

**Sample Pages from
Practical Approaches to Shakespeare in the
Drama Classroom**

Welcome! This is copyrighted material for promotional purposes. It's intended to give you a taste of the resource to see whether or not you it will be useful to your classroom. You can't print this document.

Visit <http://folk.me/p362> for pricing and ordering information.



Practical Approaches
to
SHAKESPEARE
IN THE DRAMA CLASSROOM



Julie Hartley

Practical Approaches to Shakespeare in the Drama Classroom

Copyright © 2019 Julie Hartley & Theatrefolk

CAUTION: This book is fully protected under the copyright laws of Canada and all other countries of the Universal Copyright Convention.

No part of this book covered by the copyrights hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means - graphic, electronic or mechanical - without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by Theatrefolk Inc.

e-mail: help@theatrefolk.com

website: www.theatrefolk.com

Photocopying / Multiple Copies

The sole owner of this book may copy the Lesson Plans for his or her class for educational purposes. All other purposes for duplication and/or distribution are prohibited.

BIOGRAPHY



Julie Hartley is a playwright, novelist, theatre director, and teacher based in Toronto. She is the founding director of Centauri Summer Arts Camp, which offers intensive arts training each summer for youth including more than 20 theatre programs. Hartley has taught in schools, colleges, universities, and conferences all over the world, including EARCOS in Asia and both CITE and CODE in Canada. She runs her own arts school in Toronto and an annual creative writing retreat in Costa Rica that is attended by teachers and writers from across North America. In addition to this resource book, Hartley has designed two online courses for Theatrefolk's *Drama Teacher Academy*. She can be reached at julie@centauriartscamp.com

Julie Hartley



TABLE OF CONTENTS



Introduction	1
Chapter 1 – Action Before Words	5
<i>Approaching Shakespeare through his action scenes</i>	
Chapter 2 – Issues and Ideas.....	10
<i>Relating Shakespeare’s themes to the lives of our students</i>	
Chapter 3 – Comedy: From Status to Stand-Up.....	16
<i>Shakespeare as raw material for an exploration of comedy</i>	
Chapter 4 – Building a Character	24
<i>How to use Shakespeare to teach character development</i>	
Chapter 5 – Beyond Realism.....	33
<i>Tackling different performance styles with the aid of the Bard</i>	
Chapter 6 – Let’s Get Original!.....	39
<i>Shakespeare as a springboard for devised theatre work</i>	
Chapter 7 – Making the Words Make Sense	47
<i>How to bring Shakespeare’s language to life for your students</i>	
Appendix 1 – Bringing Shakespeare’s Action to Life.....	55
Appendix 2 – Exploring Shakespeare’s Themes.....	60
Appendix 3 – Exploring Comedy	63
Appendix 4 – Character Studies: Hamlet and Kate	67
Appendix 5 – Teaching Theatre Style.....	70
Appendix 6 – Further Reading	72



INTRODUCTION



William Shakespeare is one of the greatest resources a drama teacher can have. He offers us scenes packed with action. Endless opportunities to explore comedy and physical theatre. Rich themes and characters to act as springboards for devised theatre. The chance to work with our language at its finest and – most importantly – ideas that relate directly to the experiences and preoccupations of the young people we teach.

Yet Shakespeare isn't easy. The language can seem dense and, even if we accept the value of including Shakespeare in our work with students, finding a way *in* can be tough – especially for drama teachers who have not themselves studied Shakespeare. That's the goal of this book – to help you find a way in. And to provide you with practical activities that will work with all students – including students for whom English is a second language and students who face other literacy challenges.

Let's begin by asking ourselves an important question: **Why is it vital to include Shakespeare in our curriculum?** At a time when schools seem to be moving further away from teaching the classics, we must be able to articulate why we see Shakespeare as a vital component of our work as drama teachers.

Firstly, William Shakespeare is the undisputed king of the English language – the best poet and the best dramatist our language has ever produced. And don't our students deserve the best? Most of our kids see more movies than live theatre, and Shakespeare has had a greater influence on Hollywood than any other writer. If you were to visit any big city in the English-speaking world (and many other cities besides), the chances are good that you would find a play by Shakespeare in performance. That can't be said for any other dramatist.

Shakespeare's reach is so universal that his plays, his speeches, his sonnets, and his phrases have been used to spearhead political and cultural movements all over the world. His plays have been translated into more than 100 languages and he has added more words to the English language than any other individual – about 1,700 of them – including words we use every day, such as "traditional" and "eventful."

The following quotation from the author Bernard Levin illustrates how we routinely pepper our language with phrases invented by Shakespeare:

If you say something has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused to budge an inch or suffered from green-eyed jealousy... if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony... laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort, or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days... you are quoting Shakespeare. — From a speech written by Bernard Levin and delivered by Michael York at the Aspen Institute Ideas Festival.

This is just a short excerpt. Levin goes on, listing more than 60 commonly used phrases that originate with Shakespeare's work.



