

“To Perform or Not to Perform?” A Question Worth Exploring

GINNY GRAHAM

Are you going to make us act out Shakespeare like they did last year?” During the first week of school, as I am going over my year plan, at least one of my new ninth graders raises this question. When I assure the students that, yes, they too will be playing with scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* during our fourth quarter Shakespeare unit, anxiety and excitement animate the class. I am not surprised that my new students know to ask, since they were audience members for the final scenes some of my ninth graders do every June in a small performance space at our school that we call the “Black Box.” Inevitably, after this

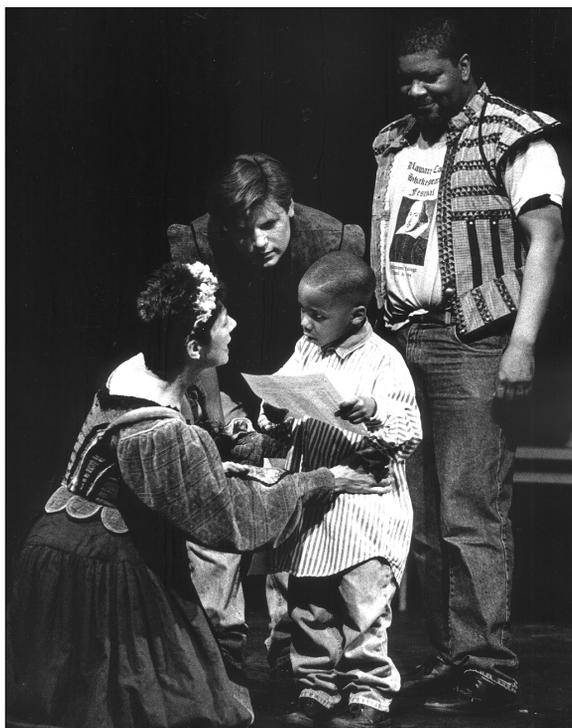
initial conversation, a few students seek me out privately after class and insist that they will not be able to perform a Shakespearean scene for me. “I don’t act,” is what I hear. “If I wanted to, I’d be taking drama.” I’ve been teaching Shakespeare using film and performance-based methods for over ten years to a diverse population of ninth graders. Because year after year even these would-be evaders become absorbed and enlivened by activities centered around Shakespeare’s text, I would never teach Shakespeare any other way.

Teachers Learning How to Play

In “Three Dimensional Shakespeare,” actor/director Michael Tolyado articulates what a paltry experience merely reading a Shakespearean play can be. He reminds us that the plays were meant to be performed and that an audience depends on “words, pauses, vocal and technical sounds, movement, music, facial expressions, gestures . . . lighting, actors, costumes, and more” to contribute to our understanding of the material (27). Why, then, should barely prepared student readings be the centerpiece of a Shakespearean unit? When I began to teach, this was the predominant model, and, while I would call it many things,

dynamic it is not. The idea that a Shakespeare unit could be fun was an oxymoron, yet fun is the only way I can describe this active and revolutionary approach.

I went armed with notebook and pen to workshops conducted by Peggy O’Brien and Kevin Coleman at the Folger Library’s Teaching Shakespeare Institute in Washington, DC, in the early nineties. It didn’t take long for me to realize that note-taking would not be part of the Folger approach to teaching Shakespeare. They had both teachers and students up on their feet and fully engaged in playing with what Tolyado, one of the creators of this approach, refers to as a process for getting Shakespearean scenes “from page into performance” (31). We did interactive warm-ups that served several purposes. Not only did we learn ways to understand Shakespeare’s language, but we also felt more confident and less self-conscious using it. Before the day-long workshop was over, we performed a scene complete with costumes, props, and blocking. I remember O’Brien pointing out that research scholars are involved in explicating Shakespeare’s *work*, but suggested that our classrooms could be a place where students meet him in the *play*. I left both exhilarated and informed by an experience that transformed the way I design my Shakespeare units.



