Review: That Shakespeare Life

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Project

That Shakespeare Life

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Project Overview

Cassidy Cash

That Shakespeare Life is a weekly interview-based podcast that invites listeners to sit down with globally recognized guests and learn about the real life and history of William Shakespeare as he would have lived it in turn of the 17th century England. The show helps listeners understand the history of Shakespeare’s life so they can better enjoy his plays.

Each episode has a single historical focus. Episodes explore popular foods, common clothes, now-obsolete games, and household implements, while also delving into more cultural items like major events, key figures, superstitions, religion, and even idiomatic expressions or antiquated words. Most of the topics have direct textual connections with Shakespeare’s plays, which is shared on the show.

The guests on That Shakespeare Life have published professionally on the topic they discuss. Beforehand, Cassidy Cash researches the work of each guest. Guests are then invited to visit for a 10-question conversation typically based on their most recent publication. During the show, guests promote their work both as a way to provide credibility for their interview and to make sure listeners have reliable resources available when they want to explore the topic further.

The show does a serious and in-depth exploration of historical research while housing that analysis in an upbeat, fun, and light conversation where laughter and merriment are regular visitors to each show. The balance of research with entertaining and pleasant conversation allows the show to be useful for students, scholars, and historians across a wide spectrum of experience.

The show aims to help listeners learn something new about The Bard. Strictly historicist in approach, That Shakespeare Life sets itself apart from other Shakespeare podcasts by intentionally avoiding literary criticism.
and performance history, focusing instead on the exploration of narrow historical topics through short form episodes, usually 30 minutes or less in length. The show extends its historical focus to its funding model, which is supported in part by listeners who sign up to be patrons of the show, which is the same way William Shakespeare funded his work during his lifetime.

Patrons who support the show are treated to behind-the-scenes extras, including visual content not available on the podcast like woodcuts, artifacts, or paintings that demonstrate topics discussed, as well as ebooks, worksheets, and other classroom resources that coordinate with the show and with Shakespeare’s plays. Due to the patronage of listeners, the show is available to listen anywhere in the world completely commercial-free. *That Shakespeare Life* is ranked as the #2 Shakespeare history podcast in the world by *Welp Magazine*, right after the Folger Shakespeare Library’s, and has been featured in major history publications including *History Magazine*, *Historians Magazine*, and *History Hit*.

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**Project Review**

**Darren Freebury-Jones**

*That Shakespeare Life* is a highly entertaining, accessible, and informative podcast series. Its episodes encompass interviews with internationally renowned scholars on a vast range of topics pertaining to 17th century England. Audio episodes, published weekly and usually around 30 minutes in length, are available directly on the project website and can be streamed (or downloaded for offline listening) on platforms including Apple Podcasts, Podbean, and Spotify. In some instances, weekly episodes also feature interviews as video recordings available on Youtube.

Each episode on the project website is complemented by a range of useful materials including: episode synopses, guests’ biographical information, teasers of questions posed by project lead and host Cassidy Cash, and lists of further reading on the episode’s topic. These lists offer interviewees invaluable opportunities to promote academic scholarship. Subscribers to the podcast’s Patreon receive bonus features such as ebooks, worksheets, archival images, and maps.

As a result, That Shakespeare Life is steeped in scholarship. *Cash’s website* serves as not only a platform hosting hundreds of podcast episodes, but also as an engaging blog of great use for general audiences as well as students, teachers, and researchers. I would suggest that each episode’s blog post be checked by a professional proofreader or that the pre-publication draft is shared with the guest to avoid minor errors such as “Tamberlaine” instead of “Tamburlaine,” or unitalicized play titles.

Beyond the podcast and blog, the website boasts additional resources including talking head videos with Cash, which can be located by clicking the “DIY History” tab on the podcast website and discusses topics like, “Did
Shakespeare have a first job?” and “Did Shakespeare use a graphite pencil?” Cash also produces economical three-minute videos depicting the plots of Shakespeare plays with a commendable lightness of tone.

This light tone also appears in the podcast interviews with Cash, who is an Associate Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in London and deserves recognition for her contributions to history. In interviews, Cassidy always poses astute questions that benefit knowledge-hungry ears, working closely with guests to increase understanding and ensure that both listeners and interviewees are comfortable. The episodes reveal the breadth of her research skills on such diverse topics as the circumstances behind Shakespeare’s death, mandrakes, Epiphany Eve celebrations, and cony-catching. During recordings, Cassidy draws from a script shared with interviewees but often takes an extemporaneous approach that adds spontaneity to each episode and enhances the listening experience.

Gary Maholm, who serves as professional audio engineer for the project, ensures that production values of the podcast are high. The audio quality of recordings is consistent and episodes are well-edited. On very rare occasions, there are some small gaps in dialogue or dips in volume, due to minor internet connectivity issues during recording. However, this is not unexpected in podcasts today and does not detract from the listener experience. Cash does everything possible to ensure a high quality of initial recording by advising guests to wear headphones and to seek a recording area where internet access is at its strongest.

Despite containing a vast range of educational content, the website is easy to navigate through its menu, which also includes an option to procure extra content via a membership scheme in which listeners can act as patrons for the show. There are five membership levels in total, ranging from “Loyal Podcast Listener” at £5 per month to “Official producer” at £46 a month.

I would encourage readers to consider lending their ears and support to this show, which has featured in major history publications worldwide and is rightly ranked by Welp Magazine as a top Shakespeare history podcast behind the Folger Shakespeare Library’s. Its commercial-free podcast episodes have been praised by listeners, guests, and globally recognized scholars and creatives. That Shakespeare Life is the ideal blend of detailed research and light conversations on topics pertaining to Shakespeare, his life and times, exhibiting clever textual connections to his works and providing invaluable resources for listeners and users across a wide spectrum of research interests, backgrounds, and experience.