So, though Shakespeare's language is occasionally dense, his more famous phrases are ones we can all recognize. But that's not the only reason our students deserve access to him. Shakespeare may have died more than 400 years ago, but his plays truly are universal and have stood the test of time – they tackle issues profoundly relevant to the lives of young people today.

Students who have experienced displacement, injustice and loss will see those experiences keenly reflected in characters as diverse as Hamlet, Prospero, Lear, and Viola. Teens in the throes of first passion, experiencing the awakening of their sexual selves, or struggling to see eye to eye with their parents, will identify with the characters in *Romeo and Juliet*, while similar life challenges play out very differently in *As You Like It* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Issues of gender identity are important today, and Shakespeare addresses them directly in many of his plays including *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. In fact, gender exploration is complex and multifaceted in Shakespeare.

In Shakespeare, we have a male writer creating profound and very rounded female characters of all ages, originally to be played by young boys on the stage. And, often, those female characters dress up as men – so we have boys playing girls who assume male identities to keep themselves safe, or to make themselves more powerful. There's so much for our students to mine in all of this.

And to make the gender possibilities of Shakespeare even more exciting, in recent years, key male characters in Shakespeare have been played by women, unlocking fresh meaning in his plays – Prospero in *The Tempest*, for example and, many times, Lear herself.

And that's far from all. A teen interested in looking outward to a contemporary world of political controversies and power plays will see all of this reflected in plays such as *Julius Caesar*, *Henry V*, and *King Lear*. Hamlet and Ophelia grapple with questions of mental health, powerlessness, and the meaning of life that are familiar to many of today's teens.

In fact, Hamlet may give voice to many of the feelings our more troubled students struggle to express. It's difficult to imagine how a teen would not identify with Macbeth's dreams and ambitions. We all wonder at some point how far we would be willing to go to get what we want.

Isabella in *Measure for Measure* is one of many characters who puts a Shakespearean face on the "Me Too" movement – perhaps things haven't changed for women over the last 400 years as much as we'd like to think.

When King Lear asks "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" he is posing a question about individual identity that haunts us all from our early teens and for the rest of our lives. And when Duncan in *Macbeth* observes profoundly "There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face," he's echoing a dilemma that perplexes every teen struggling with social dynamics of increasing complexity – why can't we tell what a person is thinking just by looking at them?

In the chapters that follow, we will explore ways to present the thematic complexity of Shakespeare to our students – but let's not forget that we're teachers of drama, not literature.

So Shakespeare does offer characters, plots, and themes that our students can relate to. But, just as importantly, he offers a wealth of practical opportunities for the drama studio.



How can performers dazzle an audience with believable action scenes – battles, shipwrecks, riots – given the obvious limitations of live performance? Is it possible for an actor to play a villain capable of terrible things, yet still make the character credible on stage?

What changes about a performance when we stage it in a small, intimate venue, in a grandiose theatre, or out in the environment? How can clown, mask, acrobatics, music, and stage combat enrich a performance? What happens if we involve an audience in the action? How can you use physicality and tempo to make an audience laugh? What is the best way to prepare a monologue? How do you mine a scene for conflict and subtext?

All of these are questions we want to invite our students to grapple with as they perform, and no other dramatist offers us as many varied opportunities to do this as Shakespeare does.

So, there you have it: arguments for why Shakespeare is an essential tool for all drama teachers.

But what if you're intrigued by this and you accept the importance of weaving Shakespeare into your work, but you were not yourself exposed to his plays in school or university? Where do you begin?

First of all, understand that **Shakespeare's plays were never intended to be read**. It's only when you see his plays performed that you can fully begin to appreciate their scope. So if you want to learn more about Shakespeare, see his plays in performance.

And if you live in a smaller community where that isn't an option, begin with film adaptations of his work. There are some terrific movie versions of his plays that are readily available to everyone. I would highly recommend *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Henry V* – both directed by Kenneth Branagh. Why? Because Branagh has a knack for adding gorgeous visuals without sacrificing the clarity of the language.

It's also not necessary to be deeply familiar with a play to use it in the drama classroom. Read a plot summary of *The Tempest*, and you already have a magical location, ethical dilemmas, and a rich plot for your students to explore.

Work with any key Shakespearean soliloquy taken out of context, and you are offering students the chance to explore conflict, subtext, and character. While it's far better that you and your students are familiar with the plays the soliloquies come from, it isn't essential to start with.

When my daughter was 11 years old, we took her to see her first live production of Shakespeare: *Twelfth Night* at Stratford, Ontario. At the end of the evening, I asked her what she thought. "I didn't understand all of the words," she said, "but it didn't matter."

I think this an important thing for all of us to realize. It doesn't matter if we understand every single word. Shakespeare's vocabulary so far exceeds our own that we should be in awe – it's one of the things that makes him great. It's never the case that you have to understand every word to gain something from the classics. If that were true, we wouldn't still be reading Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, Jane Austen, and Charles Dickens.

As teachers, it's natural for us to be afraid of presenting students with something they don't completely understand. But we need to overcome this reluctance. Our lack of knowledge should humble us – but it shouldn't stop us. I would doubt even Shakespeare's original audiences understood every word spoken on the stage. After all, he invented 1,700 words and dozens of phrases, so it's impossible anyone would have heard them before. Yet, despite this, his audiences still had a rollicking good time.

