

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, creator; Paul Edmondson and  
Anjna Chouhan, hosts. Shakespeare Alive

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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**Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, creator; Paul Edmondson and Anjna Chouhan, hosts.**

***Shakespeare Alive.***

Stratford-upon-Avon, England: Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, 2020–. Accessed 21 March 2023.

[shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/podcasts/shakespeare-alive](https://shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/podcasts/shakespeare-alive).

Though now nearing the age of maturity, podcasts retain something of their adolescent charm. A demotic form, podcasting is within reach for anyone with internet access and a recording device. Though “anyone” is not “everyone”—internet access is still a luxury, like running water—the relatively low barrier to entry positions podcasts as a DIY techno-craft.

Freely available to anyone with internet access and a rudimentary listening device, podcasts also require little investment on the listener’s part. They are meant to be enjoyed while doing something else—walking to work, tending your garden, stirring the risotto. They are, above all else, an incidental form. If they are unpolished, they are so by design. If they are unrewarding, they ask little in the first place. Low risk, sometimes high rewards. That is part of a podcast’s promise and pleasure.

In these terms, tuning in—to use an archaic phrase—to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust’s *Shakespeare Alive* podcast is like showing up at your community theatre and finding the English National Opera presenting *Die Fledermaus*. Lavishly produced and elegantly edited, *Shakespeare Alive* drips with prestige. Bumped by a chipper welcome and spritely music (think of the intro to PBS’s *All Creatures Great and Small*, but somehow, impossibly, even more cheerful), the episodes are alternatively hosted by the beautifully spoken and elegantly erudite Paul Edmondson and Anjna Chouhan, who engage performance practitioners and active academics in roughly half an hour of companionable chat about Shakespearean scholarship and performance.

The term “chat” is used advisedly (and by the Birthplace Trust in their own description of the podcast). If one stumbled across the *Shakespeare Alive* podcast out of context, you might well imagine you were listening to a BBC or NPR broadcast—say, Melvyn Bragg’s *In Our Time*<sup>1</sup> or Terry Gross’s *Fresh Air*. There is a high professional gloss to the episodes, however friendly and familiar

1. See Michael Ulliyot’s review in this issue.

the conversations turn. The result is to position the Shakespeare industry as a minor adjunct to the entertainment one. The fascination of the subject is never asserted, only assumed. The polish, ease, and confidence of the proceedings authorize the podcast as established, and as *establishment*, lending the prestige of Shakespeare to a newly established media.

Each episode features roughly 30 minutes of a plotted but unscripted exchange. Guests have obviously been prompted to think about some topics in advance, which provides a framing conceit and standard template for each episode. Whether actor or academic, guests open by addressing a foundational question: How did they get started with Shakespeare? The title—and execution—of episode 12, “Journeying with Shakespeare” with Islam Issa of Birmingham City University, is instructive. Dr. Issa recounts his journey from an “Egyptian child who knew no English” to an active, public-facing scholar who has published and broadcast on Shakespeare and terrorism and Milton in the Arab-Muslim world. Particularly apt in Issa’s case, “Journeying with Shakespeare” could serve as an adequate subtitle to the entire series.

After the episode begins with an inquiry into the guest’s origins with Shakespeare, it then turns to another prompt—an inquiry about the Birthplace Trust’s collection: What single object from the collection are you most drawn to? (On the website, listeners are urged to play along at home: “What do you think of their choices, and what would you choose?” with a live link to pursue the project.) Intentionally or not, the structure contours the conversation from a beginning with the guests’ youthful encounters with Shakespeare to the place of Shakespeare’s own youthful encounters, his home. Whatever happens in between these questions, the podcast is grounded in origins.

If there is a prevailing quality to these conversations (and “quality” is one of the podcast’s prevailing attributes), it is that they are above all friendly, gentle, and leisurely. They court no controversy and brook no anxiety. When actor Freddy Fox informs us that “there is no shadow side to the works of Shakespeare” (episode 24), it passes without challenge. Chouhan might at least have referred him—and listeners—to episode 1, “Shakespeare and Race” with Farah Karim-Cooper. Co-director of Education and Research at Shakespeare’s Globe, Karim-Cooper gently but firmly articulates the place of race in contemporary Shakespearean scholarship and performance. The listener who moves across the range of episodes might usefully bring the fruits of one conversation to bear upon another—say, using Karim-Cooper’s terms to interrogate Fox’s.

Tonally uniform, the conversations with artists and academics are distinguished by the differing ways and means of the creative and scholarly worlds—as well as, of course, the comfort of the guests with the interview format. Celebrities like Adrian Lesser and Fox give leisurely but crafted answers to inquiries, aware that even podcasts are commercial projects and need to pause on occasion to puff the product. Indeed, *Shakespeare Alive* pauses now and then to remind us to visit the Birthplace (fair enough, they are paying for the free podcast, which is available via the Web as well as Apple, Google, Spotify, etc.). Academic guests tend to be a bit more *discursive* in their answers, to put it politely.

The contrast between artistically pithy answers and academically expansive ones positions the podcast as an instructional resource for graduate students hoping to join the professoriate or scholars hoping for a public-facing profile. Even a brief sampling of the 24 episodes—or a scan of the free transcripts—would prove instructive to a student or scholar hoping to communicate complex matters cogently and concisely.

The podcast “lives” where Shakespeare lived, but how “live” is *Shakespeare Alive*? There’s no telling where the episodes are being recorded and no way of knowing, for that matter, whether the conversations are, in fact, “live” (in person) or being conducted by phone or other remote means. But the effect—or the illusion—is that the conversations are taking place in person *at the Birthplace* itself, giving the chat show the aura of originating presence, which radiates a comforting centrality throughout its various episodes, subtly centring the Trust as the premier sight for Shakespeare pilgrims around the world.

There is no evident tension, then—none—in the conversations with Karim-Cooper of Shakespeare’s Globe or Michael Witmore of the Folger Shakespeare Library. (The Folger has its own podcast—*Shakespeare Unlimited*—which is distinguished from *Shakespeare Alive* largely by accents, not execution.<sup>2</sup>) But if there exists even a subtly tense contest for centrality (the Globe has the stage, the Folger has the books), it is clear in the end, or by the end, that the Birthplace has the crèche. One of the things the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust wants you to trust is that it is in fact the birthplace of Shakespeare. The podcast reinforces this sense by bringing each guest’s journey with Shakespeare—wherever it began—back to its true beginning, to the birthplace of the artist who

2. See Sheila Coursey and Jess Hamlet’s review in this issue.

harbours these disparate voyages. All journeys—or journeyings—arrive back where it all started.

*TimeOut*'s review of the "50 Best Podcasts to Listen to in 2023" is preceded by a promise that each entry is "guaranteed to make you forget you're cleaning the house."<sup>3</sup> It's hard to think of another form—lyric poetry?—for which this might constitute praise. *Shakespeare Alive* does not make the *TimeOut* list (no Shakespeare in sight, in fact, among the top 50), but perhaps it is hard to forget you are cleaning the house when the podcast is so preoccupied with property.

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3. Kryza and Doyle, "50 Best Podcasts."