

The Visual Shakespeare Project

Dr Iain Will & Mr Rodolphe Fonty

This project forms part of a collaboration with the performing arts from which Rodolphe Fonty (an actor/scholar) and I (a visual artist) derive inspiration. In 2021-22, I had a Paris exhibition and spent time in a theatre there, studying the actors during their Shakespeare season of plays. In this series of paintings, based on Shakespeare's plays, we capture the micro-expressions of the actors; effectively capturing their live performances. This is challenging, but the rewards are great. The paintings are not just a tableau, rather, they are an intimate dialogue between the actors and the viewer. I believe this brings a unique dimension to my work. The paintings explore the human condition, interactions and relationships, all of which are relevant today. Since the conception of this project, we have worked in collaboration with a New York theatre group, via the talented actor Chelsea LeSage. The journey continues and we now work with many more actors.

The Poet, Fair Youth and Dark Lady

Artist: Iain Will



This painting depicts the Poet (Shakespeare), the Fair Youth (possibly William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke) and the Dark Lady. The people portrayed in this painting are all French actors based in the Parisian Theatre du Nord-Ouest. On the left stands Rodolphe Fonty, an actor/director (one of the cleverest people I have met). Next to him is Arthur Dragon (a very talented young actor) and on the right is Joane Rubio (an amazingly versatile and talented actor, indeed). The painting hung behind them as they performed readings from the sonnets before a theatre audience. The event was in honour of my 2021-22 Paris exhibition of these paintings (curated by Rodolphe) and formed part of

an evening of entertainment, including an onstage interview, during which I discussed the paintings included in this portfolio. Olivier Bruax and Laetitia Leloutre gave a stunning performance from Henry VIII on stage, whilst the director of the play, Isabelle Watel, gave an interesting and informative talk. This sonnets performance was repeated in the highly prestigious, Henry IV school in Paris, before staff and parents. The setting was in the vaults of the school (effectively a wonderful exhibition space) which was beautifully lit and presented.



Me, Rodolphe Fonty and Joane Rubio taking a bow before the theatre audience



Rodolphe Fonty and Christiane Marchewska at the closing event

In March 2022, I returned to Paris for the closing of the exhibition, before the audience of the Theatre du Nord-Ouest. My dear friend Rodolphe Fonty gave readings along with a famous French actor of film and theatre, Christiane Marchewska. I read sonnet 24, and really enjoyed what was for me, a new experience. We raised funds to support the theatre through sales of original paintings and art prints and we are grateful for the support of the public and theatre supporters. This **Visual Shakespeare Project** is a self-funding project that continues to grow and flourish and we look forward to including additional actors and theatre groups, whom we will attempt to support via sales of these paintings. Please do [contact](mailto:iain.will.artist@gmail.com) us at iain.will.artist@gmail.com or via www.iainwillartist.com if you would like to participate. We can hold an event and an exhibition to create interest in your theatre group, or gallery, and also generate funds via sales.

Please read on and view the paintings and explanatory notes.....

Portrait of Dame Judi Dench

Artist: Iain Will



Dame Judi Dench is set against a York backdrop where she was born. She was inspired to act by her brother Geoff and Shakespeare has been a lifelong passion. Dame Judi was delighted to hear that this portrait is being created and is to be included in the Project.

In the background we see arches from the Museum Gardens in York, where her family took part in the Mystery Plays. Her father, a doctor, was a keen amateur actor. During his medical practice, he delivered many babies in York, including my Mother!

Through the arches we see the iconic York Minster on the left, and the York Theatre Royal on the right. Above is the symbol of her Quaker faith. Below the arches is a bookshelf upon which sit the works of Shakespeare and also a paint brush and tube from her initial set designing days. In a very generous response to an email, Dame Judi told me that Shakespeare, painting and York are her three most favourite things, and so this is reflected in the painting. To the bottom left and right of Dame Judi, are two trompe l'oeils that depict the canvas surface being torn back to reveal Shakespeare's own words. The passage on the left is taken from Hamlet, Dame Judi's big break, playing Ophelia at The Old Vic in 1957. On the right we see a quote from Macbeth, in which she played Lady Macbeth.