A performance from Shakespeare's Birthday Celebration at the Folger Shakespeare Library. Photo by Julie Ainsworth.

I was thrilled with the publication of *Shakespeare Set Free*, a collection of articles and activities to inspire and guide teachers interested in this creative approach. It has been an invaluable resource for me as I introduce my students to Shakespeare through performance. Informed by the work of the Teaching Shakespeare Institute, it gives teachers permission to branch out in quest of what O'Brien calls "even grander, more meaningful learning experiences for all kinds of students" who are challenged by Shakespeare's plays (xiv). My intention here is not to describe the excellent activities from the Folger series. Those resources stand on their own and deserve to be read as a primary source of information and inspiration. In my mind, there is no question as to the soundness of a method when ninth graders equate ten weeks of Shakespeare with pleasure. I present my experience as a kind of case study of what it looks and sounds like when "doing" Shakespeare is in the foreground of instruction and "play" is the thing that makes that happen.

Playing before the Play

As a classroom teacher of both English and creative writing, I'm among many who know that not only

are classrooms places where students can discover their imaginations, but that, when well cultivated, imagination acts as a bridge to knowledge. Coupled with this idea is my belief that sound educational practices activate not only students' minds, but their bodies, hearts, and spirits. The performance approach validates my philosophy and encourages me to look for opportunities to balance my rigorous reading and writing curriculum with opportunities for dynamic expression.

During the course of the year, I try to fit in opportunities for doing skits or "Reader's Theater" type encounters with fiction as more expansive ways to explore the human story. I also expose students to memorization and the satisfaction of knowing things "by heart." Both of these goals help students lose some of the self-consciousness they can feel about being expressive. Since the final activity of my Shakespeare unit is for my students to interpret and memorize a scene of their choice through costumes, blocking, props, and the use of complex, iambic pentameter, it is only fair for me to lay some preliminary groundwork.

Usually in second quarter I ask them what, if anything, they have committed to memory. Typical responses include some Shel Silverstein, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, the Declaration of Independence, and the like. Everyone who wants to gets a chance to show off and recite, and I try to get everyone to participate. This becomes a pivotal class because of the genuine appreciation and admiration that surface for people who have anything memorized. Because many fourteen-year-old kids are walking archives of lyrics, I coax resisting students by asking whether or not they know any popular songs. When I let them sing one of their favorites from the "Top 40" as a group, they've more than helped me make my point. It is hard not to be impressed by impromptu recitations and songfests. Applause always follows these efforts, and students relax enough by the end of this class to recite a few nursery rhymes together as a final demonstration. In the end, the activity puts a fine point on the fact that memorizing is a skill that they all know how to do—and, most of all, it is really fun.

I culminate this activity by asking students as individuals or in small groups to write and memorize either a 200-word poem or a song based on any of the themes, plots, or characters we have explored so far this year. I give them a few class periods to get started, then about two weeks to

complete and memorize for an in-class presentation. Students are impressed by each other's original memorized pieces, so I trade on the momentum and camaraderie the performances create by sending them off with the task of choosing any of Shakespeare's sonnets to memorize over the winter break. I have downloaded and copied the collection, but some students prefer surfing the Web themselves, so I provide Web addresses for those who prefer that approach.

Chewing on only fourteen lines slowly cultivates a taste for Shakespeare's complex ideas and structures. I like to think of this assignment as an appetizer for the larger portion to come in fourth quarter. Questions on language that surface are easier to tackle without the responsibility of a five-act play. I keep students interested in their sonnets by assigning extra credit points to those who hold the poem "in memory" ready for an impromptu class recitation. Students have the experience of watching their understanding of the language grow, as they become more and more familiar with the lines.

Beginning the Performance Based Unit: Building a Context for the Play to Come

When I start the unit in the beginning of fourth quarter, finding out how much my ninth graders already know about the play is my first priority. This

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is important, not only for review, but also for building context for the activities ahead. Because some students have seen either the Luhrman or Zeffereilli productions of *Romeo and Juliet*, this opening session can be a confidence builder as well.

