

**Such Stuff podcast**  
**Bonus: Literature as Friendship**

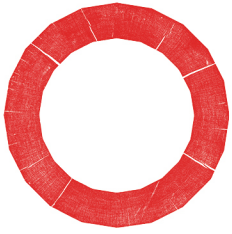
[Music plays]

**Imogen Greenberg:** Hello, I'm Imogen Greenberg and welcome to another bonus episode of Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe. This summer, for the very first time, we held Sonnet Sunday here at the Globe. Bringing together community groups to join with the actors in our sonnet ensemble, it was a chance to hear all 154 of Shakespeare's sonnets. Just before Sonnet Sunday, we snuck into rehearsals with Athena Stevens and three poets who met through an organisation called CoolTan Arts, as they worked on Sonnet 29. So, without further ado, meet the team...

[Music plays]

**Rummer:** Hi, my name's Rummer. I joined CoolTan Arts in March this year. As a form of therapy, I was doing visual arts, textiles and joined the poetry group where I met Gary and Charlie. I tried out poetry as a form of expressing myself in order to heal from some challenges I was facing in my life and I found it was a great way of talking about things that were affecting me but without offending others because it was known to be a form of art. I keep writing poetry because I'm suffering from... well, I have depression. It's now my friend, but it never used to be. And I also experience anxiety and sometimes when things become unbearable, I just put some thoughts on paper and if it works out to be a poem in the end then I feel like I've achieved something. So for me, it's a way of balancing my depression and anxiety and using that as a means to helping me produce something positive.

[Music plays]



**Gary:** I'm Gary, and we attended CoolTan Arts for about nine to ten years. I started off getting into poetry by wanting to do something that I could occupy my mind... like a hobby and poetry was very good because all you need is a pencil and a piece of paper and it doesn't cost a lot of money. And at school when you're young, the first thing you learn is nursesey rhymes and they never leave you and I think that you can say anything you want in poetry, possibly not in stories, but in poetry you can say anything and people get offended you can say 'well, it's poetry, what do you expect?'. And it releases stigma and labels on people and it's a freedom of speech.

[Music plays]

**Charlie:** Hi, my name's Charles. I've been at CoolTan for about ten years, doing poetry. In 2005, I had a long period in hospital and I started writing in hospital, really, and then it just carried on when I left hospital.

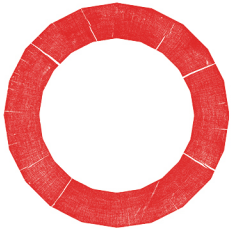
[Music plays]

**IG:** They've been writing their own poetry for years, and have worked with acclaimed poets and facilitators. But they've never worked with Shakespeare before...

**C:** We know about Shakespeare but we didn't really understand it until Athena kind of explained a sonnet to us and we kind of got it.

**R:** A lot of what Shakespeare is saying makes a lot of sense. But it doesn't when you look at it on the surface.

**R:** I think when I was at school, I think if I'd said 'I want to look at Shakespeare today', I think I wouldn't have got out of school in one piece. It wasn't really taught well at my schools that I attended. I knew of Shakespeare, but I didn't know



about Shakespeare until Athena explained Shakespeare. And then I started to actually enjoy it, and now I can even remember three lines so I must be doing good.

[Laughter]

[Music plays]

**IG:** Director Athena Stevens chose the sonnet, and worked with Charlie, Gary and Rummer on bridging that gap that they felt between themselves and Shakespeare...

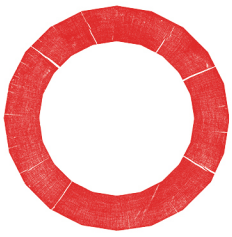
**Athena Stevens:** As a director, I knew coming in with this group that I was working with poets, and I wanted to respect these three as poets and I wanted to give these three tools that they could then turn around and use in their own poetry. So in my mind this was from Day 1 about teaching the form that is a sonnet, including the twist as we call it at the end. And then going: 'What do you see? What can you relate to? What grabs your attention and sings to your heart?' There's that wonderful quote by Alan Bennett that talks about literature as a form of friendship because you hear something, read something and you go 'I thought I was the only one that felt that way'. So finding those moments first, and who relates to what lines individually, as poets and as people in London. So that you can then turn around and perform it and say, 'This story is my story as well.'