One important point here: I do not recommend ever using guides that purport to offer “translations” of Shakespeare. A key reason we teach Shakespeare is that he is the best writer ever to have written in English. If we offer students a watered-down version of his work, we immediately negate this argument for teaching his plays – plus, we leave our students wondering what all the fuss is about.

It is better that we **emphasise visuals, plots, action scenes, comedy, and characters as our students acclimatise themselves to language** that will seem less difficult with time. When we begin this way, we empower them.

When we replace Shakespeare’s work with over-simplified versions, we not only offer our students a more superficial experience, but we send the message that the original plays somehow need translating – and they don’t. Shakespeare wrote in English, just as our students do. Except that his grasp of the language, his poetry, and his vocabulary far exceed our own. If we imply Shakespeare needs translating, we are suggesting that his plays are impossible to understand without expert help. That’s simply not true.



CHAPTER 1



ACTION BEFORE WORDS

As drama teachers working with Shakespeare, our goal must be to offer our students a practical and engaging way *in* to his plays, and what better way to do that than through his action scenes? Even if we accept most Shakespearean language is accessible to a contemporary reader, our students expect it to be hard – and that is bound to lead to a certain level of reluctance.

One way to demonstrate that Shakespeare's plays are accessible is to find ways to work with them that does not place language at the forefront. This means we can use Shakespeare to teach many of the things that we as drama teachers hope to teach anyway: character development, ensemble playing, physical theatre, comedy, staging techniques and more. **Our goal can be simultaneously to introduce our students to key performance skills *and* to ease them into Shakespeare.**

A few years ago, I was hired to lead a morning workshop on Shakespeare for an underfunded inner-city school in England that had unexpectedly received an arts grant. On the day of the workshop, I learned I would be working with 50 students aged between 9 and 12, assisted by just one classroom teacher, and that our morning's work had to result in a performance to be viewed by the entire school.

I felt an enormous sense of responsibility. These kids rarely got to experience a drama class – and they had almost certainly never encountered Shakespeare before. I wanted to leave my actors and the entire school with a positive impression, so that when they next had the opportunity to take a drama class, or when they studied Shakespeare later, they would feel enthusiastic.

But how could I achieve that with 50 students of mixed ages, one assistant without drama experience, only one morning to get the work done, and a huge school gym as our performance space?

We played a few warm-up games first, with the purpose of awakening the imagination and introducing the concept of the performance ensemble. Then, without mentioning Shakespeare at all, I told the students we were going to work together to stage a shipwreck at sea. We would create the storm, and the ship, and the characters on that ship.

During our scene, the storm would increase in power, breaking the ship in two. One student asked how that would be possible on a stage – he'd seen it done in movies, but they had a real sea and we didn't. I told the students that if we believed in what we were creating, then the audience would, too.

We moved immediately into practical work. I divided the class into groups of "mariners" and asked each group to come up with a job of work they might do on a ship. When we reassembled, we had mariners swabbing the deck, hauling ropes, trimming the sails, climbing the mast, turning a huge, imaginary ship's wheel, and peering through telescopes.

Next, I had the students re-imagine their chosen action as it might be performed in the middle of a raging tempest, and we watched those performances.

As a third exercise, the entire group of 50 came together to attempt a challenge: If our gym was the deck of a ship, and the ship was being tossed by a storm, how would we all perform our actions while convincingly all swaying back and forth in the same direction? Several groups tried out solutions, clutching each other.

At the suggestion of one of the students, we introduced a number of “codes.” At particular signals, we’d all lurch toward starboard or port. Now it was possible for our giant, gym-sized ship to be tossed by a storm as we attempted to do our jobs as mariners – and we would all react the same way.

So at this point, we had different groups of mariners performing different jobs of work and a means of moving convincingly in a storm. Visually, our piece was taking shape. Several students volunteered for speaking parts, and they received the short, opening scene from *The Tempest*. (For a copy of this, annotated with staging suggestions, see **Appendix 1**.)

While these students read through their lines, we divided the rest of the class into smaller groups and had them create sound effects for the storm. One group was responsible for the sounds of the waves and the creaking boat.

Another group took on human sounds – the heaving, panting, and calling of the sailors, and the sounds of terror as the storm increased and the boat broke in two. A further group hunted down found instruments to create the sound effects of the storm itself.

Finally, all the groups came together again to share their creations and orchestrate everything into a collage of sound. One student volunteered to conduct our symphony of noises, and the group elected to have him do so in our final show.

With just an hour to go to our performance, I told our actors a little about Shakespeare’s play, *The Tempest*, and we listened to our actors read their lines. We all moved together across the gym, first walking as the Master, then as mariners, and then as the lords – exploring how power dynamics are expressed in body language and gesture. We listed the insults thrown by the lords at the mariners, such as, “you bawling, blasphemous, incharitable dog!” and tried them out on one another for fun.

