

“Shakespeare and Reader’s Theatre: Fellow Traveling Companions”

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Academic Affairs

22 December 2010

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ABSTRACT

Whether constructed on literary analysis models or inspired by conventional acting theories, Reader’s Theatre performance techniques are an invaluable instructional tool available to teachers who want their students to see, hear and feel Shakespeare texts in classroom performance. These classroom exercises are designed to promote both a critical and creative instructional perspective for teachers who wish to explore the inherent theatrical impulse that gives heightened dramatic meaning to Shakespeare’s texts and personalizes classroom performances for students.

A number of traditional approaches to teaching Shakespeare texts view the notion of classroom performance as an occasional exercise in oral interpretation of literature, persuasive speaking or small group recitative reading aloud (Lewis, 2003). Classroom performance viewed from this decidedly rhetorical perspective frequently acknowledges the inherent dramatic qualities of a Shakespeare text but chooses to present rather than represent literary characters in an active and engaged classroom performance.

For still others, however, teaching Shakespeare is part of a theatrical tradition of classroom performance that translates the author's words into both a physical and vocal interpretation of the text and is not limited solely to the critical analysis of its isolated parts (Showalter, 2003). From this more theatrical perspective, classroom performance of a Shakespeare text sets free the imagination of student performers to explore what critic Kenneth Thorpe Rowe calls "...that theatre in our heads." (Rowe, 1967)

Whether constructed on literary analysis models or inspired by conventional acting theories, Reader's Theatre performance techniques are an invaluable instructional tool available to teachers who want their students to see, hear and feel Shakespeare's texts in classroom performance. (Ratliff, G.) Exploring a more theatrical approach to visualizing and voicing the actions, attitudes and emotions of literary characters suggests that Reader's Theatre and Shakespeare are well-suited fellow traveling companions in an imaginative journey to discover the aesthetic and intellectual content of a literary text.

## Basic principles

Perhaps the most crucial example of the shared theatrical journey of Shakespeare and Reader's Theatre is found in the character of Hamlet. Amid a flurry of literary as well as theatrical techniques, Shakespeare challenged his sixteenth century audience to rely on their own sense of sight and sound to decipher the "spoken" words and "unspoken" actions of his characters. In the text, the young prince is in a state of pitiful mourning for his father when approached by friend and fellow student, Horatio:

Hamlet: My father—methinks I see my father.

Horatio: O where, my lord?

Hamlet: In my mind's eye, Horatio.

(I, ii, 183-185)

It is here that Hamlet's words provide the most basic working blueprint for Reader's Theatre classroom performance: it must be in the "mind's eye." If, like Shakespeare, we view the dramatic imagination as a creative act that gives form and substance to a character's subsequent actions and words, then classroom performance of the text is an essential ingredient in giving immediate and heightened meaning to both the characters and the text.

## Theatrical Impulse

Reader's Theatre literary characters do not leap full-blown from the printed page in a detailed description of their apparent intention or motivation. Rather, they emerge in infinitely subtle classroom rehearsal clues generally found in traditional

theatre approaches to role-playing that focus on visualizing character actions, dialogue and images associated with Shakespeare's literary characters.

### Conventions

In Reader's Theatre a single student performer may play a number of different roles in a Shakespeare script. Performers may have individual lines of narration or dialogue, share narration and dialogue with other performers and hold their scripts or place them on music stands. Frequently, the setting, mood or even other characters indicated in the text may be directed into the audience to promote listener identification; and at other times performers may wear suggestive costumes to represent their character portraits. Performers may also be so familiar with the text that they deliver parts from memory, engage in movement or dance and use hand props.

### Staging

Classroom staging of a Shakespeare text may be more easily visualized by an elevated platform framed by a miniature proscenium arch and a series of small pillars at one end of the playing space; or the classroom may be arranged in-the-round, three-quarter round or in a semi-circle. Staging may feature step units, ramps, fabric panels, draperies or painted backdrops to depict selected locales in the text. Subtle theatrical elements like lighting, projections, music, sound or special effects may also provide additional aural and visual commentary.

The artistic line between a literal or a "localized" approach to staging a Shakespeare text is a fine one to be sure. Some classroom productions may feature

numerous set pieces, elaborate backdrops or a series of raised platforms that provide a number of student performance levels. Other classroom productions, however, may choose to capture the mood or highlight a specific image suggested in a Shakespeare text by simply placing a gnarled tree stump in the middle of the playing space to indicate the heath of King Lear or a single grey tombstone to locate Hamlet's graveyard.