Dame Judi also played Titania in a film adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Seeing the latter adaptation really solidified my interest in Shakespeare and I have been a devotee ever since. Thank you Dame Judi.

Henry VIII

Artist: Iain Will



One can see that Anne Boleyn has captured the gaze of King Henry at his masquerade ball. Henry looks on, his eyes full of lust and avarice. Anne is coy and innocent of her unfolding future; this liaison sets in motion a series of events that culminate in catastrophe for Anne and many others, including Cardinal Wolsey! The sword, set against the shield, is an executioner's sword, as attested by the round tip. It will behead Anne, at the hand of a famous French executioner. On the shield is the cross of St George, a symbol of The English Kingdom. Henry needs a son and heir to succeed him, he hopes Anne will facilitate this. We see the 'Machiavellian' Wolsey looking on, and later he will plan a clandestine visit to the Pope in a fatal attempt to stall Henry's and Anne's wedding plans. The former Queen, Katherine of Aragon, seen in the distance, has her back to the events. Her body language tells us that she is dejected, but she refuses to acknowledge her divorce from Henry; she is the true Queen. Katherine is the lucky one in this particular tale, as she escapes the executioner's sword. The director of the play, Isabelle Watel, is using the painting on stage, during her Paris production of Henry VIII. The actors dance close to it during the masquerade scene. The painting and the play come together in a unique way, and I am so honoured by that.



The amazing Isabelle Watel at the opening event, speaking to Rodolphe Fonty

Richard III

Artist: Iain Will



In this painting, one can see Richard III on the left. Beside him is the horse he so desperately needed at the battle of Bosworth field: "my kingdom for a horse". In the middle distance is Lord Stanley, who has his eye to the main chance, about to pick his side, against Richard. In the far distance is Sheriff Hutton castle, where Warwick the king-maker was active, and where the princes may have been held. Sheriff Hutton is where I (the artist) grew up. All these events are held as a reflection within the frame of a broken mirror. The mirror's fracture is symbolic of Richard's imminent demise and the simple wooden frame is austere in its crude simplicity, like his reign. The mirror is set in the modern world, where we see a wooden sword and shield that are those of the princes. The wooden toys are symbols of the illegitimacy of Richard's crown and also the absence of the princes (the toys lay not played with). The tower of London is also visible; this is where the royal princes met their end, one of which was a successional threat to Richard. Richard gazes out of the mirror; does he lament murdering them, or does he regret the failure of his ambitions.....that is for you, the viewer, to decide. In any case, the events both transcend time and space, leaping from the past to the present. This is a cautionary tale indeed!

Henry V

Artist: Iain Will



In this painting Harfleur castle lies in the distance behind King Henry V. The longbow references Agincourt, as do the sword and shield. The tennis ball is the 'supposed' insult from the French Dauphin, that mocks Henry's youth and inexperience. But more than this, the painting celebrates the unexpected 'passion and love' that Henry discovers with his new French Queen, Katherine, whom he marries after defeating the French. Their facial expressions reveal their feelings, in the same way as actors on a stage. Henry professes his love, but also his lack of eloquence in expressing it. He is just a simple soldier, he explains! Does this approach soften and win the heart of his future bride? Or, perhaps just her cooperation? Their betrothal secures a temporary peace, for a short while at least.

Macbeth

Artist: Iain Will



In this painting we see the three prophesying witches on the left. They watch on from an earlier point in the play, observing the chaos they have helped precipitate in Macbeth's life. In the centre of the painting we see Macbeth, with Lady Macbeth whispering in his receptive ear. Only too willing to be influenced, he listens to Lady Macbeth's protestations. The couple stand in the moonlight, beyond good company and society. They both decide that King Duncan should be usurped and that Macbeth should replace him. King Duncan's castle is seen in the distance. The symbolic image of the king's crown hangs from a broken tree branch, disembodied from the head of any King. This is symbolic of Macbeth's ultimate reluctance to be king. Both he and Lady Macbeth are eventually haunted by their actions. Two incredibly generous and supportive actors, Olivier Bruax and Laetitia Leloutre (coincidentally, Laetitia resembles Anne in the above painting) gave a stunning performance from Macbeth on stage, during the opening event of our Paris exhibition in 2021. The director, Isabelle Watel, gave a fascinating accompanying talk.