What was surprising at this stage of the project was not just how invested the students were in creating their performance piece, but how much meaning they grasped from the language, without any explanation at all – probably because they saw the language as just one of many theatrical tools they were using, rather than daunting and unfamiliar words on a page.

The students were easily able to explain that the lords were mad at the mariners because, normally, the mariners would be like servants in their eyes and have to do everything they were told – but the storm had reversed the power dynamics, the mariners were in charge, and the lords seemed feeble and useless.

“Judging by this opening scene,” I asked the actors, “what do you think the rest of the play might be about?”

The students said they thought it would be about what happened to the survivors – that maybe when the ship sunk some people would swim to an island.

“Yes,” I said, “you’re right. Some of the characters on the ship must make it to shore, or there wouldn’t be a play! And what themes do you think the play will explore?”

Their suggestions were spot-on. The play was going to be about power because, even in the middle of a storm, that’s what the opening scene is about: why people want power and what



happens when people take power from one another. The play would be about different kinds of power and the control we sometimes have over each other.

“And what about the storm?” I asked, writing the word “catalyst” on the board. We spoke about how stories require some sort of spark to ignite the action. That’s what the storm at sea was doing here – providing a catalyst. The story could only happen because of the shipwrecked sailors. The students briefly discussed recent movies they had seen and what catalysts ignited the action in each case.

After this brief teaching moment, we moved back into learning by doing. To create our performance, we combined our physical theatre pieces and soundscape with the dialogue.

There was one final and very important question we still had to answer: When the audience arrived, where would they sit? At one side of the gym was a small, raised stage. A student pointed out that plays were normally done there, with the audience sitting on the floor of the gym. But everyone agreed that wasn’t going to work in this case. We asked why – and it was immediately noted by the kids that our play was exciting for all of us because we were inside it – feeling like we really were on a boat at sea. If we wanted our audience to have the same experience, then we needed to offer them that feeling.

Environmental theatre and the audience/actor relationships are concepts that could have been introduced at the start, but it’s always more powerful when students discover things for themselves, when they see a concept played out practically in front of them – and then articulate why it works.

In the end, the students opted to have their audience file in, line all four walls of the gym and link arms to form the shape of the ship. The student audience would be used by us to create our boat.

There were the expected questions at this point – what about backstage? Where would the actors exit? Was it okay to turn your back on audience members? Could we have theatre without a stage, and without the audience sitting down? But at this point, the students were so excited by the concept they felt they had invented, that they were willing to sweep aside their doubts.

The performance we staged was rough, yet the actors and audience members were delighted, and the learning experience as profound as we had hoped. Actors had discovered for themselves that, with a sense of truth and the right physical and vocal skills, you can create anything on stage and have the audience believe in it. They had learned that theatre can be an immersive experience and can happen anywhere. They had grappled with a small segment of Shakespeare’s language, unlocking themes and discovering important things about power dynamics and conflict.

They had experienced mime, movement, choral work, and vocal masque. They had learned that, with the right theatrical devices, action can be as compelling in live performance as on film – perhaps more so. They had created a performance and discovered for themselves the important components of an opening scene. And they had discovered that Shakespeare is visually exciting to work with.

Shakespeare offers us endless scenes to which this action-before-words strategy can be applied in the drama studio. When Sampson and Gregory swagger on at the start of *Romeo and Juliet*, they are mischievous teenagers with energy to expend, acting out in a public place. What does this mean? Students can create the world of a busy market around the two of them.

When we first see Lysander and Hermia wandering through the wood in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, how might we use music, mask, and movement to establish the magical world that exists invisibly around them?

When *Henry V* delivers his famous speech, "Once more unto the breach, dear friends," he does so to groups of soldiers in the midst of a battle – how can we create this chaotic atmosphere?

Coriolanus opens with a riot on the city streets, offering terrific opportunities for group movement, character work, and an exploration of power dynamics.

In Act III Scene 2 of *The Winter's Tale*, Hermione defends herself in a public court of law that is bursting with all kinds of people from common townfolk to courtiers and the husband who has accused her. Creating their identities, their entrances, their various groupings and their individual reactions to her defence provides a drama class with untold opportunities.

Shakespeare is packed full of action scenes ripe for the exploring. And in all of them, text is minimal and the domain of a few characters – while a world of movement and conflict unfolds around them. There are battles, supernatural scenes, tavern brawls, storms, shipwrecks, comedic fights, scenes in courtrooms and at court, banquets, riots and plays within plays that require multiple students as onstage audience members as well as performers.

All these offer the drama teacher an opportunity to demonstrate that theatre is a visual medium – and that words on a page are less daunting and easily assume their meaning when they are explored in the context of compelling action on the stage.

Let's take a detailed look at one more example: In Act I Scene 2 of *As You Like It*, the downtrodden Orlando wrestles the mighty Charles for his honour, while Duke Frederick, Rosalind, Celia, Le Beau and the entire court look on. This is a terrific action scene to have your students create in groups of 5-8 people – and any of the characters can be played by either gender.

First, make it clear that, without stage combat training, physical contact or any action that might result in it is not an option. So, students must create the wrestling match using melodrama, comedy, and focus.