### Movement

Movement is essential in classroom performances to externalize the storyline and create a sense of forward motion that reinforces an audience's understanding of changing character attitudes, moods or relationships. When clearly motivated and precise, movement can punctuate a dramatic or comic action and underline character intention or motivation. Having student performers stagger awkwardly forward to the audience as the "rude mechanicals" in A Midsummer Night's Dream, for example, is very effective in conveying the amateurish and ill-conceived theatrics the characters are rehearsing. Regardless of the degree of movement suggested in a Shakespeare text, there should always be an appropriate balance between movement that depicts an accurate visual representation of the physical or psychological relation of characters and incidental movement that sets the literary scene in the audience's imagination.

### Style

The performance style of Reader's Theatre performers and Shakespeare's actors

also appears to have followed a similar journey in an attempt to sketch flesh-and-blood characters in rather broad, bold strokes. In his historical time, Shakespeare's texts are thought to have been performed in a presentation or full-front style. Today's Reader's Theatre is quite similar in its use of off-stage focus to locate characters, events or incidents "out" of the playing space and slightly above the heads of the audience. There is also ample historical evidence to suggest that Shakespeare's actors would have needed to cultivate a flexible, resonant voice capable of not only being heard in a boisterous playhouse but also subtle enough to capture the subtle nuance of blank verse. (Van Tassel, 2006)

There may also have been an attempt to suggest "believable" character actions and attitudes in performance if we to consider the historical accuracy of Shakespeare's advice to the players as voiced by Hamlet:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action;  
with this special observance, that you o'erstep not  
the modesty of nature; for anything so o'erdone  
is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at  
the first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere the  
mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature,  
scorn her own image, and the very age and body of  
the time his form and pressure.

(III, ii, 20-28)

A Reader's Theatre performer must also cultivate this ability to translate a text into

believable theatrical portraits based solely upon a character's words and actions, while at the same time giving full expression to the beauty and rhythm of individual lines of poetry in Shakespeare's dialogue and narrative descriptions. It is especially crucial for the Reader's Theatre performer, for example, to practice economy and simplicity in sketching Shakespeare's character portraits of the "lean-faced, hollow-eyed" Pinch in The Comedy of Errors; the "too wild, too rude" Gratiano in The Merchant of Venice; or the "unbridled, headstrong" Cressida in Troilus and Cressida.

### Classroom Exercises

Although there is no prescribed formula to give vocal or physical shape to Shakespeare's characters in classroom performance, the exercises that follow are designed to introduce student performers to a sample Reader's Theatre script and address theatrical attributes that enhance three-dimensional character portraits. Approach each exercise with an instructional perspective that is most appropriate for your individual style of teaching a selected Shakespeare text. Do, however, take the creative liberty of refining each exercise to meet the special needs of your students or to reinforce desired learning objectives for analysis, interpretation or classroom performance of a Shakespeare text.

### Shakespeare Sampler

The objective of a "Shakespeare Sampler" exercise is to present student performers with an opportunity to explore the role of suggestive costume pieces and hand props in classroom performance. Approach the exercise by dividing the class into small groups of seven and distribute the following Reader's Theatre

adaptation of the “sour Jacques” speech from As You Like It. Student performers then determine the character role they would like to perform and are instructed to bring to class one costume piece, e. g. hat, glasses, blanket, and one hand prop, e.g. gavel, briefcase, baby rattle, that best defines their chosen character role. Set aside sufficient rehearsal time—and in different rehearsal spaces if possible—so each group may memorize their lines, practice movement and explore suggestive approaches to incorporating the costume piece and the hand prop in an interpretation of their character’s lines of dialogue.

Remind each group to perform their roles full-front, facing the audience, and to direct their vocal and physical responses “into” the audience. Following each classroom performance there should be active discussion on individual student choices of costume piece and hand prop to define Shakespeare’s characters. The exercise may be extended to include a second classroom performance in which each group of student performers adapts their own Reader’s Theatre script from another Shakespeare text using appropriate costumes and hand props to give added dimension to their character portraits and interpretation of the text. Texts for an extended exercise might include the “royal throne of kings” speech from King Richard II (II, i, 35-53), the “lunatic, the lover and the poet” speech from A Midsummer Night’s Dream (V, i, 7-29) and the “quality of mercy” speech from The Merchant of Venice (IV, i, 184-214).

Narrator: All the world’s a stage  
and all the men and women merely players;



they have their exits and their entrances,  
and one man in his time plays many parts,  
his acts being seven ages.

Reader 1:           At first, the infant,  
                          mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.

