

Stagefright: Teaching Shakespeare as drama

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Who would have thought that one of the performance criteria for becoming a teacher of English literature was a head for heights? Or high tolerance levels for 100-year-old dust, rat droppings and bat urine? I certainly had no idea – when I took up an English post at Grey High School, and later at Queen's College – that I would spend a lot of time on very high ladders, hanging and adjusting spotlights, or taking down or hanging up stage curtains and flies, or painting and building platforms and other similarly dangerous occupations.

Because that's what you end up doing when you believe that Shakespeare lives on the stage and not the page. And in the early 70s very few schools had 'theatres', though they all had halls designed for virtually everything but theatre. School hall stages were dreadful places – badly lit, badly draped, dark, draughty and dangerous! No catwalks. Great for the opening scene of *Hamlet* and maybe the 'Fair is foul' scene

from *Macbeth* – because the special effects were ‘built-in’ – but not much else. So if you really wanted to put Shakespeare on stage you had your work cut out for you. You would become an expert in wheeling and dealing, sabotaging school budgets and channeling some money away from rugby to drama, so that you could supplement the two 100-watt lamps that ‘light’ the stage. You would become knowledgeable about light fittings, tossing out words like ‘fresnelles’ with ease. You would adopt archeological tendencies, digging down layers of previous generations’ attempts at ‘theatre’ (mostly variety concerts) in the hopes of finding bits of costume that may work, or bits of metal that may become swords, or foils or halberds. Or a lump of something which may become a hump for Richard.

You would become a shameless liar as you kept reassuring the first team prop (Marcellus in your *Hamlet*) that he looks good in tights. And Oh! – you would need a honeyed tongue to persuade the girls’ school headmistress that her Ophelias, Juliets, Desdemonas and Cornelias would be perfectly safe rehearsing till 12 every night in the very attentive company of sweaty 17-year-old boys, ardent with desire for culture; and that things really **had changed** since the days when ‘being on the stage’ inevitably led to dissolution and pregnancy.

Oh, and then of course there are other little things, like cutting the three hours (four in the case of *Hamlet*) down to about 90 minutes, auditioning, casting, directing, getting mothers to make costumes, designing posters, thinking about ticket prices and sales, refreshments (don’t sell potato crisps during interval), asking the metalwork teacher to make swords that don’t bend too easily but are light enough to wield. (There’s nothing more discouraging than a wave of laughter from the audience during a tense sword battle – and you’re sitting in the wings wondering why they’re laughing but when you look closely it’s embarrassingly obvious that one of the swords has bent at the first blow and is not ‘unbending’ because it’s made of the wrong metal.)

Why the bother?

And, well, why bother? Why go to all this trouble? Why, when you could more easily read the text in the comparative safety of your classroom, preparing your Grade 12s for the ordeal of the final examination? When you could be going to bed at a reasonable hour instead of figuring out how to give Lear grey hair that does not puff clouds of dust when he, Lear, 'beat[s] at this gate that let thy folly in ...'. (More unwanted laughter)

Well, it's fun. That's a good reason. Doing exciting things with groups of enthusiastic teenagers (mostly boys really pleased to be let off prep and allowed to grow their hair 'for the play' and chat to girls every night) is fun. It's better than going to bed at a reasonable hour.

And you might learn something. As you struggle to explain why Iago has to say 'Ha I like not that' in a particularly secretive, suggestive yet quiet tone (but not so quiet that Othello and the audience can't hear him), you learn something. And when Hamlet asks if it wouldn't be cool for him to whisper his famous last words – 'the rest is silence' – you both learn something. And when Gertrude asks you to explain what she's actually saying in the line 'This bodiless creation ecstasy/Is very cunning in' you wonder why you've taken on this job when all you can do is stammer and say 'Hmm... good question'; but ultimately you learn – because you remember vaguely that 'ecstasy' meant insanity, and of course the bodiless creation is the Ghost of Hamlet's father, so Gertrude is saying that Hamlet's madness is cunningly/craftily creating hallucinations in which his late father appears to him. So you learn! And Gertrude learns. So that's another reason.

And then – this is difficult to explain – somewhere among the dusty shadows backstage, or two storeys up on wobbly ladders, or in the wings waiting to prompt but losing your place because Ophelia is just so compelling tonight – somewhere

there is a sense of joining a long line of performers, getting into step, of linking with what generations have done year after year, and **you feel yourself part of a history and tradition that puts a bounce in your step and a song in your heart** – even on the night Horatio gets so lost in his lines that Hamlet has to die twice before Fortinbras can enter and wrap things up. So that's a third reason.