This sounds daunting, but it is far easier than you would think. To begin, have the entire class watch two volunteers. The first plays Orlando. He is asked to jog confidently from the rear to the front of the stage, waving his fists, smiling, and making eye contact with each audience member one by one, before freezing stage left. His goal is to convey the message that he is strong and confident. Encourage the other students to cheer while he does this.

Next, Charles, the wrestling champion, enters. He is asked to upstage Orlando in confidence and enthusiasm, waving his fists and jogging across the front of the stage area as he conveys that he is the ultimate champion and will crush all opponents. Again, the audience cheers. Then Charles freezes stage right.

Now, while Charles remains frozen, Orlando unfreezes, makes eye contact with the audience to signal continued confidence in his own fighting abilities, then does a double take as he notices the formidable Charles. Orlando takes in how threatening Charles appears to be, then looks back to the audience and signals shock and horror – using eye contact, facial expression, and his body.

Explain that this is how the audience is pulled into the action taking place on stage – through the actor's use of body language and eye contact. The wrestling match can be achieved



entirely through use of physical theatre in this way (though if your actors know the proper way to fall safely on stage, that's a bonus).

As they begin to fight, one actor can swing a slow-motion punch as the other one ducks. One can run at the other, who sidesteps. Of course, Orlando is the underdog in this scene and must come across as the more intelligent and the ultimate victor. But with that single proviso, the so-called wrestling scene can play out in whatever way the group wishes.

There are technically only two wrestlers – Orlando and Charles – but there's no reason why the fight can't spill out into the arena, with Celia and Rosalind doing something to help towards Orlando's victory. And, of course, the other actors in the scene are essential because it is their reactions that guide the responses of the audience.

Once groups have a piece of physical theatre ready to go, with Orlando and Charles facing one another in the arena, everyone else reacting, and Orlando ultimately victorious, you can add the dialogue.

Use the section of Act I Scene 2 that begins with Charles' line, "Come, where is this young gallant that is so desirous to lie with his mother earth?" and ends with Le Beau's line, "He cannot speak, my lord." That's about 16 lines in total, with six speaking parts – a small enough segment that most students can quickly memorize their lines.

Again, words are seen as a part of the performance we create, rather than the only thing that matters. You will be surprised at how much students will learn about character motivation and theme, even from a segment as short as this.

Creating a piece of theatre from scratch as part of a group is an invaluable experience for young people, as most of us already recognize. It encourages a sense of solidarity, of creative unity, and reinforces the valuable lesson that when we band together with energy, enthusiasm, and the will to achieve, we can create so much more than we can alone.

And when the starting point for such an experience is Shakespeare, the sense of achievement is all the greater because we are grappling with something we think of as difficult, something that we assumed belongs to people far more articulate and literate than we are.

The end result is an experience that can be enormously profound for young people, planting the idea that the classics belong not to an elite group of people after all, but to everyone. And that no matter how young we are, no matter what challenges we think we face, Shakespeare and others like him speak to us.

When young people learn this for themselves, every future foray into literature, classical performance, and other art forms seems a little less daunting. And, as a drama teacher, you've given them this while meeting many more of your key teaching objectives.

CHAPTER 2



ISSUES AND IDEAS

We have seen that action is a useful way to begin exploring Shakespeare with your students – but it isn't the only one. Shakespeare is widely performed not only because his plays are compelling and entertaining, but also because they continue to speak to all of us. His themes are as relevant to us today as they were to his original audiences more than 400 years ago.

When you introduce students to Shakespeare by exploring his themes actively in the drama classroom, you have an opportunity to relate those themes directly to your students' lives. Actors see for themselves that the issues Shakespeare grappled with are often the same ones they struggle with daily, and they may even feel that Shakespeare successfully puts into words things they feel but cannot express.

We tend to think of our lives today as vastly different from those of all previous generations. It's a powerful discovery for young people that previous generations grappled with the same life problems they are facing.

So, let's look at one of Shakespeare's key themes in detail and examine how this theme relates to the lives of our students. I'm going to present you with a sequence of drama activities that examine the concept of **AMBITION** as explored by Shakespeare, and as it relates to our students' lived experience.

By presenting one sequence of workshop activities in detail, rather than tackling several themes only briefly, I hope to offer you a clear sense of how Shakespeare's themes can be used to introduce a variety of theatrical concepts to your students and to pique their interest in his plays. In **Appendix 2**, I have also outlined a further four themes common to Shakespeare's plays that you and your students should have no problem relating to their lives.

Macbeth is the ultimate play about the attractions and pitfalls of ambition. The main character tastes power when Duncan awards him with an additional title after his success in battle, and this inspires him to kill the king to seize the throne for himself.

But Shakespeare's study of a person who will stop at nothing to get what he wants is far more complex than it seems. In medieval and Renaissance drama, a character's internal struggles were often represented externally through other characters, or spirits, or objects.

The witches foretell Macbeth's future. And in doing so they give voice to his darker desires and inclinations. The dagger Macbeth sees floating in the air is a further manifestation of his desires.