Reader 2:           Then the whining schoolboy,  
                          with his satchel and shining morning face,  
                          creeping like snail unwillingly to school.

Reader 3:           And then the lover,  
                          sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
                          made to his mistress' eyebrows.

Reader 4:           Then a soldier,  
                          full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,  
                          jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,  
                          seeking the bubble reputation even in the canon's mouth.

Reader 5:           And then the justice,  
                          in fair round belly with good capon lin'd,  
                          with eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
                          full of wise saws and modern instances.

Narrator:           And so he plays his part.

Reader 6:           The sixth age shifts  
                          into the lean and slipper'd pantaloons,

with spectacles on nose and pouch on side,  
his youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide  
for his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,  
turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
and whistles in his sound.

Narrator: Last scene of all,  
Reader 3: that ends this strange, eventful history,  
Reader 5: is second childishness  
Reader 1: and mere oblivion.  
Reader 6: Sans teeth.  
Reader 4: Sans eyes.  
Reader 2: Sans taste.  
All: Sans everything.

(II, vii, 139-191)

### Fine-Tuning Verse

The objective of the “Fine-Tuning Verse” exercise is to cultivate a student performer’s appreciation of the vocal qualities needed to give full expression to the beauty and rhythm of Shakespeare’s “blank verse.” When not written in prose, Shakespeare’s texts are written in verse that is occasionally punctuated with an end rhyme of couplets. This blank verse pattern of dialogue is vocally precise in its rhythmical pattern of meter: five unstressed short sounds juxtaposed by five stressed or long sounds. This alternating pattern of short and long sounds totals ten

“beats.” The stress in emphasis is always placed on the second sound and each line ending concludes in a strong stress regardless of punctuation. The unstressed sounds then serve to counterbalance, or counterpoint, the long sounds.

Begin the exercise with a brief introduction of the inherent musicality of blank verse and the role of vocal color to underline specific Shakespeare images or phrases. Remind student performers that phonation—the vibration of the vocal folds to produce vocal tones—is an essential ingredient in fine-tuning the larynx (voice box) for verse dialogue. Working in small groups of four, direct students to the front of the classroom and have them stand full-front facing the audience in a straight line. Instruct each group of students to slowly drop their head forward and allow the lower jaw to “sag” as they yawn several times and the head gently sways from left to right and then from right to left. Repeat this part of the exercise five times.

Now direct the students to return to an upright position and to sound each of the vowels—a, e, i, o and u—very slowly. Students should breathe quietly, using a soft and subdued tone, as they repeat each of the vowel sounds five times and then extend each individual vowel sound five seconds. Instruct each group of students to repeat each vowel sound five more times using a slightly louder and then slightly softer tone. The exercise continues as students repeat each vowel sound in a lower pitch and then a higher pitch until each student is producing the lowest and highest pitch possible without vocal strain. Conclude the vocal fine-tuning exercise by asking the students to then repeat the vowel sounds in increments of five as they

explore changes in pitch, rate and volume to achieve the tonal quality needed to effectively voice Shakespeare's verse in classroom performances.

When the final student group has completed the vocal exercise, distribute the following excerpt from The Tempest and ask each individual student to perform the passage in front of the classroom as they demonstrate what they have learned about using variety in pitch, rate and volume to voice the subtleties of Shakespeare's dialogue.

Our revels now are ended. These our  
actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air;  
And, like the baseless fabric of this  
vision,  
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous  
palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe  
itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And, like this insubstantial pageant,  
faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such  
stuff

As dreams are made of, and our little  
life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

(IV, i, 148-165)

This exercise may be extended to include other familiar excerpts from Shakespeare texts to reinforce the tonal variation and vocal variety that student performers need in voicing poetic language. Excerpts useful for an extended exercise might include the “honour pricks me on” speech from King Henry IV, Part 1 (V, i, 131-146), the “let’s talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs” speech from King Richard II (III, ii, 145-169) or the “but to die and go we know not where” speech from Measure for Measure (III, iv, 116-127).

### Summary

Designing original Reader’s Theatre classroom exercises that actively engage students in analysis, interpretation and performance of Shakespeare texts is a challenging instructional objective that promotes both a critical and a creative learning experience. Exploring selected Reader’s Theatre techniques to discover the inherent theatrical impulse in literature gives heightened dramatic meaning to literary texts and personalizes textual interpretation. Presenting meaningful performance opportunities for students to give a vocal and physical interpretation of a literary character’s actions, attitudes and emotions also enlivens and enriches the classroom learning experience.

## Citations

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