But the main reason by far is of course the obvious one: **you go to the trouble to put Shakespeare on stage because that's where he belongs**. He did not write 'books'. He wrote living text, full of movement, laughter, tears, joy and pain, and the best place to see and understand this is on stage. This is not a new idea at all. It's been around – in education literature – since well before the turn of the 20th century, but it is rarely acted upon. I think Rex Gibson may have been the first serious academic/teacher/editor who deliberately included what he called 'active' methods in a Shakespeare pedagogy. Gibson, for many years Director of the Shakespeare and Schools Project and editor of Shakespeare texts, was among the first to include dramatic hints and interpretations in annotations to the texts, something the Institute for the Study of English in Africa editions are also very good at. As Gibson puts it, 'Active methods ... recognise that Shakespeare wrote his plays for performance, and his scripts are completed by enactment of some kind' (p. xii). In this country – and this province in particular – we have had our own champion of this approach to teaching literature, Andre Lemmer. Many of you will be familiar with his work. Andre's annual *Viva Shakespeare* workshops – for many years part of the schools festival – were always received with great enthusiasm and usually resulted in several 'conversions'. I was fortunate enough to co-present one or two of these with him and what an experience that was. And how exhausting! These workshops brought home the sheer physicality of theatre and fed into Andre's notion of how to annotate the Shakespeare texts referred to above. And when you came away from one of these workshops you really were

convinced that Shakespeare belongs on the stage.

All the world's a stage

But I must immediately qualify the word 'stage', because I mean any space where people can act, interact, can say lines and move, can enter or leave. Often a space in the classroom or a quad will suffice. For expert or experienced readers of drama a space in the head works. But not for novices: they really do need to experience the play – they need to encounter the drama-ness of the drama. This is one of the most neglected literacies in the teaching of English – a dramatic literacy: finding a way of getting the reader to see 'through' the lines on the page, to 'see' the action behind the lines, and there is no better text than Shakespeare's to teach this. Look at these lines from *Othello*. What's going on here, dramatically? What can we tell – from the dialogue only since there are hardly any stage directions – about how these lines should be delivered, how characters should move, what tone of voice they should use? In short, how can the words on the page become the actions on the stage? Let's look at a few possibilities: I have annotated the text to show possible 'dramatic' interpretations without which the text dies on the page. *[Download extract below by clicking on the link and print separately.]*

[Othello extract](#)

We can also look at the many film versions of Shakespeare, where we see a range of different directors' interpretations of what's happening on stage. But of course a movie set is not a stage.

A fascinating article in this context is Peter Thomas' *Shakespeare Page to Stage*, in which he shows how an appreciation of the handkerchief as the central prop in *Othello* can lead to an understanding of the play as a whole. Here's his opening paragraph, sufficiently entertaining to

read in full:

Stuff compulsory written tests on Shakespeare and stick your statutory orders in the bin. No ring-binder can help teachers bring the dramatist to life as much as a Kleenex tissue. Departments with more lavish budgets may go for a cotton hanky or a silk neckscarf, but not even the most favoured CTC is likely to invest in a top-of-the-range strawberry number, woven by hallowed silkworms over twenty moons and dipped in mummified essence. I don't suppose Shakespeare's prop box had one matching Othello's description of his gift to Desdemona. So, a Kleenex it is. This simple prop can give students a grasp of Shakespeare's dramatic method – of writing crafted for an audience rather than a dutiful reader.

This is where the theatrical experience I'm referring to is different from the kind of thing a professional theatre company may do. For me – as a teacher – the point is not the performance – not really. The truth is you will not easily find 18-year-old Hamlets in your average Matric class. And for an adolescent to play Lear with any conviction is a big ask. So, while the play is indeed the thing, **it is the educational project that interests me**, and it is what those in the play and those able to see it performed will learn from the experience that really counts. **And what do they learn?** Well, the list is endless but here are some ideas.

- Those who are in the production learn how to move 'naturally' – to let the words dictate their movement, and to throw away their preconceived ideas about 'acting'. Every year I auditioned I had to cope with the same phenomenon: that students find it impossible to stand perfectly still while speaking on stage. And so you had the *wandering Hamlet* and the *striding Macbeth*; even when they were speaking to someone they felt they had to move. When you questioned them the answer was usually 'I don't know what to do with myself ... or my hands ...'. And the way through that was to look at the

lines again and try to detect 'movement', deliberate dramatic movement rather than aimless wandering about.

- So they learn how to move and not to move – how to be comfortable in their bodies. They also learn how to interact – how to listen, and respond. How to say lines so that they make sense, even when they are as tortuous as 'This bodiless creation ecstasy/Is very cunning in'. Of course it helps to have the context. Hamlet is watching his father's ghost leaving through the portal and Gertrude is staring at Hamlet in amazement because she can't see the ghost:

Exit Ghost

QUEEN

This is the very coinage of your brain.

This bodiless creation ecstasy

Is very cunning in.