In *Lady Macbeth*, we have a character who initially appears firm and resolute, but later shows herself to be far less aware of the consequences of their actions than Macbeth. Despite his evil intentions, Macbeth acts with his eyes wide open. He knows that murdering Duncan will set him on a pathway to further murders.

This is what I mean when I say that Shakespeare offers a complex and multifaceted examination of the themes he explores, thereby encouraging our students to think deeply in

their own creative work. An excess of ambition transforms and destroys Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in very different ways – and it destroys their world, too.

Whether your intention is to find a way into the further study of *Macbeth*, to excite your students about classical theatre, or simply to offer a thought-provoking drama workshop, structuring a class around the exploration of ambition is a great way to engage your students in practical drama activities – and to demonstrate that Shakespeare’s preoccupations are not that different from our own. We may not be setting out to seize a throne, but we understand the human desire to become more than we already are.

Here are five activities you could weave into a drama class with the purpose of exploring the theme of ambition:

Firstly, as students enter, scatter index cards on the floor. Ask them to write on each card an ambitious goal for the future that they have heard expressed by someone in their school. Examples might include “travel the world for a year,” or “act on Broadway.”

Place the students in groups and ask each group to choose one of the index cards. Their job is to tell the story of a fictional character who achieves the ambition written on the card, but only by doing things they should not have done.

The plot of their story should unfold in a sequence of five narrated tableaux. The third and fourth tableaux in the sequence should visually portray the character doing things that are blatantly wrong and damaging to others in order to further their ambition. The fifth tableaux will show the flawed protagonist at the height of their success.

Have groups perform and narrate their tableaux sequences to one another once they are finished and invite a discussion about staging and sequencing. As theatre practitioners, how do we successfully condense a story into just a few images? How do we decide what to present to an audience and what to leave out? How can we present complex ideas in a frozen image?

Now, introduce Macbeth’s dagger soliloquy. To do this, you can either show them a movie clip of the soliloquy or read it to them. You also need to explain the context. Macbeth is seriously considering whether to murder the king. He is allowing himself to visualize the possibility of doing so and showing his awareness that the murder will set him on a path from which there is no return.

Here is the soliloquy:

*Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle towards my hand? Come let me clutch thee –
I have thee not and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat oppressed brain?*

When Macbeth sees the dagger floating in front of him, it isn’t because he’s crazy. The dagger offers the audience a window into Macbeth’s mind. Macbeth is trying to decide whether to go through with Duncan’s murder, and he’s anticipating what it will feel like to kill his king.

The dagger soliloquy also demonstrates to an audience that Macbeth’s ambitions have become all-consuming. He can think of nothing else now, and he is moving closer to committing the crime that will change the path of his life, and his country, forever.

In a second workshop activity, ask your students to return to their groups and add to their tableaux sequence. Ask them to pick a moment just before the third tableau when the main character had to decide whether to go through with their plan. The equivalent point in Macbeth's story is the moment when he sees the dagger beckoning to Duncan's chamber, and must decide whether to follow it.

In medieval drama, the process of moral decision-making was often represented by so-called "good" and "bad" angels who spoke to the main character, arguing for and against the decision they were about to make. That's what your actors should do now – represent the complexity of the thought process behind the terrible choice their character is about to make.

One person should play the main character, and two of the others should play the good and bad angel – or in other words, the two conflicting voices inside the character's head. The remaining students are responsible for writing the short piece of dialogue and directing the scene. The good and bad angels tell the protagonist what they should do and the protagonist listens to each viewpoint, perhaps asking questions. The scene of conflict ends with the main protagonist deciding what path they will take.

Give your students time to build and rehearse their scenes, then bring the class together again to view each group's tableaux sequences a second time – only now, with the good and bad angel debate inserted before the third tableau. Ask students to consider how each group ramps up tension by presenting both sides of the protagonist's dilemma – and how they show the thought processes the main character must go through before making their life-changing decision.

It is always tough to present a decision-making process on stage, because such a process is likely to happen inside a person's head. The good and bad angel technique is one way to present a moral dilemma on stage. Can your students think of any other strategies that might be used?

A solution we often see used in movies, TV, and contemporary theatre is to give the main character a confidante, a best friend who will force them to face the consequences of any decision they might make.

Now that we are beginning to expand on our five tableaux, we are starting to unpack the concept of ambition, encouraging our students to explore its complexity. We are also identifying staging dilemmas and discussing possible solutions. Shakespeare used soliloquies to unpack the complex thoughts of his characters, and many writers still use that technique today.

For the third activity in this unit, invite your student groups to create a short monologue that can be inserted into their sequence of five tableaux. They can write the monologue collectively, and then all group members direct one student who plays the main character.

The goal of the soliloquy is to explore the character's thoughts and feelings, just seconds after they perform their first dishonest or deceitful act to further their ambitions. So, the soliloquy will eventually be inserted after the third tableau.

Before groups begin to work, share with them the tension-filled scene between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth that happens immediately after Macbeth kills Duncan. Ask them: What are Macbeth's immediate feelings after he commits the murder? (He worries he will never be able to sleep again.) Lady Macbeth warns him that if they dwell too much on what they have done, they will lose their sanity.