The talented actors, Olivier Bruax and Laetitia Leloutre

Romeo and Juliet

Artist: Iain Will



In the painting we see the figure of a 'Juliet', located in our time, framed by an arch. In the background there lies the stage of the Globe theatre and upon it are two actors playing Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. They gaze into each other's eyes and all around them is inconsequential. The figure in the foreground is lamenting the loss of her 'Romeo' and she too is oblivious to her surroundings. She can only think of her absent lover.

The Tempest

Artist: Iain Will



This painting depicts the arrival of Ferdinand, after he is led to safety by Ariel, the servant of Prospero who is master of these shores. These events are precipitated by a storm created by Ariel, at the behest of Prospero, which drives the occupants of the depicted sailing ship to abandon their vessel unnecessarily. They are old enemies of Prospero. We see the image of innocent Miranda, Prospero's daughter, who casts her gaze on Ferdinand as he climbs from the sea. They are to fall in love and, ultimately, the play ends in happiness and reconciliation between old enemies.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Artist: Iain Will



This painting shows Bottom, Titania and a love potion. Titania, Queen of the Fairies, is about to fall foul of its effect. Ironically the potion was supplied by Oberon, King of the Fairies. The love potion is placed upon Titania's sleeping eyelids. She will fall for the first person she sees. Oberon's servant, Puck, mischievously presents Bottom before Titania and precipitates the unplanned romance. The scene is located in an enchanted forest, as the presence of a fairy attests. This scene is part of a play within a play.

Hamlet

Artist: Iain Will



This painting depicts Ophelia at the point of her tragic end. We see her in her watery grave, in the reflection of a broken mirror. The shattered glass is symbolic of the destruction that results throughout the play. The skull of Yorick is depicted, hovering above a broken shard of the mirror. All this is located in the room that hosts the events at the end of the play. This is one of Shakespeare's tragedies, indeed. There is a goblet, provided by the new King of Denmark, Claudius, containing poison, that features at the end of the play. The goblet contains a pearl that is supposed to entice the duelling Hamlet to drink the poison. The pearl is symbolised by the moon seen through the window, through which all the departed souls have passed. The sword, that Ophelia's brother uses to duel with Hamlet, is propped against the mirror; it too is poisoned and kills both Hamlet and Ophelia's brother, Laertes.

King Lear

Artist: Iain Will



This painting depicts King Lear, played by Eliezier Mellul (a famous French film and stage actor) who can be seen with a sorrowful expression, whilst Cordelia's pale ghost looks on sympathetically. In the distance we see his two other daughters, Goneril and Regan, walking off into the coming storm that symbolises their ultimate doom in the play's finale. At this point they have the divided kingdom in their grasp as denoted by the crown, held in Regan's hand. In contrast, Cordelia's army has failed to regain the kingdom; Albany's (Goneril's husband) last minute attempt to stay the execution of Lear and Cordelia has partially failed; Cordelia is dead! Her ghost looks on Lear as he grieves. Is it self-pity that Lear feels, or remorse at his failure to appreciate the true worth and sincerity of Cordelia? The whole painting is set against a stormy barren land, which symbolises Lear's self-expulsion from his Kingdom and his subsequent days in the wilderness. The actor who posed for this painting is a successful Parisian actor and friend, Eliezer Mellul (via the Theatre du Nord-Ouest), whom I met during my Paris Exhibition of these Shakespeare paintings in 2021-22.



