

## Drama in the English Classroom

### Teaching *Macbeth* to NYC teenagers

Bloody sword fights, secret marriages, mistaken identities, corrupt leaders, witches and spells. Are you hooked yet? These are all themes that can undoubtedly appeal to the youth of today's society. Young people today are so knee-deep in technology, text messages, and Facebook, that they hardly have time or interest to read books, let alone Shakespeare's plays. They think that Shakespeare was this "old, white guy," who wrote boring plays with stale characters. They could not be more wrong. The task of teachers today is to make Shakespeare relevant and accessible to students. The issues that plagued Shakespeare's characters are common and pertinent in everyone's lives, and the method to understanding Shakespeare does not have to be as difficult as one would think. His stories and characters are eternal, and many of his themes occur over and over again in films, modern literature, and theatre. There is no better way for teachers and students to prove that Shakespeare is manageable, relevant, and completely timeless than by incorporating dramatic activities into the Shakespearean English classroom.

When I first told the 10<sup>th</sup> grade that our next unit would be Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, they were annoyed and disinterested. They claimed Shakespeare was like reading a "foreign language" and they did not understand why they were forced to study his works. After they read *Romeo and Juliet* in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, they were left with a bored and disengaged relationship with Shakespeare. I knew that one way to get into their hearts and minds would be to approach *Macbeth* through a different lens. Shakespeare was meant to be read aloud and performed on stage, not read quietly in desks.

In many ELA classrooms, English teachers have no drama background. They often look at Shakespeare from the "English" side and have the students read the scenes aloud, but usually sitting in a circle in their desks. This does not provide for an engaging atmosphere (to say the least), and the students in my 10<sup>th</sup> grade class were unimpressed with *Macbeth*. As an artist and a director, I set out to incorporate dramatic activities into this unit to keep the students engaged and excited.

After reading Act 1, one of the first dramatic activities I incorporated was "roll on the wall" with the characters. I had the class break up into small groups and gave each group one of the major characters (Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Duncan, Banquo, Macduff) to work on. Using my model, the students drew an empty "body" or outline of their character. Then they wrote words to describe this character's personality, emotions, ambitions, etc. They were to differentiate their words by writing inner qualities on the inside of the body, and outer qualities on the outside. Once this was accomplished, the students had to defend their words by writing direct quotes on the back of the paper. Quotes said by the character, or about the character that would support the words they chose.

The students loved this activity and worked together as groups to accomplish the task. It was rewarding to see different types of learners using their strengths. The artists of the group added detail to the drawing, while the more “academic” of the kids found the direct quotes. This exercise was a great success and can be modified and used in any ELA classroom. Tracing a character in a novel or play is integral to the learning, and this roll on the wall is a fun and engaging way to do just that. Also, since it is not so exposing, it is a great way to warm up both teachers and students to the benefits of drama in the English classroom.

Another activity that proved to deepen the student’s understanding was a soundscape. While reading Act 4, Scene 1, one of the major objectives I wanted to get across was the atmosphere created by the three witches. These witches are so important in studying *Macbeth* that it was crucial that the students were interested in them as characters. I created a lesson where the students used a soundscape of dogs howling, owls hooting, and wind blowing, and inserted these sounds into an edited version of 4. 1. In groups, the students created these sounds to enhance the spooky, dark tone of the play. Not only did this exercise deepen their understanding of the scene, but it also got them out of the chairs and awake and engaged.

An interesting occurrence happened one day in the classroom that proved the power of dramatic activities. We teach four sections of 10<sup>th</sup> grade English. The first three sections were before lunch on this Wednesday in March. In the first three classes, we had the students stay seated in their desks and read Act 5, Scene 2 aloud in a “popcorn” fashion—one person reads a line, and then calls on the next. The reading was a bit monotone but the class got through it. After lunch, I decided to approach the reading differently for the last class. Instead of the popcorn reading, I “cast” the scene and had the students stand in front of their class and act it out. The reading felt successful, but it was only until the next day when the true comprehension was measured. We asked all 4 classes the same questions referring to plot of the previous scene. Only the fourth class (the one where the scene was acted) knew what had happened in the scene and picked up on subtle nuances of Shakespeare’s writing! The other three classes were confused and not sure of what happened in the scene. This anecdote is proof that acting does enhance student’s learning and comprehension of a text.