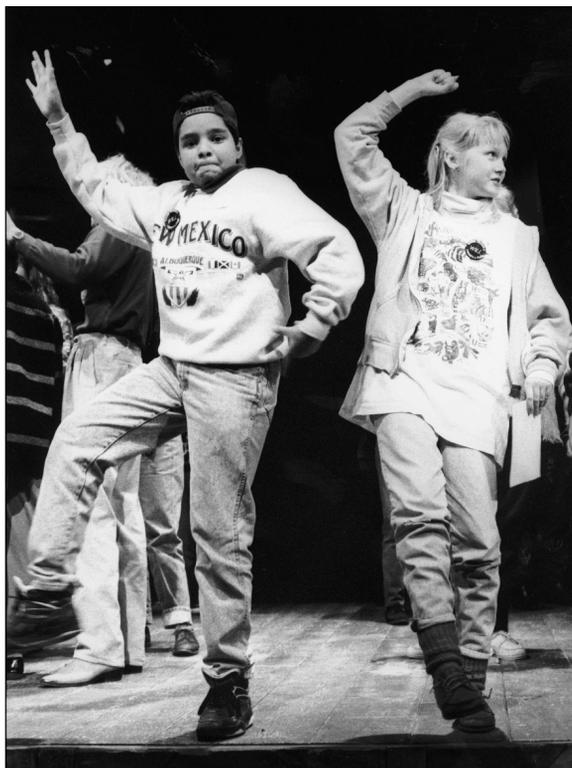
I give them five minutes or so to write down everything they can think of about plot, character, theme, language, etc. Then I follow up with some kind of whole class gathering of information. If time allows, I supply small groups with poster paper and markers. After they pool the information they have gathered, they make a creative map of the play. The completed posters are a good way to usher in the play as the unit begins. If time is a factor, an alternative is to simply create a whole class spill of points on the board and tell them to add new information to the list that they've already started. Either activity gives students a chance to build necessary schemata for the next task of learning the play as a whole.

Learning the Play

Next, students receive copies of the play, along with a packet of reflective questions with answers due at the end of the unit. Predictably, some students take the book home, read it quickly on their own, and hang back after classes to discuss fine points of language and other aspects of the play that they find irresistible. Others leave their copies behind in class, or lodge them somewhere in their backpacks, lockers, or under their beds. I design journal reflection questions to offer choices that will satisfy a variety of intellectual needs.

I take a practical approach to students learning the play; they simply read a synopsis and watch a movie version. In addition, they get homework points for answering study questions that focus on plot, character, and theme. All students are expected to master these basic elements, but I stress that this fundamental comprehension is merely a starting point for the hands-on approach that we take in a performance-based unit. Students take pride in hearing that the comprehension test they will take at the beginning of our unit is an old final exam that in the past students would take at the end of their study of the play.

After gearing them up with a graphic organizer of "who's who" to help them sort out members of the feuding families, we settle in for a few days to watch the play. I let classes vote on the version they want, and they have the option to follow along in their books. Students who are reading the play start to notice cuts that exist in the modern screenplays; others will ask for clarification as they start to iden-



Students participate in a Shakespeare Steps Out Workshop at the Folger Shakespeare Library.

tify characters. Most importantly, however, eventually everyone just hunkers down and becomes fully engrossed in the dramatic experience of watching a captivating story unfold.

On our second day of viewing, I give students a one-page chronological outline of the acts and scenes, along with a pep talk about looking at the characters and action with the intention of figuring out which scene they see themselves doing for their final projects. I direct them to act as casting agents for themselves and fellow classmates, challenging them to watch with eyes and ears for the different emotional tones of the scenes they might imagine themselves and others doing. Evidence abounds showing that they take this suggestion seriously in the animated discussions that follow. We discuss their favorite films and how good casting contributes to why they fail or succeed. I encourage them to think not only about the role they want to take on, but also with which classmates they'll want to play.

