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Goldsmith, Lisa Ann, and Owen Thompson, creators and hosts. Bardcast: “It’s Shakespeare, You Dick!”

Molly Beth Seremet

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Goldsmith, Lisa Ann, and Owen Thompson, creators and hosts.

Bardcast: “It’s Shakespeare, You Dick!”

Independent, 2020–. Accessed April 2023.

buzzsprout.com/1136141.

In their description for *Bardcast*’s inaugural episode (“Filthy Shakespeare”), hosts Lisa Ann Goldsmith and Owen Thompson reach out to Shakespeare sceptics with this tantalizing invitation:

Were you ever sitting in high school English class, struggling to stay awake while listening to the theatre kids schmacting *Romeo and Juliet* out loud, and you hear a phrase that perks you up for a second? You think, “Was that a dick joke??? Nah, can’t be, it’s Shakespeare.” It WAS a dick joke! And there’s SO much more.

This playful energy and commitment to productive troublemaking suffuses *Bardcast*’s 74 (at the time of writing) free and widely available episodes, and Thompson and Goldsmith completely commit to the bit. As they remind listeners frequently, they are not bardolators, and this is exactly why their podcast is both successful with listeners and award-winning, having scooped up the 2021 New York Shakespeare Award for Best Podcast. In particular, Goldsmith and Thompson focus on the myriad of weird, hilarious, and occasionally disgusting contexts with which Shakespeare’s plays engage. *Bardcast* aims to attract folks who remember Shakespeare as boring and, over the course of its three-year run, has boasted a panoply of episodes that invite another look without ever proselytizing. Goldsmith and Thompson accomplish this by leveraging their shared expertise as seasoned and experienced theatre directors to keep the focus on what is playable, fun, and exciting about Shakespeare’s plays. Though they draw on a wealth of historical facts and clarifying context, their playfulness keeps listening to episodes from feeling like work. The hosts of *Bardcast* offer a well-calibrated dramaturgical deep dive into pockets of historical, political, and social history in balance with a healthy dose of authentic humour that never feels forced and, in so doing, have crafted a podcast that is immediately useful for sharing with students in and outside the classroom.

Goldsmith and Thompson have amassed a wide-reaching catalogue that thinks about interconnections between plays rather than emphasizing single

titles. The project's Buzzsprout page includes short but tantalizing summaries, though full episode transcripts are not available. Their catalogue is still growing, with a range of episode styles, most of which include discussion of multiple plays across 30 to 90 minutes. Episodes take on the dramaturgically topical ("Medical Shakespeare"; "Song and Dance Shakespeare"), modern performance practices ("Zoom Shakespeare"; "Adapted Shakespeare"), and Shakespeare in contemporary culture ("Punk Rock Shakespeare"; "Pride Shakespeare"), including episodes in which the hosts compete at Shakespeare-themed games like *Bards Dispense Profanity*, a play on the popular party game *Cards Against Humanity*. These last are not my favourite, especially as they sprawl in length and feel more like parties I'm listening to rather than participating in. That said, they work within the podcast's broader remit to relax our uptight thinking around Shakespeare's plays. They also include a terrific range of episodes covering film adaptations of heavy-hitting titles like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*. These episodes are especially effective at unpacking how practical dimensions of theatre making, such as casting, unfold across a range of versions of the same play. Here, Goldsmith and Thompson leverage their own directorial chops to good effect, and these episodes in particular would be great to share with students to introduce conceptual thinking around Shakespearean adaptation in contemporary practice. On the whole, *Bardcast's* catalogue is well-rounded, and, since most episodes deal with more than one play, a single episode affords a listener the chance to learn about a cross-section of Shakespeare's canon. It is also a podcast that teachers can nudge students towards confidently because it foregrounds fun in its pursuit of unpacking the "so much more" they identify in Shakespeare's plays.

The episodes that centre specific contextual topics are particularly strong. In "Medical Shakespeare," for example, the hosts lay out a neatly abridged history of medicine as a practice in early modern England that smoothly traverses legal, social, and practical dimensions. They unite these threads into a "a three-part system of orthodox medical practice" and then dissect the medical practitioners and maladies that Shakespeare incorporates across his canon. Though the episode briefly gets bogged down in a long alphabetical inventory of medical terminology, Goldsmith and Thompson keep it in check by weaving in key excerpts from Shakespeare's plays. I appreciate the nuance they bring to gender in this episode, especially in their close reading of *All's Well That Ends Well* and Helena's placement as a female practitioner of medicine. They usefully

draw in details about key historical figures such as Lady Grace Mildmay and think through the ways that misogyny shaped the early modern medical mindset. This is useful context, especially in unpacking Helena's role within the play and how much medical knowledge she has, beyond curing the King's fistula, and would be a great excerpt to share with students because it opens the aperture around women's knowledge and sphere of influence in the early modern period. On the whole, this and other topical intertextual episodes are the bedrock of the podcast, and they allow Goldsmith and Thompson to flex their multi-hyphenate muscles powerfully.

A key feature of *Bardcast*'s style is its intentional irreverence, which should in no way be construed as a lack of academic rigour. Thompson and Goldsmith are whip-smart, packing episodes with pithy insight, even and especially when the topic of the episode is an intentionally gross one (which they helpfully signal with preliminary warnings). Many of the episode's titles effectively leverage titillation to draw in a casual scroller. One such standout is "Cumming, Farting, Pissing, Shitting, Barfing Shakespeare." As promised by the title, Goldsmith and Thompson go deep into Shakespeare's dramatization of bodily functions with, in their words, "quite a bit of farting love." Over the course of the episode, however, they also offer excellent close readings that demonstrate how Shakespeare's bawdy body language creates meaning in performance. As part of the episode's discussion of "wind," for example, Goldsmith and Thompson work through the clown in *Othello* and ways in which his gaseous references might inform our understanding of the play's human dimensions. While the episode's grossout title might have lured me in, my curiosity was rewarded with fantastic facts about Shakespeare's baser humor(s) in close proximity to performance, and I suspect that students would be equally tickled to be invited to spend time with the elements of Shakespeare's bawdier body of work.

In addition to their core of topical episodes, *Bardcast* also branches out into alternate formats. There are a range of recent episodes in which Thompson and Goldsmith talk about performances that they saw on a trip to London and Stratford-upon-Avon in winter 2022. They share their thoughts, feelings, and delightful hot takes on performances including the all-female *Titus Andronicus* at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse and *As You Like It* at Soho Place. Their insights are keenly drawn and their acumen as working theatre practitioners are on full display in these recent offerings. These episodes represent an effective evolution for a podcast that began at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic as a sort of

supplement or stand-in for live performance and now has become a podcast that works reflexively in conversation with performance as well. As a teaching tool, then, *Bardcast* situates itself as a useful go-between for page and stage and takes its student-listeners along with edutainment in mind.

Bardcast knows its audience and wants us to feel included and informed without ever stooping to boredom as a tactic. Since *Bardcast* is an ongoing project, I'm especially excited to hear how their work with live performance will continue to evolve. Thompson and Goldsmith don't take their subject too seriously and are therefore able to deliver a remarkable wealth of contextual information through humour and relatability. As a fellow non-bardolater, I'm hooked.

MOLLY BETH SEREMET

Mary Baldwin University

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