

# *Bard* APPEAL

**After discovering there is not a single Shakespeare festival in the South West, these two women set about creating one**

**I**n 2023, two Exeter academics - Dr Judith Morgane and Dr Sarah Spencer - founded Lightbear Lane, an organisation that champions the arts not just as entertainment but as a powerful tool for community connection and personal wellbeing. Their mission was simple: to make the arts accessible to everyone, regardless of geography, background or circumstance.

Enter the first South West Shakespeare Festival, taking place from 24–26 April, which will bring together scholars, performers and audiences for a celebration of the Bard in the heart of the region.

The festival's founders are perfectly placed to lead the charge. Morgane, who holds a PhD in English Literature, has worked both on and off stage across Europe. After several years managing Cambridge Handel Opera, she

returned to Exeter, where she now helps shape cultural initiatives across the region.

Spencer, who holds a PhD in Art History, has built a career around community engagement and creative outreach in Devon. Following roles at the Royal Collection and Sotheby's, she established her own artistic practice aimed at widening access to arts, culture and heritage. Here, we spoke to Morgane and Spencer to find out more...

#### **How did the festival come about?**

Over the last few years, we have worked with several theatre companies to perform Shakespeare's plays in unusual places and bring theatre to places where there is little arts infrastructure.

The uptake and feedback has been fantastic and we've explored the idea of growing our work into an annual celebration of Shakespeare. We have a well-established

network of cultural partnerships, so we started planning a festival that involves not only performance but also focuses on literature and historical context.

#### **What is your vision for the festival?**

After some scoping work we found that there is not a single Shakespeare Festival in the South West and with our expertise and experience in performing and teaching Shakespeare, we saw an opportunity to start something that has the potential to address so many issues such as lack of literacy, and a worrying loss of oracy skills in young people.

Our vision for the festival is not just a celebration of Shakespeare's work and legacy or the chance for everyone to be enthralled by a performance and be inspired to take up a pen and write a poem. It goes much deeper: the festival can reposition engagement with culture and make the arts part of people's



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everyday lives as essential to individual wellbeing, building stronger, more empathetic communities and to understanding ourselves, each other and the world around us.

### What can audiences expect from this year's line-up?

We are really looking forward to Wild Thyme's performance of *The Merchant of Venice* - it's one of those plays that you can talk about forever, but nothing beats seeing it performed. There is also mezzo-soprano Iryna Ilnytska and pianist Alex Wilson's concert delving into music inspired by Shakespeare.

And that's just the performance element of the festival: Exeter Picturehouse will have a special screening of *Hamnet* for the festival, our heritage partners are opening their doors to share their Shakespearean treasures, there are the Young Poet Awards and a Campfire Shakespeare Special for writers to showcase their work.

### Can we look forward to any fresh or unexpected interpretations?

Definitely. Our performances will show Shakespeare from different and new perspectives. Taking the audience on a journey through different periods and musical styles will give a new understanding of the wide-ranging effects of Shakespeare and how his plays were interpreted. *The Merchant of Venice* is rather topical - antisemitism is part of the play's legacy and will challenge the audience to examine their own understanding of current political affairs.



### How does Exeter lend itself to a Shakespeare festival?

We think there's no better place to host the festival than Exeter, our UNESCO City of Literature here in the South West. With an international network of literary partners, we are bound to draw the attention of an audience far beyond the city.

And Exeter is full of Shakespearean artefacts, collections and Elizabethan heritage: the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, which houses the UK's biggest collection of cinema ephemera, will display a selection of their host of artefacts relating to Shakespeare on screen.

The Devon & Exeter Institution has a rare collection of Victorian illustrations of Shakespeare's plays, and then there is Shakespeare's Folio at the Exeter Cathedral Library and Archives. St Nicholas Priory is also presented as an Elizabethan merchant's house

(the parlour is stunning!) and we are looking forward to a food demonstration in their amazing kitchens. For those who like to explore the city's history on foot, there is the excellent Hidden Exeter app, which takes people on a trail of discovery of Elizabethan Exeter.

### Is this intended to become an annual event?

Absolutely! We are already planning next year's festival with many more partners. In five years' time, we hope to have national and international artists, speakers and audiences, all contributing to the local economy and supporting a cultural infrastructure that is rooted in community at the same time as having universal appeal.

For information on the South West Shakespeare Festival and other Lightbear events, head to: [lightbearlane.org](http://lightbearlane.org)

