



Australian Association for the Teaching of English

Citation for AATE Award for Distinguished Contribution to English Education 2015:

John Bell AO OBE, Co-Artistic Director, Bell Shakespeare

Presented at the AATE/ALEA National Conference in Canberra, July 2015

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In addition to their minds and bodies, English teachers are able to deploy a range of resources in their work. There are the traditional boards and books, though the boards now are almost invariably white and often interactive. There is also the cornucopia of digital resources available via the internet.

To support the study of dramatic literature, there are resources in the theatre world beyond the school and students can be taken to see live productions, although I acknowledge that this is mainly available to those who live in capital cities. Then there is the option of having theatre professionals visit schools.

When I taught in high schools in Queensland, we had access to touring groups operating under the auspices of the Queensland Arts Council – and I imagine that there are similar programs elsewhere in the country. Particularly in relation to helping bring Shakespeare to life for students, there are the home-grown Grin and Tonic Theatre Troupe, a long-standing institution in the sunshine state, and more recently, groups like Shake and Stir Theatre Company and Zen Zen Zo Physical Theatre.

It seems to me that Australian schools are well served in this regard. Let me illustrate from personal experience. During the 1990s, I was fortunate to have two, year-long teaching exchanges to high schools in North America. In 1991, I taught at Winston Churchill High School in Eugene in Oregon. If you haven't heard of Eugene, don't worry. I hadn't either prior to going there. But it's a medium sized city and the site of the University of Oregon (*Go the Ducks*). There is an excellent annual Shakespeare festival held during the summer at a small town in the south of the state called Ashland. Throughout a whole year, however, I heard no mention at all of the sort of theatrical visits to schools that I was familiar with at home.

Later in the 90s, I taught in Canada at a high school in the greater Toronto area. Now Toronto is a major city the size of Sydney and Melbourne and the province has a rich cultural life but, again, I saw no sign and heard no mention of visits to schools by theatrical groups.

That bit of preliminary context brings me to John Bell and the work of Bell Shakespeare.

John Bell has had an illustrious career in theatre and his achievements there have been acknowledged by appointment to the Order of Australia and the Order of the British Empire, in addition to a host of industry awards. His theatrical work has had a particular focus on the plays of Shakespeare as evidenced by his founding of the Bell Shakespeare theatre company.

Contrary to the jaundiced commentary that one sometimes reads in newspapers, Shakespeare continues to be an important element in English programs in schools across the country. Like the perhaps lesser known Queensland-based groups that I mentioned earlier, one aspect of the activities of Bell Shakespeare has involved excellent support for the study of Shakespeare in schools. Indeed, the company has played a leading role in this space and its reach has extended across the country. A visit to the groups's website indicates the richness of its educational program – in schools themselves, in theatres, and in the area of professional learning for teachers. For several years I was pleased to be involved in rating applications from Queensland teachers for its regional teacher-scholarship program that brought teachers from around Australia to Sydney for a period of concentrated study and experience designed to enhance the work they did with students in their own school sites.

Towards the end of last year, the AATE national council determined that it wished to acknowledge the very valuable support that John Bell's work over many years has provided to English teaching in Australia by conferring on him *The AATE Award for Distinguished Contribution to English Education*.

The notion was to express the appreciation of English teachers for the way that his efforts through the work of Bell Shakespeare have supported their work in schools. And we thought it particularly appropriate to make such an award in Bell Shakespeare's 25th anniversary year and at a time when its founder is preparing to hand over the reins.

It is in recognition of John Bell's contribution to English education in Australia that AATE proudly confers this Award.