Inform your students that they are going to look at the feelings of their chosen character in the seconds after they commit their first dishonest deed – but they are going to put those feelings into a soliloquy.

Before they begin, ask them to consider what makes a good soliloquy. Macbeth's dagger soliloquy heightens the drama by moving Macbeth – and the audience – one step closer to his heinous crime.

What other functions might a soliloquy serve? How do we give a soliloquy shape and purpose? How do we make it dramatically interesting to watch and to listen to?

This is a difficult challenge, so divide it into manageable chunks. For the first half hour, students should work in their groups to collectively write a short soliloquy. Then for the second portion of the activity, the class comes together to offer feedback on one another's soliloquies. Students return to their groups and apply any of the changes that other students have suggested.

Next, group members direct one of their number in rehearsal, as they stand the soliloquy on its feet. Finally, the groups put their entire pieces together – the five tableaux, the good and bad angel scene, and the soliloquy they have written. All groups watch one another's work again and offer feedback.

As we move on to our next activity, we will start to consider the very human emotions that come with making terrible decisions to further our own advancement. In Shakespeare's play, Macbeth is consumed by so much guilt that by the end of the play he can barely cope with the struggle to stay alive. Lady Macbeth's prediction comes true – she goes mad.

Shakespeare demonstrates that there are consequences to our actions. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are ultimately destroyed by their lust for power. The sequence of five tableaux our groups have created so far only take their protagonists to the height of their power.

Now it's time for groups to create the last portion of their performance pieces and show what happens to their main character because of their excessive ambition and the terrible things they have done to get what they want. Naturally, the work they do now will fit at the end of their five original tableaux.

For this activity, we are going to move into the realm of physical theatre, and work with masks. Simple neutral masks are best for this. If you don't already have these, you can buy them easily online. What you're looking for is identical plain masks – often in white plastic – with a neutral expression. They are useful for all sorts of work in the drama classroom because students can use body language to imply changes in facial expression.

If you can't find a set of neutral masks, you can have your students make their own using paper mache. You won't need any experience teaching mask for this exercise, but you will need a mask for each student and some large pieces of fabric for them to work with – white, black, red, or grey would be best.

To begin, invite your student groups to unpack the feelings that their main character might have about their wrongdoings as time passes. Ask them to list words that describe these feelings – words like remorse, terror, self-loathing, and misery.

Now, introduce the task your students must complete: Their job will be to create a nightmare sequence. The protagonist will be represented by a blanket thrown in the middle of their performance area, and all group members must become creatures of the main character's nightmare, haunting them with the terrible memory of their crime. Students can create sounds, either electronically or with found objects.

They can also make use of darkness and light – either your studio lights or flashlights. They can use the large pieces of fabric and they can use the masks. However, the masks must be worn on other parts of the body than the face. This exercise is a great *way in* to further mask work because students learn for themselves the power of mask. And because they are working so creatively with them, no one needs any prior mask experience.

To demonstrate the potential of this idea, choose a student with long hair. Ask them to bend at the waist, so the top of their head faces the audience and their hair dangles down. Now, invite them to place the mask on the top of their head, so that it faces the rest of the class. Their own face is hidden, and the result is a creature with blank features and an elongated neck – something that looks hideous and unnatural.

Invite a second student to wrap themselves from head to toe in one of the fabric pieces and to crouch down. They should place a neutral mask on their hand, like a puppet, with the fingers poking through the eye holes. This mask should be held in front of their stomach, underneath the fabric. While the class watches, ask them to slowly sneak the puppet-mask through a gap in the fabric. Here is a nightmarish head, growing out of a grotesque mound-like body.

By this point, your students will probably be laughing – but they will also be eager to explore for themselves the potential of masks used in this way.

Ask them to return to their groups and begin creating a physical theatre piece to reflect the nightmarish images that appear to the protagonist in the darkness of night when their feelings of guilt and remorse are at their height. They can experiment with different ways to use the masks to create creatures of nightmare.

For example, what happens if an actor places masks on their knees, and walks like a crab? Could they create a creature with two or three heads? Introducing masks like this often empowers students to experiment with physical movement, even if normally they might be reluctant to do so.

And as the protagonist is represented in each movement piece by a blanket in the middle of the performance space, all students get to participate in the creation of the nightmare sequence.

It's a good idea to record video of each of these pieces as groups work on them and then play the footage back so that students under fabric and in the masks can see the effect of the work they are creating.

Then finally, bring the class together to view and discuss the finished physical theatre pieces.

Now we're moving to the final activity in our unit. Ask students to think about their five original tableaux. The final tableau in their sequence showed the main character at the height of their power. This would be followed by the physical theatre piece they have just created – which shows that the protagonist is haunted by their actions. Now, to end our group performances, we must chart the downfall of our main characters.

To begin doing this, introduce students to Macbeth's final soliloquy, which is spoken moments before he is killed by Macduff. You can do this by reading the soliloquy or showing a video clip.

