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**Four hundred years have passed since William Shakespeare penned his last play. Yet his prose, plots and characters are as alive today as they were when the plays were originally staged during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Shakespearean works are required reading for high school English students and a course or two for college students who study writing or literature. The plays have been performed in almost every language, on stage and screen and at popular festivals around the world. Even in prisons, teachers find that Shakespeare offers contemporary connections that open pathways to learning for some of society’s most marginalized.**

For two of UTSA’s eminent literary scholars, the bard of Avon’s enduring appeal is an enduring topic as well. Alan Craven and Mark Bayer are frequently asked to explain Shakespeare’s staying power in the lore of literature. What is it about a long-dead poet and playwright that makes him such an important element of contemporary culture?

The answer is simple for Craven, a professor emeritus at UTSA who taught his first Shakespeare course back in 1965.

“He is the greatest dramatist, the greatest poet and the greatest prose writer in the history of the language,” said Craven, who teaches undergraduate courses in Shakespeare and has seen all of his plays performed at least once. “He has a presence like Lincoln or Washington in American history.”

The language is rich, the characters are complex and many of his basic themes – love, treachery, honor, bravery and political intrigue – still resonate today, said Craven.

Mark Bayer, an associate professor and chair of the Department of English at UTSA, agreed.

“There are two poles of debate about Shakespeare’s longevity,” said Bayer. “One is intrinsic to the plays’ universal appeal. But also, one could plausibly argue Shakespeare has been manufactured into what he is today through popular culture.”

Academia has helped fuel Shakespeare’s mystique by thoroughly incorporating his works into the standard curriculum for high school and college students, Bayer noted. High school students typically read one play each year. At least one class in Shakespeare is required for college English majors, which is one of the most popular academic programs on the UTSA campus, said Bayer. Outside of the classroom, there are movies, ballets, live theater and Shakespearean festivals. Even popular music and television commercials have been built around notable Shakespearean characters like Romeo and Juliet, Bayer added.

“A certain amount of Shakespeare’s notoriety is predicated on hype,” Bayer said.

Nonetheless, Shakespeare manages to shape the experience of many who have never even seen one of his plays, Craven said. Pretty much everyone knows the story of Romeo and Juliet, and most people can recite at least a couple lines from Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy. “A lot of people are affected by Shakespeare even though they don’t think that they know a lot about him,” Craven said.

Even in prisons, inmates who pursue educational opportunities regularly find lessons about Shakespeare and his plays. The Tragedy of Julius Caesar, a play about the conspiracy to assassinate the Roman emperor, is one of the works regularly used to introduce inmates to literature and learning, Craven said. The plot and themes involve murder, political treachery and justice. “These are all things that people in prisons would relate to and be interested in,” he added.

**A Man of His Times**

Still, Shakespeare most likely did not envision his works as fodder for high school English classes or inmates in distant centuries. He was a man of his times, writing for his contemporaries on topics that were the hot-button issues of his day.

Bayer teaches students to examine the historical context of the plays and the people they were written for. For example, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century British audiences, and indeed, the author himself, did not study nor understand human psychology as it is understood today. Yet the psychologically complex character of Hamlet made for a successful play because of its connections with ideas and events that were relevant to the people of Shakespeare’s time, Bayer said.

“They (early modern audiences) would enjoy the ghosts, the political intrigue, the murder plots, the nations at war. These were things that were on people’s minds at that time,” he said.

Humans still experience love, loss, be-trayal, war, humor and tragedy, which gives Shakespeare a foothold in modern times, Craven said. Still, the playwright wrote for live audiences, and Craven encourages students and other Shakespeare lovers to get out of the books and go see the plays in a theater.

“His plays were written to be performed. He conceived in them what an audience needs to know,” Craven said. “If we come at his plays from books and classrooms, we are doing it the wrong way.”

He laughed, recalling a recent experience of seeing Romeo and Juliet live in a theater that seemed to be filled with teenage girls. They sighed, moaned, giggled and cried as one throughout the production, something the professor delighted in.

“That is exactly the way Shakespeare intended for his plays to be experienced,” Craven said. “Shakespeare wanted audiences to react. He wanted people to cheer and boo at his characters.” These physical connections to Shakespeare are not as strong in San Antonio as in other areas of the United States, where summer months bring Shakespearean festivals or where there may even be local theater groups that focus on Shakespeare, said Craven.

Of course, England is the real heart of Shakespearean love and lore. No vacation to that country can be considered complete without a visit to Shakespeare’s hometown of Stratford-Upon-Avon. A tourist in London may be able to find three or four theaters simultaneously presenting different Shakespearean works, Craven noted.

Despite the limited opportunity to see performances in San Antonio, UTSA’s courses on Shakespeare remain popular with students, who gain appreciation for the lilting language and talent of an author from another era.

“The language is so dense, so rich, the first couple plays they read are difficult. Not because the language is archaic, but because it is semantically dense. You have to read the lines over and over,” said Bayer. But like anything else, time and effort bring an understanding, he said. “Students go into it because it is a requirement, but I do think they end up enjoying it.”

Perhaps some of those students will end up like Craven, who finds that Shakespeare forms a lens through which he sees life.

“I find myself quoting Shakespeare all the time,” he said. “There is almost always a quote for almost anything one wants to say.”