Shakespeare the Comic: An interview with Nick Craine

Written by Adam A. Donaldson

Guelph-based illustrator Nick Craine has carved out quite the niche for himself as one of Canada's premiere graphic novelists. His past projects have included the Hard Core Logo adaptation, Portrait of a Thousand Punks, and his collaboration with Scott Mooney Parting Ways. For his latest novel, Craine reached back to the past, 16th century England to be precise, in order to tell the tale of a young playwright from Stratford-upon-Avon who revolutionized the theatre business for centuries to come. Parchment of Light: the Life and Death of William Shakespeare is an exclusive to the MacDonald-Stewart Art Centre at the University of Guelph as part of the Shakespeare: Made in Canada festival. I recently got the chance to talk to Craine about interrupting the man and the myth of Shakespeare for the comic shelf.

AAD: Where did the idea to do a graphic novel about Shakespeare come from and how did you get involved?

Nick Craine: Lewis Melville, who works at the University of Guelph, is a friend of Daniel Fischlin and the two of them were starting to cook up this whole Shakespeare Made in Canada thing. Lewis asked me if I’d be interested in doing a graphic novel adaptation of a Shakespeare play and I immediately said “No way” because it seemed to me that theatre is an oral medium and comics are these static images. So it didn’t make sense to try and transpose one thing onto the other. But the idea would not go away and I thought that maybe there’d be something worthwhile in creating a biography. The more I thought about it, Shakespeare back in the day, was something of a sewer rat, coming out of the countryside, living a farmers life, wandering into the big city where he decided to try and make a living working in the gutter of the arts. And in my mind and popular culture’s mind, comic books are currently the gutter of the arts. Of course I don’t really believe that, but that’s the stigma.
How did you approach the story because not a lot is known about Shakespeare’s life?

Basically, I’m using Shakespeare as a giant jacket or a coat. You can’t disconnect yourself from your artwork no matter what people say. I am also talking about what I think of the world and what human beings are about using Shakespeare as a vehicle. You’re right though, not much is known so the challenge for me is to try and create episodes around what is known about the facts of his life and then work in all sorts of sidebar pieces. Like in the excerpt there’s a sequence where he searches for tadpoles in a pond and who knows if it actually happened in real life but in my mind it’s a very useful storytelling moment that can mean a lot of other things. My personal agenda is to paint a portrait of a guy that is trying to get ahead in the world and gain some sort of credibility and bring credibility to this terrible medium called the theatre.

What kind of research have you done?

I read a number of biographies. There’s the Scoenbaum biography that collected the sort of definitive facts of Shakespeare’s life called *Shakespeare: A Documented Life* and all academics sort of point to this as a sort of “these are the facts, nothing else is proven.” Then there’s Stephen Greenblatt’s biography *Will in the World*, which gives the facts and then asks all these conjectural questions. The *Oxford Shakespeare Companion* has also been very useful. So there are those and then there’s his entire canon which I haven’t even touched. There’s so much to do to get to the end of this work and basically, I’ve just cracked the surface in order show publishers that this is what the book will look like. It’s a strange sort of challenge, but I’ll tell you that the artwork is a strange sort of pallet that I’m working with, this green, sort of jell-o-y pallet. In Shakespeare’s world you can spend a lifetime trying to figure out what the colour of something should be and the emotional content of that is useless in my mind at the end of the day when you’re reading a graphic novel.

Having said that, I’d like to introduce full colour for certain moments about two-thirds of the way into the work. The whole thing with *Parchment of Light* is that it’s about light emanating from the stage and light emanating from inside a human being. Everyone, when they’re deconstructing Shakespeare, reads all the plays and try to figure out who he was from his work. But my station is that in order to know anyone, you have to know yourself and you have to look inside the dark corners of yourself and figure out who you are a human being and that might be a template to show how other people are. I haven’t achieved that by any means but that’s the goal of the work.
How has working process differed in working on this as opposed to your past graphic novels?
Well, I’ll tell you with Hard Core Logo it was a real experiment in collage. The source material it was adapted from was also a real collage, a type of music video narrative so I was trying to keep the work as textural and as interesting and engaging to keep attention to the story and have a relationship with the source material it’s based on. But in the end I find that all the clever asides became to distracting and they overshadowed what was happening in the picture and in the moment. With this work I’m trying to also have interesting approaches in how to tell this story, but I’m trying to make them more invisible so that I can see the mechanics of it but the reader won’t necessarily so much.

This a work in progress, so do you have a timetable in when we might be able to see the finished work?
Not really, there’s still a great deal of work to do. I’m an illustrator for a living so there are quite a few things that I’m juggling and taking on that little chapter took a bit of effort. But to get to that point I had to spend a year reading stuff and messing around with stuff in my head before I even started drawing. As for timeline, there are a couple of publishers in Europe, Britain and Toronto that are looking at it and I’m hoping that I can get someone to make a commitment to it, because it’s like a 300-page undertaking and a great deal of work. If the right publisher were to make that commitment then I guess that in two or three years I might be able to have it done. But I’m thinking of breaking it into two or three pieces, so that in a few years you’d get the first 100 pages and then the year after another 100 pages or something like that. It’s still kind of formative.

The Parchment of Light preview is available at the MacDonald-Stewart Art Centre in Guelph or through Nick Craine’s website www.nickcraine.com