Ten Things You Didn’t Know About . . .

Shakespeare
By Eric Rasmussen

1. Shakespeare invented nearly 2,000 words, including critic, exposure, fixture, housekeeping, hurry, laughable, lonely, Olympian, puke and road.

2. Shakespeare’s wife was eight years older than the playwright — and three months pregnant when they got married.

3. Charles Jennens, an 18th century editor of Shakespeare’s plays, wrote the libretto to Handel’s Messiah.

4. Howard Staunton, another Shakespearean editor, invented the design of modern chess pieces.

5. Archeologists have found early clay pipe fragments near Shakespeare’s house in Stratford-upon-Avon that show traces of marijuana and other hallucinogenic substances.

6. At a performance of Macbeth in 1672, the actor playing the title role apparently used a real dagger and murdered the actor playing Duncan.

7. The actors in Shakespeare’s company didn’t get a copy of the full script, just the lines spoken by their character written on a narrow strip of paper that could be rolled up, which became known as the actor’s “role.”

8. King Lear, with its portrayal of a mad king, was banned on the London stage from 1788 to 1820 because of the real insanity of the reigning monarch, King George III.

9. All of Uranus’s 21 moons are named after Shakespearean characters.

10. In the 46th Psalm in the King James Bible, which was printed when Shakespeare was 46 years old, the 46th word is “shake” and the 46th word from the end is “spear.” Proof positive, some argue, that Shakespeare wrote the Bible!

Eric Rasmussen, English professor, University of Nevada, Reno, is one of two editors chosen by the Royal Shakespeare Company to edit The RSC Complete Works of Shakespeare as an official edition to accompany a Shakespeare stage extravaganza currently playing in Stratford-upon-Avon, England.