

***Blank Verse* web series dramatizes history's most famous dramaturge**

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From left to right, Claire Hesselgrave, Xander Williams and Emma Middleton are all UBC BFA grads and play the three leads, Chris Marlowe, Will Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, in *Blank Verse*. Photo courtesy of The Blank Slate.

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It is a crisp Friday afternoon, and you are simmering over coffee on a heated patio with Ben Jonson, Thomas Kyd and Richard Burbage. You observe that Jonson has a penchant for latte art, while Burbage is partial to cinnamon pastries.

Actually, you're with Emma Middleton, Matt Reznick and Andrew Lynch, who each play the respective Renaissance playwrights, and play-actor, in *Blank Verse* — a new web series produced by UBC MFA theatre alumna Amanda Konkin, which re-imagines Shakespeare's life and art in the twenty-first century. It's a meta-theatrical moment.

Missing from the scene is William Shakespeare — evocatively portrayed by Xander Williams — as a brooding and ambitious college freshman, composing sonnets on his MacBook and posting them on Tumblr and Twitter. It was an intentional production decision to position Shakespeare away from the spotlight; instead, his literary contemporaries command the centre stage.

Konkin seeks to translate the archetypal artist's story into a modern collegiate setting, to make it relatable and accessible.

"*Blank Verse* is filmed through the lens of how the people around Shakespeare influence his life and work," said Konkin. "I wanted to focus on the artistic development of Shakespeare, Jonson and Marlowe, and their struggles to become great writers.

"What fascinates me is that there is so much we don't know about Shakespeare. We think we know a lot about him, but we usually try to come up with facts," Konkin added.

"People talk a lot about Shakespeare, but he is still very much an enigma, and we often overlook that he was surrounded by tons of other really great writers."

"*Blank Verse* is about the people around Shakespeare who are influencing him, rather than about Shakespeare exclusively," said Laura Fukumoto, costume director for *Blank Verse* and a senior theatre and design undergraduate at UBC. "A writer is made from other environmental factors: what that person observes in relationships, and who are the people influencing him.

"These are entire stories based on historical events, which is a cool angle to come in from as we examine who the people in his life are historically. At the root of what we're doing, we are presenting and providing access to history."

Costumes play an important role in *Blank Verse*. “There are interesting opportunities for storytelling [through costumes] that the audience might not necessarily pick up on the first time,” said Fukumoto, “but every single background character that shows up on screen is a character, whether it’s historical or inspired by Shakespeare’s work.”

In the prologue of *Blank Verse*, for instance, audiences can discern Othello offering a handkerchief to a classmate; in a later episode, attentive viewers will observe Lady Macbeth trying to rid herself of scarlet ink in the background.

In other ways, the web series is both an accomplished theatrical piece and a genuine cinematic pleasure. Converging modern media with the rich intertextuality of the Renaissance, *Blank Verse* interweaves speeches and scenes from both Shakespeare’s life and his early plays — such as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Titus Andronicus* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost* — to reflect his youthful promise. The series also positions him as a contemporary of Christopher Marlowe, at the height of the latter’s *Faustus* fame. The result is, simply, magical.

“Shakespeare is not meant to be read, but to be seen and heard,” said Matt Reznek, who plays Thomas Kyd. “A whole language was invented because Shakespeare wanted to convey images and emotions through the way things sounded and felt.”

Reznek, who graduated from the BFA acting program this year, spoke of his first encounter with the playwright: “I was a shy kid, but when I was given a Shakespeare text in elementary school, the words had to come off the page. In doing that, I had to do something I could feel. I could use the words to perform. It was both performative and transformative.”

Of course, *Blank Verse*’s version of history has been creatively embellished. Perhaps one of the more delightful anachronisms in the world of *Blank Verse* so far is in “Act II Scene III,” which alludes to Thomas Wyatt hosting an Allen Ginsberg poetry reading while Marlowe and Jonson break into Elizabeth Tudor’s office to steal an unpublished manuscript (the royal monarch recrowned as head of the creative writing department in *Blank Verse*’s ahistorical university).

The intertextuality will delight theatre aficionados and literary connoisseurs alike. “You don’t have to be a Shakespeare nerd, but if you are you will get all the inside jokes,” said Andrew Lynch, who plays Richard Burbage. Lynch is also the casting director behind the inspired choice to cast women as Marlowe and Jonson.

And what about the story behind the project’s title itself — which dignifies Shakespeare’s subtle wit?

“*Iambic Pentameter* was a mouthful, and it sounded pretentious,” laughed Reznick. “No one will read your writing if it sounds pretentious.”

New episodes of Blank Verse air every Sunday at <http://blankverse.tv> (<http://blankverse.tv>) through Dec. 29, 2013.