

Shakespeare's Plays **B1**



William Shakespeare wrote comedies, tragedies and history plays.

There are ten history plays that tell the stories of the kings of England in the years before the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the monarch in Shakespeare's time. History is written by the victors, and the plays generally present the Tudor kings, Elizabeth's ancestors, as the heroes.

Some of the tragedies are also about historical figures like Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, or Macbeth, King of Scotland. That play is considered unlucky by actors – apparently an actor died the first time it was performed. It is considered very unlucky to say “Macbeth” in a theatre (except in a performance), and actors call it “That Scottish Play”.

One of the most famous Shakespearean scenes is in Hamlet, when Hamlet is in a cemetery and picks up a skull. He addresses the skull (of a friend called Yorick), in a soliloquy: “Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him, Horatio...” Recent productions of the play at the Royal Shakespeare Company theatre in Stratford have used a real skull for the scene. A Polish pianist, André Tchaikowsky, left his skull to the company when he died, so he could participate in the play!

About half of Shakespeare's plays were published when he was alive. This was a new practice. Until that time, plays usually only existed in one manuscript copy. Actors learned large quantities of dialogue by heart and



A performance of Macbeth at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London.

the companies presented several plays a month. Today, most Elizabethan plays are totally forgotten. Seven years after Shakespeare died, his actor friends published all his plays in one book, the First Folio. That is why we have the original texts today.

Help

figure (n) famous person

Polish (n) from Poland

skull (n) the bones that protect

your brain, in your head

soliloquy (n) monologue

victor (n) the person who wins, who has a victory