

Pragnell Award 2019: Jerzy Limon

The Pragnell Shakespeare Birthday Award has been given annually since 1990 for ‘outstanding achievement in extending the appreciation and enjoyment of the works of William Shakespeare and in the general advancement of Shakespearian knowledge and understanding.’ Since Shakespeare is not only Britain’s greatest writer but the supreme playwright of the rest of Europe too, and is now the single most important dramatist worldwide – a fact on which the economy of Stratford continues to depend – the Pragnell is an international award. It is also an award which has recognized not only theatre practitioners but those other special friends of Shakespeare who, according to the epistle ‘To the Great Variety of Readers’ in the First Folio, will always be willing, should you mysteriously fail to enjoy reading the plays without help, to ‘be your guides.’ ‘If you need them not,’ Heminge and Condell conclude, ‘you can lead yourselves, and others: and such readers we wish him.’

Professor Jerzy Limon, OBE, is not only a major contributor to the international pyramid-selling enterprise initiated by the Folio, exactly such a reader as Heminge and Condell wished Shakespeare to have, but as impressive a theatrical entrepreneur as any since James Burbage. The author of ten major books, in Polish and in English, Jerzy belongs to that great succession of charismatic and learned scholar-teachers of Shakespeare who have indeed guided generations of readers to a richer enjoyment of the plays and poems, in the seminar room and in print. But as well as doing the most difficult, the most valuable, and the least well-rewarded job in the world – that of being a professor of Shakespeare studies – Professor Limon is also one of the great inspirational playhouse-builders and festival-founders in the long story of Shakespeare’s appreciation beyond the Anglophone world. (In fact, the name ‘Jerzy Limon is one that can be mentioned in the same sentence as that of David Garrick. There

– it just was). That story began in Shakespeare’s lifetime, and it began in the port cities of the Baltic, which troupes of touring English actors began to visit in increasing numbers during the early seventeenth century. To accommodate such companies, Professor Limon’s home city, Gdansk, even built the only fully public Renaissance playhouse on the European mainland, in configuration not unlike Shakespeare’s own Blackfriars theatre back in London.

Thanks to Jerzy’s scholarship, vision, and insane persistence, the foundations of that lost seventeenth-century theatre were located – inconveniently, under car park of the secret police headquarters; funds were raised; support was obtained; excavations were carried out; a stellar architect was employed; and since 2014 Gdansk has boasted the Teatr Szekspirowski, one of the most beautiful and magical of all the playhouses purpose-built for Shakespeare since the original Globe. For some productions, it is an austere, modern, indoor, proscenium-arch space; but at the touch of a button its raked seating will subside, a thrust stage will emerge, the whole roof will open, and suddenly you are in an Elizabethan innyard. There is something of Sam Wannamaker about all this, but also, delightfully, something of Gerry Anderson; and the Teatr Szekspriowski is only one of many venues at what has become one of the finest festivals of international Shakespearean performance in the world. Needless to say, the artistic director of the Gdansk Shakespeare Festival is the ever-tireless Jerzy Limon.

But do not feel you have to take just my word for Professor Limon’s significance to the history of Shakespeare’s appreciation worldwide. So high are some of the quarters from which Professor Limon was able to secure backing and encouragement for the creation of his theatre that at this point, in a break from the customary format of this ceremony, I am about to yield this microphone for a message from one of Jerzy’s greatest admirers; a message

which according to protocol can only properly be read out by the Lord Lieutenant of Warwickshire.

My lords, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to concur with these royal sentiments, and on behalf of the Pragnell family I hereby present the 2019 Pragnell Award to Professor Jerzy Limon.