- They learn about stagecraft, how actors need to be positioned so that the action flows and makes sense. And of course they learn lines and can quote impressively from the text for years afterwards, perhaps forever.
- And those who merely watch learn a great deal too, but mostly they see that the plays are not words on the page. They look through the page, at the stage and through the stage at life itself.

But there's more!

But it would be wrong to promote an 'active' approach to Shakespeare at the expense of other interests, or pursuits

that the texts offer. This is a point argued by Jane Coles – who collaborated with Gibson on many projects – in a scathing attack on the testing system in UK entitled *Alas, poor Shakespeare: Teaching and testing at Key Stage 3* (Coles, 2003). I don't want to pick up the testing issue now – I'm coming to that – but I do want to take up her warning that it is possible to neglect the kind of close textual analysis that Shakespeare texts demand in favour of more 'active' approaches. Clearly the best place to engage Shakespeare's poetry is the classroom, not the stage. And central to poetry is metaphor; any engagement with Shakespeare that ignores metaphor is missing something special. How could one not want to talk about these images?

Come, thick night,

And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,

Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,

To cry *Hold, hold!*

To take arms against a sea of troubles [even Shakespeare mixes metaphors]

When I have shuffled off this mortal coil

When sorrows come they come not single file but in battalions

My predecessor in the Education Department at Rhodes University – Ken Durham – used to encourage teachers to 'romp through' four or five Shakespeares with their Grade 10s, not struggle painfully through one. I love the spirit of what Ken was getting at – as I loved most of the things he was inclined to enthuse over – but I did wonder how 14-year-olds could

absorb anything but the plot if they really did romp through four or five plays in one year. And the plots are really the least interesting features of the plays. It is what Shakespeare was able to do with such unpromising material that is truly remarkable. I remember at university being warned that the comedies required considerable suspension of disbelief to be enjoyed. But I find the same is true of the tragedies and used to 'tease' my pupils with 7-minute Shakespeares, in which, if the tragic figure were not who he was, the play ends very soon. For example, in response to Horatio's story about seeing the ghost Hamlet replies: 'Really! You believe in that sort of thing? I think it's rubbish. Let's go and have a beer.' You can try this on all the tragedies – works very well, but unfortunately destroys the plays!

Other than the stagecraft, the plot and the poetry, what else is worth looking at? The issues, of course; and Shakespeare is full of issues. It is in these – usually regarded as universal in applicability and moral values – that teachers who subscribe to the notion that teaching English is about encouraging personal growth find the material for their lessons. So *Macbeth* is about ambition; it's about power corrupting absolutely; and *Lear* is about the arrogance of old age and authority; it's about filial ingratitude. *Hamlet* is about indecision; thinking too much. And so on. I don't mean to be scornful of these notions – because they are valid and worth pursuing in the sense that they can get learners to talk about the plays – but there is a danger in assuming that these 'messages' from the plays are somehow timeless and universal and that we can learn so much about ourselves from them. I don't know what there is to be learned from the story and the motivation of a powerful thane who kills the king to usurp his throne; or from a silly old man who throws out the only child who truly loves him because of vanity; and so on. It is also possible to take this notion of relevance (real life stuff) too far, as one sees in examination papers (thankfully not in

this country – not yet anyway) where candidates are encouraged to ‘apply’ the issues to their own experience. An example – cited by Coles – is a question inviting candidates to describe a person they truly admire (this after reading *Henry V*). Coles notes examples of journalists having fun with this approach producing questions such as *Doesn't King Lear make you appreciate your grandpa more?* It is quite possible to answer these questions without any reference to the play whatsoever!

More importantly, the underlying assumption that everyone obviously admires Henry V, or really sympathises with Lear is highly questionable. Surely other readings are possible? This is what happens when these texts are read unproblematically, as though they contained ‘messages’ that would be true for all time. It leads to what McEvoy (2008) has called a ‘reverential acquaintanceship’ or ‘blank reverence’. It is what happens when teachers fail to present the plays as cultural products, growing from specific historical, political contexts. This approach to teaching English – a ‘cultural analysis’ model – is no less valid than a personal response approach – in fact arguably even more valid as our learners grow up in increasingly text-saturated environments.