[Sonnet 29]

**C:** When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone bewep my outcast state,

**R:** And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,

**G:** And look upon myself and curse my fate,



**R:** Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,  
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,

**C:** With what I most enjoy contented least;

**G:** Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,  
Haply I think on thee,

**C:** and then my state,

**R:** Like to the lark at break of day arising  
From sullen earth

**G:** sings hymns at heaven's gate;

**R:** For thy sweet love remembered

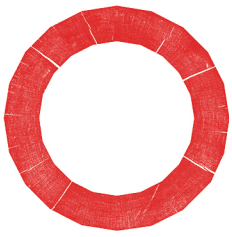
**C:** such wealth brings

**G:** That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

[Music plays]

**IG:** So what was it in Sonnet 29 that they related to? And why did Athena choose it?

**R:** I think the first two lines of the poem really stand out to me. I think everyone in their life at one point or another has been at a point where they've felt like they weren't good enough or other people are achieving things and they are not, they might feel like a failure. And they look around at the friends who are maybe progressing further in life than they are or they look at the things that they don't have as opposed to all the things that they do



have and they feel miserable and sad. Not looking at what other people have, and how full other people's plates are, but looking at what you have, and what you can do with the things you have, all the privileges you have to help improve other people's lives that may not have as many privileges as you.

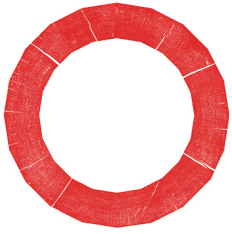
**AS:** I relate to it. I did during my time at RADA, and it just always sticks in my head more than the other 150-odd sonnets because I think it is so much about our tendency to compare ourselves with other people and the reassessing of how we value ourselves, as opposed to what we want to be, that is ultimately out of our control. There's very little in life that we can control, but if we focus on that, all of a sudden the world becomes much less unwieldy.

[Music plays]

**IG:** Sadly, CoolTan Arts closed earlier this year due to a lack of funding, leaving Charlie, Gary and Rumer without their weekly sessions and the structured support of the charity.

**C:** It was somewhere we went to get inspired and it's no longer here but we're trying to carry on and inspire each other.

**G:** It was going for 25 years, and Charlie and myself had been there for 10 years and Rumer a lot less than us, but still the same feelings as us, in a short time/ a long time. And it was a place where you could go as a group and get together and get things off your chest. And then you go one week for an open night to see your work being put out to the public, and told on that night that in two weeks' time it would be no more, and the reason being, lack of funding. And this seems to be a big thing with a lot of charities now and it's such a shame, because even the government are saying that mental health is so important at the moment but where are the people to keep

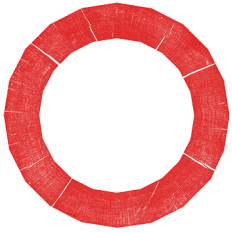


these organisations, these charities going to help people. The reason why us three are together is because we won't let it drop, we'll just carry on ourselves, we don't, if they're going to help us, we help ourselves.

**R:** I remember CoolTan Arts, even though I wasn't there for very long, gave me structure in my week. I was also volunteering there and when CoolTan Arts closed down, I not only lost a lot of support I was getting there from the facilitators but the structure in my life that I needed. So I had to kind of rebuild what I want to do. Although I haven't been there as long as these two have, I have felt the positive impact of the service that CoolTan Arts were providing and it's such a shame. You know every time a door closes, another, you have to look for another window or a door, and you know, it's going to be there.

**AS:** I think, as a writer myself, I believe that we need to keep funding the arts, and keep funding mental health services because part of writing is naming the unnameable, and part of what is really hard of anyone's mental health is when have feelings in situations that you can't name and you don't exactly know what's going on, and it feels quite nebulous. And so in my mind the creativity and the hardcore thinking, because it is actually thinking, that takes place when you take your problems and commit words to them on paper, is something that helps us all: in the political area, which I also work in, in the arts, at home. When you can something that has happened to you and use the words to adequately express it, then your brain starts to reorganise itself and move on, rather than ruminating and going into spirals.

[Music plays]



**IG:** That's it from this year's Sonnet Sunday, but it'll be back next year!

You've been listening to Such Stuff, with me Imogen Greenberg. Our theme music is from the album Mali in Oak, which was recorded in our very own Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. To find out more about Shakespeare's Globe and what's on, follow us on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. We'll be back with more stories from Shakespeare's Globe so subscribe wherever you got this podcast from. And that's exactly why we work in theatre, to kind of question and bring to light and put a mirror up to that and go, "Look, this is where we are. What does that mean?" And not say anything, not try and control it, but just ask a question and go, "This is against your expectations of what the Ophelia in your head should be. This is very different. How does that make you feel? Can you accept that? Can you get beyond a hairy chest? Or can you not really see the human underneath?" And I think especially today in our time right now, we should be working as hard as we can to see the human underneath the exterior. So I totally believe that anyone should be playing any part. That would be the most liberating human experience for an actor, and if someone can get past that for an audience as well. It would be a true recognition of humanity beyond race, beyond disability, beyond every exterior sort of label.