Famous French film and stage actor, Eliezier Mellul

Merry Wives of Windsor

Artist: Iain Will



The Merry Wives of Windsor features a favourite of Queen Elizabeth I, Falstaff. The incredibly experienced French actor, Bernard Lefebvre, posed for Falstaff. The character is larger than life and is a knight of the realm with an insatiable appetite for life. In this painting we see him at the end of the play, having been duped by the two married women (Mistress Ford and Mistress Page) whom he has attempted to seduce. His aim was to relieve them of the burden of their wealth! To this end, he has sent them an identical love letter, but the two on-looking wives have compared notes and have discovered his plans. They have lured him into a trap. Consequently, Falstaff has dressed as Herne the Hunter (a popular mythical being of the time) and has visited Windsor Forest for a clandestine meeting. He is about to be exposed and humiliated before all! An on-looking 'Great Tit' is Falstaff's doppelgänger. Around his neck is a medallion picturing Queen Elizabeth; this is a nod-and-a-wink to his royal popularity. Someone loves him at least!



The wonderfully charismatic actor, Bernard Lefebvre

Othello

Artist: Iain Will



This painting depicts Othello looking out of an arched window onto a Venetian scene. His gaze is thoughtful and troubled. We see him reflected in a mirror hanging in his bedroom. Despite his rise to power, he is insecure and experiencing racial prejudice. He feels he is ageing and is also jealous of a supposed love rival. He has been led to believe, by devious Iago, that Cassio is pursuing his wife, Desdemona. In the foreground of the bedroom, we see Desdemona laid asleep on their bed. She rests her head on the very pillow that will soon smother her, at the hand of jealous Othello. Her strawberry embroidered handkerchief lays by her side. It is Othello's first gift to his wife (originally a gift from his father to his mother). We see the blood red of the strawberries in the foreground; Othello will end his own life with his dagger.

Much Ado About Nothing

Artist: Iain Will



The painting, based on the play *Much Ado About Nothing*, is set in the Trinity Church Theatre, New York. In the background we see the luxurious drapes that decorate the theatre and a door that leads to the back stage, where Don Pedro and Don Jon appear. They are backlit by a strong light which helps to draw our attention to them. They are important characters to this scene. Don Pedro (Tom O'Hare) is peering through the half opened door and he is looking at Beatrice. He is clearly delighted that his match-making is working; he has united Beatrice and Benedick in their love. His satisfied smile is testament to this. Don Jon (John Lichtwalt) is standing behind Don Pedro. He appears menacing and scheming and is watching the events before him. He is the illegitimate brother of Don Pedro and is melancholy and sullen by nature. He schemes to ruin the happiness of Hero and Claudio and is the villain of the play. His actions are motivated by his envy of his brother's social authority. Beatrice (Chelsea LeSage) is seen stage-left, facing the audience. She is in the foreground looking up with a beautiful beaming smile on her face. She has just heard Benedick declare his love for her and is overjoyed. She is also thinking that this might create a chance to get Benedick to avenge Hero, via a duel with Claudio. Benedick (Joshua Koehn) crouches on bended knee as he reveals his love for Beatrice. His hands are clasped in a pleading gesture. Their initial rejection of each other has transformed into true love.



The versatile film and stage actor, Chelsea LeSage

HENRY IV PART 1

By Dr Iain Will



We see two scenes, the first (Act I, scene 1) showing Henry IV (Tony Froud), and the second in the Boar's Head Tavern with Doll Tearsheet (Emma Scott) and Sir John Falstaff (Simon Russel Beale), in Act II, scene 4. On the left sits King Henry IV. He is looking disapprovingly across at his son Hal (Christopher Commander), future Henry V. Hal is not fit to become the next King yet, as he continually cavorts with Falstaff. Falstaff is recanting a fictitious account of his attack by an ever increasing number of assailants, after Hal and Poins (the originator of the plan) set a trap for Falstaff at Gad's Hill. Falstaff robs some merchants and pilgrims there, but then he himself is robbed by Hal and Poins, who are in disguise. They know Falstaff's account of events are ridiculously inflated lies. Hal smiles as he sees Falstaff pointing at his remembered assailants. Doll smiles as she looks on. She knows Falstaff, all too well. Hal is dressed in armour, which symbolises his transition into Henry V. He will ultimately abandon Falstaff; the King will eventually come to understand this.

Falstaff: 'These four came all afront, and mainly thrust at me. I made me no more ado, but took all their seven points in my target, thus'.

Prince (Hal): 'Seven? Why there were but four even now'.



Stage actor, Christopher Commander