After seeing the play, students always get a weekend to bone up on the study questions and synopsis before I give them their comprehension test. I am careful to point out that the film versions always

leave out certain parts, and the test will be based on the actual play. Some students take this opportunity to read the play straight through, but those who rely only on the synopsis and film fare equally well.

Playing around with the Play

After they have taken their test on plot and characters, the academic part of the unit is finished; it is time to get them up on their feet playing around with Shakespearean language. I depend on two warm-ups to break the ice and get students involved, and both are included in *Shakespeare Set Free*. The first is the by-now-familiar activity that has students hurling Shakespearean insults to one another across the room. It is pure fun and exposes students to both the richness and humor of his language. My second favorite is a “read around” activity Tolyado describes as “a fast read-through involving each class member” (30). I created a composite monologue of Lord Capulet’s lines to Juliet when she refuses to comply with his wishes to marry Paris. Students are instructed to take turns reading lines as far as punctuation marks (except for commas) take them. The directive I give is to pay attention to the emotional tone of the lines and, when that starts to come through, to read the lines in a way that seems appropriate to what is going on. Taking inspiration from my Folger workshop experience, I then divide students into competing teams facing each other in lines. By the end of this whole-class reading, they have created a deafening roar as I coach them to try to outdo each other with the decibel levels of the father’s angry tirade.

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Learning to fence for one of Shakespeare's plays. Photo provided by the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Before we engage in these warm-ups, I explicitly acknowledge the predictable resistance and self-consciousness that can exist when we engage in play like this. I validate the naturalness of the awkwardness but cajole and challenge them (as Coleman had in workshops) into shutting off the switch to those internal critical voices that inevitably surface. These warm-up activities are pivotal in defusing student anxiety and demonstrate how easy it is for students to enjoy “speaking Shakespeare.”

Playing with the “Tolyado Method”

I devote the next few classes to introducing what O'Brien refers to in *Shakespeare Set Free* as the “Tolyado Method.” She describes it as “the divinely simple way for students to discover and work with a piece of text *themselves*, (her italics) with only the subtlest assistance from a teacher, and a teacher who doesn't have to know anything about theater” (xiii). The beauty of the activity is watching the students' confidence level grow when they approach text using his simple discussion and questioning techniques. The method equips them with skills to help unravel the complexities of the upcoming final scenes that ultimately they will tackle on their own.

My objective during subsequent classes is to continue to improve students' comfort level with the language. The activities in *Shakespeare Set Free*

offer a multitude of suggestions to pick and choose from. Every year I like to try something new, but I always fit in a class or two on subtext. Also, when looking over the various exercises, I don't limit myself to the ones designed for *Romeo and Juliet* because many activities for other plays are easily transferable. The tips for learning how to memorize in the section for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are invaluable. Before I release students to work on their final scenes, a favorite yearly staple is a homemade “video mix” I've made of identical scenes from different film versions. This is a fascinating visual that demonstrates the variety of ways Shakespeare's lines can be translated into action.

Selecting Scenes for Play

Because of my earlier directive for students to act as “casting agents” while viewing the film, the job of choosing scenes becomes a fairly simple, albeit noisy, task. The class becomes charged with the energy of creative problems being solved. I break the challenge down for them by cueing them with broad thematic questions. Do you want to play with romance? Or choreograph a fight? How emotionally charged a scene do you want to do? Which gender do you see yourself playing? What about exploring your comedic side? How about tackling the intricacies of a family feud? Anyone want to try the tragic

Advice for Teachers

Advice for teachers approaching a performance unit for the first time:

- Start by looking over *Shakespeare Set Free*. It is an invaluable resource on the approach. First, read the introduction by Peggy O'Brien for background. Next, read Michael Tolyado's article entitled "Three Dimensional Shakespeare" to get easy-to-follow instructions on how to play with text. Don't limit yourself to the exercises designed for your "class play" because many exercises are transferable to others. Don't miss out on the invaluable tips for memorizing in the segment on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- Begin slowly, but *do* put performing a final scene in the foreground of the unit. By the time students arrive in a high school classroom, they have done plenty of skits; even with no particular "performance based" activities, they will be able to figure out a way to go about this assignment. Watching them with the goal of refining this approach will teach you volumes. Decide you are going to try a few preliminary activities each year as you grow in comfort with what works for you.
- Start by showing a film version followed by a substantive comprehension test on plot, character, and theme. Address questions and discuss important themes and plot points as students view the play. This way you can breathe easily knowing that, at least on a fundamental level, students know the play.
- Acknowledge the fears that exist when students start to play around like this. When coaching (and sometimes coaxing) students in the warm-up activities, directly address the problem of self-consciousness. Validate the awkwardness, but invite them to shut off those internal critical voices that will inevitably surface.
- Schedule the off-book test so students have more than a week to continue practicing their final scenes. When remembering lines is no longer the paramount task, the real fun of individualizing and interpreting character can start to happen.
- Expect rehearsal time to be noisy and that your classroom will (hopefully) become crowded with the mess of props and costumes that will gradually appear.
- Consider ways to accommodate space needs for rehearsing the final scenes. Having kids spill out of your classroom to practice in "public places" like corridors and lobbies can breathe a creative spirit into the school community. If it is logistically possible, let students go outside on the lawn to practice.
- Create clear guidelines with the students on daily expectations once they are "on their own" during class time to rehearse. Include tasks such as running lines, working on blocking, planning costumes and props, figuring out subtext and interpretation, choreographing fight scenes, practicing the scene, and the like.
- Stand in the background after making your role as facilitator clear for them. Act less as a "watchdog" and more as an interested "producer" overseeing the creative projects of your "acting troupes."

death scene? There are always one or two students who want to work alone with one of the monologues. It is fine with me, too, if multiple groups want to do the same scene; this only increases creativity because of their desire to be unique. Some put together excerpts of lines to create an original pastiche showing one character's complexities and changes throughout the play. Every few years an ambitious group writes a condensed version of the play and turns the assignment into a magnificent *tour de force*. Students too familiar with *Romeo and Juliet*

sometimes opt to focus on an entirely different Shakespearean play for their final project. Because the "Tolyado Method" transfers so well, it is easy to accommodate such creative and ambitious requests.

My expectation for the number of lines each student takes on is high. I challenge each to learn about fifty or more lines of the poetry. What seems like an inordinate number to some students (and I am flexible on this point), others take on as a challenge to do even more. The more observant realize quickly that characters from some scenes simply

don't have enough lines, and this becomes another creative problem to solve. One approach is to excerpt lines from earlier or later scenes to flesh out the action, thus emphasizing character and plot change. Another is to have students with too few lines pick up additional ones from a prologue, monologue, or sonnet from the play. Every year students surprise me with the solutions they come up with regarding the line expectation they must meet. And, despite the work this entails, every year I am impressed that the majority of my students are more than equal to that challenge.

Prompt Books for the Play

After students have chosen their scenes, they create prompt books by enlarging and copying their lines. If students don't have easy access to copying machines, printing lines off the Internet is another option. To instruct on the theatrical jargon that they can use for prompt books and blocking, I use materials from *Shakespeare Set Free*. Most useful for this step is to call on students who have had previous drama experience. They love coming up and demonstrating the location of up, down, and center stage for the class, and I put them in charge of this activity. Student "actors" take turns responding to verbal stage directions, while student "directors" order them around on our classroom "stage." This is a nonthreatening warm-up that gets kids on their feet in front of their peers playing around with the stuff of theater.

Learning Lines for the Play

When students start preparing for their final scenes, the fruits of playing with memorization during the year become apparent. They've become more comfortable with the skill while learning their sonnets, so tackling their scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* is a less daunting task. I plan the unit carefully by scheduling the written "off-book" test on their lines, preferably two weeks before their in-class performances. This might sound extreme, but it is worth it. After they have memorized the lines, understanding increases significantly. Once the words "belong" to them, the nuances of meaning really begin to break through, and some of the most creative play occurs at this point. Since they are not stuck in their heads trying to remember the lines, students then start to really play with the subtleties of stress, pacing, volume, tone, and subtext. I know they are se-

cure in their ability to memorize, so the early test with its point system acts as a motivator to get the lines learned in a timely fashion. Students receive two points per ten-syllable line, and for every line over the required fifty they receive two extra credit points; they get more extra credit if they *recite* the lines at this stage as well.

