## Why do we stage Shakespeare with our youth theatre?

by Peter Hussey

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Kildare Youth Theatre aims to stage one classic verse play each year. Previous Shakespearian productions included *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, which we’ve look at twice. At the time of writing we are rehearsing *Othello* for performance in May 2015.

The draw to Shakespeare is immensely powerful. Aside from all of the practical advantages (a large cast with roles for everyone; deepening understanding of Junior and Leaving cert texts for cast members studying them; the plays can effectively be performed anywhere, in or out of theatres; they don’t need lights, sound or a set to work) staging a Shakespeare play opens up a world of challenge and risk that can appeal hugely to ambitious young people with quick minds and open hearts.

While the characters and situations engage their empathy, and help them understand overwhelming emotional impulses, the demands of speaking the iambic verse introduces them to a tool-box of techniques that are absolutely absent from any other educational activity in which they are involved. It is not difficult to perform engaging dialogue in iambic form, but it requires a lot of detailed work. There are tools to learn, which when practiced, show immediate and positive results. This sense of being able to apply novel resources to solve a complex problem builds confidence and contributes to a sense of positive achievement in a young performer.

In addition to the development of technical skills, staging a Shakespeare play offers us a lens though which we can appraise the world around us. Working on *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, allows young people to study the condition of being in love. Using tools such as *actioning* and thought-tracking over such a long and detailed piece of work exposes a young performer to a rich psychology of desire which they can – and must – apply to their own lives. Everyone loves learning about themselves. And there is no better lens than Shakespeare through which to analyse your own self. The great critic Harold Bloom maintains that Shakespeare ‘invented’ the human: in that Shakespeare presented us with the first collection of psychologically complex characters that pretty much charts all of human experience, motivations and conditions.1 If this is so, then we can *find* ourselves in Shakespeare. Judi Dench and Fiona Shaw both talk about how playing a role in Shakespeare expands what you knew about yourself in a fairly measurable way.2 In our work, we interview young people who’ve staged *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* and they say the same. The way they speak about their experience (how, for example, “Juliet taught me things”, or “Romeo lived with me and changed me”) shows not an affected preciousness about being in a classic play, but a deep critical awareness of how a work of art can profoundly affect and change us.3

Staging a classic often offers young people the chance to develop their research skills, not only into the period and theme contexts, but also into the language (unravelling meaning; fostering vocabulary development; appreciating the uses and types of rhetoric). While lot of this activity can happen at school (using the classroom as a space for detailed research into character and situation) much of it can be done alone online as there are countless resources now available to help performers.

Plays like *Romeo and Juliet* provide great space for stage combat (finally putting all those workshops into actual use!). Our young people used their knowledge of how people move in games, hero and epic films, and horseplay to create the fight scenes themselves – thus increasing ownership and authenticity in the making of the piece.

Performing Shakespeare involves commitment to getting it wrong: embracing the likelihood that many moments will be misinterpreted, that the pace will drag in places, and that the thought will not be clear in several speeches. This is why it demands time. We rehearse at least twice a week and from October to May. We try not to lose sight of the fact that while the learning for the cast can be immense, the return for the audience must be worthwhile (or at the very least, the audience must not be made ‘endure’ the company’s learning curve). This of course is true for any drama, but it is often easy to lose sight of it when the project challenges the artistic team as much as it does the performers (eg “Aren’t they brilliant to have learnt so many lines” is surely not a sufficient marker of quality). So, performing Shakespeare requires that we also, as creative theatre makers, must embark on our *own* immeasurable learning journeys, take risks, build confidence, and support our ambition with technique.

What’s not to like about that?

References

1 Harold Bloom, *The Invention of the Human* (Riverhead Trade; 1st edition; 1999).

2 Filmed interviews with Fiona Shaw, Judi Dench and many others in the engrossing *Muse of Fire* project for Shakespeare’s Globe can be found here: <https://globeplayer.tv/museoffire>

3 Interviews with young performers on playing Shakespeare are available on-line at Crooked House’s Vimeo page here <https://vimeo.com/user26080482/videos> Also in this collection are filmed scenes, other interviews, and excerpts from performances.