Testing Times

So now I have arrived at the examination and this is the last point I want to make. These thoughts spring from a quarter of a century of teaching and testing literature. My over-riding impression of examinations is that it was very difficult – if not impossible – to test ‘active’ approaches to Shakespeare. I know because I tried many times and made some bad mistakes along the way. In my anxiety to get the candidates to think of the stage (rather than the page) I completely overestimated them and their teachers, and it soon became apparent that very few teachers were looking at Shakespeare as anything but a rather unusual novel or a long poem. My first attempt – I remember it well – was a scene from *Antony and Cleopatra*, one of those scenes where Antony greets Cleopatra exuberantly

after an absence of some kind. I printed the scene and asked the candidates how they would put in on stage – I asked about grouping, costume, set, even music. O my goodness, what a lot of rubbish we got to mark. Everyone of course answered this question because it seemed that you did not have to know anything to answer it. So we got the full treatment of leather sandals, purple silk wraps, diamond necklaces, Antony's brown curls, lots of gold of course, and soft romantic music – one huge Hollywood cliché. It was very difficult to award any marks at all. Credit went to candidates who showed understanding of the tensions and themes in the play, the characters, but mostly what was actually happening on stage and why.

My next attempt was one that is easily demonstrated in a classroom. It is the scene, near the end of *Lear*, in which Edgar, Kent and Albany are clustered in discussion about what to do with the country, while Lear is bent over the dead Cordelia, some distance away. At a point in their conversation Albany exclaims 'O see, see!' and the next dialogue is Lear saying 'And my poor fool is hanged ...' in that unforgettable soliloquy which drives towards 'Never, never, never, never, never.' The question I asked was 'What do you think makes Albany exclaim 'O see, see!''? Obvious isn't it? No. Very, very few candidates had a *picture* of the stage in their heads, and so looked in vain at the text, the written text, for clues, and came up with rubbish – things like 'He's trying to emphasise what he means ...' whereas if one saw that there were two groups (Albany's group and Lear and Cordelia) and that Lear must have made some noise or movement to draw Albany's attention making him look at Lear bending over Cordelia, the answer is obvious. But this requires a dramatic reading.

Staying with examinations for a few more minutes, most of you will identify with the excessive and sometimes insane laughter that erupts in examination venues when one encounters howlers,

especially when one has marked about 200 scripts and one is facing another 100. The following gems are part of a huge anthology collected over a period of twenty years of examining the former Cape Province literature exams. In the process of selecting these I wondered what it was that made them so funny, and realized with surprise that they were funny because one could see what the writers meant – they have a grain of truth in them, however minute. To keep things simple I select a few from *Macbeth*.

So here goes:

Macbeth undergoes several periods when his mind controls his body.

Just thinking about murdering makes Macbeth's ribs knock together.

Lady Macbeth has many redeeming features. She is essentially ignorant.

Lady Macbeth's milk went sour.

Before the killing Lady Macbeth even dances with Duncan mercilessly.

Although Macbeth has killed many people you could still describe him as a fairly normal person.

Macbeth carefully kills people at random.

She pushed his manhood in his face.

She played with his manhood.

Lady Macbeth commits suicide shortly before her death.

Macbeth weakly says 'If we should fail' and Lady Macbeth says 'Screw your courage!'

Macbeth dabbled in the blood.

And finally this stroke of post-modern genius:

Lady Macbeth is driven mad by all the imagery in the play.

It took me many years as a teacher to realize that what you took into the classroom didn't matter terribly – that whether you were looking at Cummings or Keats, or Shakespeare or Shaw didn't matter much. What you were teaching was poetry, not poems, drama, not plays, and any vehicle you could find to do this was acceptable. I know this sounds a little un-academic ,

but I believe it is educationally sound. Seen in this light, materials you take into the classroom are just an excuse really, a reason to talk and write and argue and discuss. This is one of the few notions that OBE actually got right, the idea that content was sometimes arbitrary and that it was the skills and attitudes that were learned that mattered. I have to say though, that Shakespeare is a pretty good excuse for teaching, definitely the best I ever encountered.

It is because of this conviction that I was a little startled to learn – a few years ago – that schools no longer need to ‘do’ Shakespeare. Schools can now choose a modern drama over Shakespeare. I must confess to wondering at the time whether this was not somehow illegal and I had to ask myself some serious questions. Was I disappointed because Shakespeare is so central to the canon; in other words, did I feel that one ‘ought to’ teach Shakespeare, and who was the DoE to think otherwise? Maybe a bit. But I think what I felt was sadness rather than injury, because I could not understand how a body of work that is without question **the** high point in English literature, and that provided me and (most of) my students with so much pleasure and just plain fun could be declared ‘optional’. The debate rages in other countries too, even the UK, where there is loud lamentation when there are suggestions that Shakespeare need no longer be part of the testing and examining regime. Lighthill (2011), in an article entitled ‘Shakespeare – an endangered species’ is afraid that ‘teachers might opt for a pedagogy of least resistance and thus expose poor Will to the slings and arrows of revisionists who for a long time have felt that Shakespeare was far too elitist and of little relevance to the young today’ (p. 38).

I’ve never thought Shakespeare to be elitist, or of little relevance. And if one has to work a little harder to ‘get it’, the rewards are all the greater.

But maybe I really am ready to retire!

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