Personalizing the Play

Although every year I have groups who seize the opportunity as an excuse to don long skirts and other rich accoutrements of Renaissance attire, throughout the unit I emphasize that they do not have to set their scenes in the traditional mode. Challenging them toward nontraditional settings puts the universality of Shakespeare's themes into the foreground of the experience. Because Shakespeare doesn't reveal the nature of the feud in *Romeo and Juliet*, it is up to the students to decide on a reason and bring it to life through gestures, voice, costumes, and props.

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Rehearsing the Play

When students begin playing with their final scenes on their own, rehearsal classes are very noisy, and my classroom becomes crowded with the mess of props and costumes that gradually appear. With permission from neighboring teachers, I accommodate space needs for rehearsing the final scenes by having acting troupes spill out into the hall. By now it has become a yearly tradition and, although temporarily a bit disruptive, breathes a kind of creative spirit into the school community. Upper class students comment on how much fun it is to be reminded of their own *Romeo and Juliet* experience. Because I schedule my unit in the spring, sometimes I let students go outside on the lawn to practice as well.

Guidelines for In-Class Playing

An important way to manage this unit is to create clear guidelines with the students on daily expectations while they are “on their own” during class rehearsal time. Each year I involve my students in creating a rubric establishing what it is going to look like if they want to get full points for daily practice time. They detail observable tasks such as running lines, working on blocking, planning costumes and props, figuring out subtext and interpretation, choreographing fight scenes, practicing the scene, and the like. I act less as a “watchdog” and more as an interested “producer” as I oversee the creative projects of the “acting troupes.” When I ask the practicing actors to “take it from the top” during these rehearsal days, they know I’m there to see the progress of their scenes. Watching students working together on their own to puzzle out meaning stands out as some of the most teachable moments of my career. Naturally, they consult me on problems of meaning, and there are times when students require nudging as they go about the task of bringing the scenes to life. Rarely, though, do students seriously abuse the opportunity they have to take responsibility for getting their scene “performance ready.”

Final Performance Play

In-class performance days are charged with creative excitement, since the majority of students have become genuinely enthusiastic about the way they have individualized their scenes. I’ve seen lots of traditional sword fights, and as many approaches to creating fake blood. I have also seen the feuding sides divided ingeniously along economic, racial, educational, political, regional, sexual, and cultural lines. What’s more, the Montagues and Capulets have been characterized hilariously as warring Hatfields and McCoys, Preps and Nerds, Pops and Wannabees, Blacks and Whites, Confederates and

Unions, Mafia Dons, Rappers, Rockers, and Skaters. We’ve even had rival baseball teams!

Going Public with the Play

While everyone is required to perform in class, students also have the opportunity to “go public” with their scenes. Because our school population spans grades six through twelve, it is easy for me to schedule middle school audiences. Despite predictable resistance and all the initial stress, terror, and embarrassment that some students experience, at the end of the unit one of my biggest problems is scheduling the large number of students who want to be a part of the ninth grade’s annual showcase of scenes. This is a problem I manage with great satisfaction. Shakespeare’s plays can certainly be intimidating, and many students (and teachers) resort to *Cliffs Notes* and the like for understanding. Yet involving students in “doing” the play rather than merely reading and discussing it demonstrates what O’Brien means when she states that “students and Shakespeare have a great and natural affinity for each other.” Because I’ve adopted the performance model, I now hold one of her “Fiercely Held Beliefs” that “Shakespeare study can and should be active, intellectual, energizing and a pleasure for teacher and student” (xiii). If you haven’t already, you might want to try it and see.

Works Cited

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