bate says. "He was the first writer in Britain to make serious money out of writing; he was a brilliant businessman. He worked out that by forming a joint-stock company with his actors he could get a share of the box office. All the leading actors in his company got wealthy and bought big houses in nice suburbs around London. Shakespeare bought properties around Stratford and agricultural tithes. He died a very rich man."

Did he keep a pet?

If he did, it certainly wasn't a dog. He hated them, especially fawning spaniels. "Dogs have very negative associations in the plays," Bate says. "The murderers in *Macbeth* are compared to a list of breeds of dog." The one dog to get a (non-speaking) part in the works is Crab, in *The Two Gentleman of Verona*, who lifts his leg in a dining room.

Did he have a chip on his shoulder?

Yes, a social whopper. The main feature on the family coat-of-arms that Shakespeare took so much trouble to obtain (his father having applied and failed to become a gentleman) was a yellow spear, the colour of which Ben Jonson ridiculed — together with Shakespeare's motto "Not Without Right" — in his play *Every Man Out of His Humour*. Jonson turned the motto into "Not Without Mustard".

What was his most overrated play?

"*Hamlet* gets my vote," Bate says. "There are a lot of problems with it: the fact that he wrote three different versions shows that he thought so too. He became so obsessed with the character of Hamlet that he became too big for his own play."

For Wells, "dramatically speaking, *The Tempest*, marvellous play though it is. But I'd go for *Henry VIII*. It really bores me."

Did he go in for lighting and sound effects?

Yes, the Blackfriars indoor theatre (which was used from 1608) in London was candlelit. His last plays have a clear five-act structure, and the reason for this was that candles lasted only so long; you needed four points in the action in which the play could stop, music play and the (brief) candles be changed. Sound effects were popular too. Sparks from canon fire during a performance of *Henry VIII* burnt the Globe theatre down in 1613.

What were his favourite books?

He had two permanently on his writing desk: Montaigne's *Essays* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Terry Hands, the former boss of the Royal Shakespeare Company, sticks his neck out with the choice of *The Faerie Queen* by Edmund Spenser. "Underneath all of Shakespeare is a deep Spenserian acceptance of what is virtue, what is excess."

"If it's a favourite bedside novel, how about *Don Quixote* by Cervantes?" Bate suggests. Incidentally, Cervantes and Shakespeare both died on the same day: April 23, 1616.

Did he have a Warwickshire accent?

He would have had a Midlands accent, although he probably got rid of it once in London. "Banquo in *Macbeth* is described as 'blood bolter'd' and boltered is a Warwickshire expression," Bate says.

"The dramatists who dominated the stage when he arrived in town all had Oxbridge educations: they sounded posh, for want of a better word. Shakespeare came from the backwoods and would have sounded like it. He has a joke at his own expense in *As You Like It* with its bumbling peasant much teased by sophisticated court characters. He's called William."

How did he commute from Stratford to London?

"He went to London at the very least once a year for the summer season at the Globe," says Peter Whelan, who has written two acclaimed plays about Shakespeare. "I think he'd have come down the Thames in May. Going back to Stratford in the winter — upstream being a more expensive trip — he'd have gone by horse, pretty much on the route of the A40, his first stop perhaps being his son-in-law's family house in Acton.

"I also think he rather liked going back home to Stratford, whatever academics say about his supposedly nag-bag wife."

Did he ever go abroad?

If he did, he was pretty unobservant. "He set two plays in Venice and seems not to have noticed it has canals," Bate says. "In *Two Gentleman of Verona* they go by boat from Verona to Milan. Writing about the coast of Bohemia [it didn't have one] in *The Winter's Tale* is his most famous mistake. And there's some very strange geography in *All's Well That Ends Well*."

Was he a Catholic?

"His father possibly was and Warwickshire was certainly a stronghold of the old faith," says Callow, who thinks that Shakespeare may have lived in genuine fear of the Protestant Tudor Taleban. "In our play we allude to a real event before Shakespeare was born, when his father, as mayor, had to employ workmen to deface the frescoes in the Guild Chapel at Stratford. Intriguingly they were only whitewashed so that they could be restored later, which they were."

Did he go down the pub?

"There's a well-attested early anecdote that he kept himself apart in his lodgings in Shoreditch; his fellow actors would invite him out on the town and he'd plead a headache," Bate says.

"I am absolutely certain he was monosyllabic to meet," Callow says. "If Shakespeare had a conversation with you, he'd have done a lot of listening and you'd have done the talking."

Whelan thinks differently. "If you could ever find the real Shakespeare in the plays, I think you'd find a very good drinking companion."

What would have been his specialist subject on *Mastermind*?

"Glove-making, his father's trade in Stratford," Bate believes. "He grew up among the smell of leather. In three of his plays Shakespeare mentions the elastic property of fine leather called cheveril. There was a backroom workshop full of it in his home in Henley Street".

"It wasn't glove-making; it was love-making," Wells argues.

Did he hate actors?

"No, he absolutely loved them," Bate says. "But there was a particular kind of actor who really annoyed him. That was the clown who ad-libbed too much. The company funny man, Will Kemp, left because of creative differences in 1599. He had just played Falstaff and the epilogue to *Henry IV (Part Two)* promises that he'll make a future appearance in *Henry V*. He doesn't because by then Kemp had stormed out. After that they hired Robert Armin, who was less trouble."

Why are Shakespeare's jokes so bad?

"They are no worse than anyone else's of the period," Wells says. "It's the wordplay we find difficult."

His worst joke? Bate reckons it's the Fool's in King Lear: "The reason why the seven stars are no more than seven ... Because they are not eight." "It's very hard to believe that ever got a laugh."

Did he really never cross out as he wrote?

"It's myth that he wrote cleanly, put about by Ben Jonson, who said that 'he scarce ever blotted a line'," Bate says. "The only thing that survives where we can see the speed of his hand is one scene he wrote for *Sir Thomas More*, a multi-author play in which Shakespeare wrote and crossed out. But the fact is he revised much of his work."

What would be the ultimate Shakespeare find?

"*Love's Labour's Won*, which is believed to be the sequel to *Love's Labour's Lost*. There is evidence that it was printed, so it may turn up one day. It would be the find of the millennium. That, or a private letter revealing something of his inner emotional life," Bate says.

"I'd love to find a document linking the Shakespeare of Stratford irrefutably to the plays," Wells says. "A letter from a Stratford friend, perhaps. 'Dear Wm. Shakespeare: your wife Anne and the twins are in good health and wish you all the best for your new play *Hamlet*.' It would save the world so much wasted paper on the subject of who wrote Shakespeare."

The Man from Stratford opens its tour at the Plymouth Theatre Royal, June 10-12 (www.manfromstratford.co.uk)