Because of this experience, we decided that instead of having the students write a final paper on *Macbeth*, they would perform scenes. We gave each class sheets where they could indicate their favorite scenes to be performed. We spent hours putting together the scenes and casting the roles. We told the students we expect full memorization, costumes, set design, and background information for all the characters. We gave them two weeks of rehearsal time and expected a high level of performance at the end. Of course, we were not grading them on their acting, but on their effort, memorization, and interpretation of the text.

Since performance and acting is my strong suit, I led the next two weeks and created schedules and rehearsals for the students. I stayed after school every day to work with students who needed extra help. I put together a monologue workshop

for the students who chose to work alone and perform a monologue or soliloquy. I set aside a special day to work with these students on their soliloquies. In this session, we began by talking about each speech in detail. When working on a Shakespearean monologue, a student must first understand *what* the monologue is doing. Is Macbeth torn between allegiance to Duncan and his intense ambition? Is Lady Macbeth summoning spirits to help her become more masculine and “unsex me here?” By understanding the goal and motive of each character, students can understand where the monologue is going and what the pace and intensity should be. The next step is to mark the end of each sentence on the monologue itself. Using a rope, students will pull at the end of each sentence, marking the beats that Shakespeare indented. Below is a detailed plan of how I used this monologue workshop with my students:

### ***Shakespeare’s Beats and Images***

#### *Exercises for the classroom*

*One of the most important things in performing a monologue is recognizing where the pauses (beats) should be. Take a second and mark the end of each sentence on your paper with colored pencils. (What makes a sentence? Period, question mark, exclamation point).*

Now need one volunteer to work with me on monologue.

1. Say monologue to me on intensity of 5/volume 5
2. Use rope (student on one end, teacher on other). Ask student to say speech and pull at the beginning of each sentence.
3. Ask student what she felt when using the rope? Did the meaning of her monologue change? Ask class what they noticed.
4. In pairs, have them use rope technique on each monologue
5. Debrief, what did you notice about your own monologue?

*Now back to the text, circle the most important phrase or sentence in your monologue. Ask for another volunteer to work with me*

1. Say monologue at intensity 5/volume 5
2. Ask what was the most important phrase? Have student think of a still image/gesture that goes along with it.
3. Use still image/gesture as you deliver your monologue. When you say the most important line, freeze in the image and only come out of it when you feel the moment is over.
4. Ask student what she felt when using the image? Did the meaning of her monologue change? Ask class what they noticed.
5. Repeat the exercise in pairs.
6. Debrief, what did you notice about your own monologue?

This activity proved to be successful when coaching these students through the rehearsal process. Since most of them were not actors, being able to mark their

pauses and pull the ropes on beats really helped them breakdown the language. Most of the students showed significant improvement and cited the rope technique as one of the most helpful tactics to getting to the meat of their speeches.

Not only did I work with students on their soliloquies, but also helped groups unpack and stage their scenes. I encouraged students to think big and to be creative in their blocking and costumes. One group turned “Double, double toil and trouble” into a rap. Another added humor to the witches and made them “silly and youthful.” We encouraged different interpretation of these witches by showing several video clips and suggesting there was no wrong way of portrayal. The scenes were so creative and funny that the principal even watched and commented on how proud and impressed he was by their hard work and effort.

We did meet with some issues though, especially over memorization. The students thought it was unfair and “pointless” to force them to memorize their scenes. They argued daily, and wanted to bring index card on stage with them. To help, I gave them techniques to help them memorize and stayed after school and during lunch to run lines with them. Although there were some students who faltered on stage, the majority of the kids were memorized and performed brilliantly. When debriefing these scenes, the students said that memorizing really helped them understand what Shakespeare was saying. Since they had to fully know *what they meant* when they were speaking in order to commit it to memory, they had no choice but to learn and comprehend the complex language.

All in all, I do not feel there is a better and more authentic way to combine drama and English than by studying Shakespeare. His plays are timeless and engaging for adults, but for high school students, they sometimes do not “click.” It is our duty as teachers to make Shakespeare relevant and accessible to students of all ages. Sitting and reading the plays is not sufficient. Incorporating drama into the curriculum can make Shakespeare come to life. It is not about “acting” in English class. It is about using drama to delve deeper into the meaning of texts. It is about using drama to create confidence in young people. Is its about using drama to give student’s a voice. I cannot say enough how much I believe in integrating the two disciplines and creating lessons that foster the marriage of drama and English.