The soliloquy is as follows:

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

As a class, examine the meaning of the soliloquy. Invite students to suggest words that describe Macbeth's emotional state in the last moments of his life. Then ask one volunteer from each group to join you to make an extra group. These students will work together to understand and to practice reciting the soliloquy, before returning to their original groups.

Meanwhile, other group members create a final three tableaux to end their performance sequence. These tableaux must take their protagonist from the end of their nightmare to their final downfall. And that doesn't have to be death, of course. It could be an emotional collapse, or arrest, or abandonment by everyone around them – however they choose to represent it.

As a final step, the students who have been working on text return to their groups and Shakespeare's words are laid on top of the three final tableaux.

The last step in this unit is for all groups to add whatever props, costumes, or sound effects they wish, and to polish their performances before sharing the completed pieces with the class.

All performances on the theme of ambition will now consist of two opening tableaux, followed by the good and bad angel debate, followed by a third tableau which shows the protagonist doing something unspeakable to advance their ambitions.

This is followed by a soliloquy, the fourth and fifth tableaux, and the nightmare sequence. And the final three tableaux will show the hero's downfall, overlaid by the narration of Shakespeare's Tomorrow soliloquy.

The impact of a unit like this is powerful. Your students have seen for themselves that a key Shakespearean theme is as relevant today as it was 400 years ago. They have worked with various theatre styles and created a complete performance in groups. They have been introduced to Shakespearean text, using it in a way that demystifies it.

By layering on the various steps, we have encouraged them to view a concept in a complex and sophisticated way. And when the project is done, they are probably all eager to read *Macbeth* and to work with Shakespeare again.

Teaching Resources

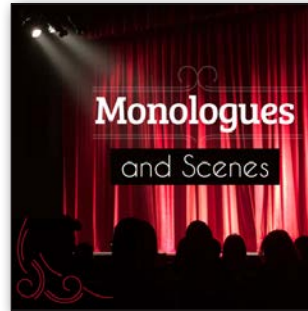
Quality resources to use in your drama classroom



The Drama Classroom Companion

The Drama Classroom Companion is filled with articles and exercises to build the skills needed for theatrical performance as well as real world skills like creative thinking, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication.

theatrefolk.com/companion

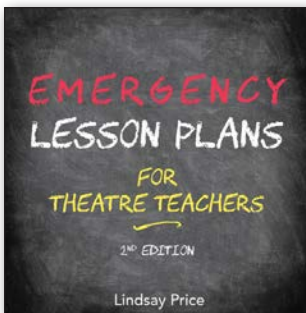


Monologue and Scene Collections

Whether it's for classwork, competitions or auditions, these collections of student-appropriate monologues and scenes can help you find what you're looking for.

All monologues and scenes come from published plays and include running-times, descriptions, character notes and staging suggestions.

theatrefolk.com/collections



Emergency Lesson Plans For Theatre Teachers

Emergency Lesson Plans For Theatre Teachers, 2nd edition gives you the tools and resources you need to confidently leave your class in the hands of a substitute teacher. Customize your lesson plans to suit the specific needs of your class when you can't be there.

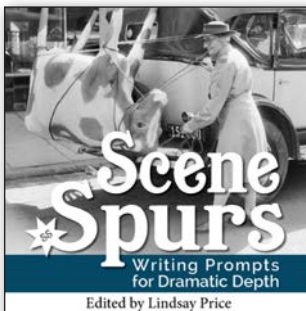
theatrefolk.com/elp



The Student Director's Handbook

Help students take their show from first audition to opening night with *The Student Director's Handbook*. This easy-to-use ebook is full of guidelines, tips and templates designed to help students create a vision, circumvent problems and organize rehearsals on their way to a successful production.

theatrefolk.com/student-director



Scene-Spurs: Writing Prompts for Dramatic Depth

Scene Spurs is a collection of photo-based writing prompts developed by playwright Lindsay Price. The set includes 35 different Spurs along with an instruction guide to integrate them into your drama classroom.

theatrefolk.com/spurs

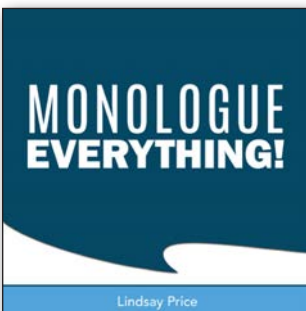


Write Your Own Vignette Play

Your students want to write and perform an original play. You want to include a playwriting unit in your program. But where to start? What if your students have never written a play before? What if you've never written before?

Write Your Own Vignette Play will answer all your questions and more

theatrefolk.com/write_vignette



The Monologue Everything Program

Want your students to write their own monologues? Have you tried to incorporate monologue units into the classroom with less-than-satisfactory results?

theatrefolk.com/monologue-everything



Competition Material

Plays, monologues, and scenes for drama competitions including royalty information and exemptions.

theatrefolk.com/competition



Practical Technical Theater: The Complete Solution for Technical Theater Classrooms

This series of instructional DVDs is perfect for the teacher who feels more at home with a prompt book than a hammer, and would welcome a new, visually oriented teaching tool for their tech classes and production crews.

theatrefolk.com/ptt



www.theatrefolk.com/resources