

# A Play in a Day

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**A description of and reflections on a project in which seven Grahamstown government schools - four from the township - read, rehearsed and performed a Shakespeare play in a single day (2014)**

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## **Context**

Having recently returned to this country after spending ten years teaching English in the UK, where a complete play by Shakespeare is no longer a requirement for GCSE English, I expressed an interest in the current trends in teaching Shakespeare in a post-apartheid South Africa. I was disappointed, but not surprised to learn that the situation was very similar here: that it is not compulsory to study a Shakespeare play and that in fact none of the township schools in Grahamstown do. Nor do some of the town schools. I agreed to join a working group set up between the Institute for the Study of English in Africa (ISEA) to celebrate its 50th anniversary and the Grahamstown Branch of the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa (SSoSA) which was celebrating Shakespeare's 450<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was decided to offer a workshop on Shakespeare to local schools, town and township, with the aid of a local professional drama group, Ubom! The overwhelming success of the project, as well as the adaptations possible for a variety of purposes and conditions, has encouraged me to share our experiences.

Rather than provide a serious academic lecture on Shakespeare, our aim was primarily to provide an enjoyable experience for young people and introduce Shakespeare to many learners who proved entirely unaware of his existence. For this reason we selected a play that none of the schools had chosen for their matric students: *Macbeth*. Other reasons for this choice included the aptness of the themes for South Africa today (greed and uncontrollable ambition, lawful and just leadership, manhood, relationships between husband and wife); the relative simplicity of the plot and its preoccupation with murder, physical violence and supernatural forces of evil and the powerful and poetic imagery of darkness, blood and guilt. We believed these concepts all to be within the imaginative grasp of modern teenagers and in order to establish the validity of this perception, "before and after" questionnaires were designed for the learners to complete. I attempted to establish prior knowledge and attitudes to the study of Shakespeare, as well as possible changes in these after the workshop.

## **The 'active' way**

It was agreed that we needed to provide a dramatic presentation if we were to succeed in our objective of providing an enjoyable yet meaningful learning experience for young people from different backgrounds, of different ages, and with a wide range of language abilities and previous knowledge of Shakespeare. The results of the "before" questionnaire showed 38% of learners having had no previous exposure to Shakespeare at all. Another 26% of answers in which learners claimed to have experience reading Shakespeare, some seemed rather contradictory when considering responses to the rest of the questionnaire, such as referring to his works as "books". Most

significantly, only 15% of the responses indicated that they had seen a live performance of a Shakespeare play. Shakespeare did not write “stories”, but plays to be performed by live actors on stage, and as Hennie Van Der Mescht points out in his article, *Stagefright: Teaching Shakespeare as drama*:

*This is not a new idea at all. It's been around – in education literature – since before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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.*

It was decided to engage a professional group of actors from Ubom! to teach a section of the play to groups from the different schools in the morning – imitating Andre Lemmer’s methods in his *Viva Shakespeare* workshops, which, as Hennie Van Der Mescht puts it, “were always received with great enthusiasm and usually resulted in several ‘conversions’ [to Gibson’s ‘active’ method]” - and then for these groups to act their scenes in sequence to create a performance of the whole play in the afternoon. The same role could be fulfilled by a team of teachers with a large group of students at the same school (or even more than one school collaborating – perfect for two neighbouring all-girls and all-boys schools) almost as effectively. This would also be a perfect opportunity to stretch more senior or gifted learners by offering them the opportunity to “direct” one or more of the groups.

### Preparations

Permission was kindly granted by the local education authorities to use the final Friday of the first term for the workshop and the schools were invited to select eight learners each to attend a full-day workshop on *Macbeth* at the Rhodes (ISEA), free lunch included of course. We decided not to mix the schools into different groups because we felt the students would maintain better focus if we made the performance into an inter-school event with prizes for the best group performances. Only one of the town schools declined the invitation due to sporting commitments, but all four township schools accepted, which meant we were expecting a total of seven schools and 56 children, ages 14 to 21. In the end 50 turned up on the day. One of the township schools requested a screening of a film version prior to the workshop, which we duly provided for all four, not without some logistical difficulty. The screening was accompanied by a simple worksheet aimed at grasping the plot, the relationship of the characters and the role of the witches. On reflection this whole exercise proved mostly unnecessary except as a means of building enough confidence among some of the township learners to attend the workshop proper.

In order to increase the pace of the production and keep the final performance short enough to maintain interest, a script was downloaded from the internet and radically abridged, cutting out entire scenes as well as shortening those included, while still maintaining a rational plot. Certain characters as well as long speeches were also cut in order to even out the roles in groups, but we strove to keep the language as close to the original as possible to maintain the rhythm and poetry of the lines. The script was then divided into seven fairly equal portions. We noticed further cuts taking place during the rehearsals according to the abilities of the actors and their capacity to understand the language and articulate the vocabulary. We do not feel that the play was greatly compromised; after all, there is evidence that actors did this freely during rehearsals in the Elizabethan theatre. Peter Ackroyd

refers to this practice at some length and quotes an “epistle” from Beckerman (1962)<sup>1</sup> referring to this practice. He then goes on to say:

*The plays of Shakespeare were not treated any differently. The play is not a piece of writing, but a collaborative event; it is never finished in other words, but subject to a continuous and inevitable process of change.*

### Rehearsals

Despite the fact that it was the final day of a long term and many of the learners were matriculants, 51 arrived for the workshop, and we lost only one to a funeral during the day. Learners were asked to complete a short questionnaire in order to establish their attitude to and experience of Shakespeare, were allocated their scenes and then dismissed into the gardens with an actor-director assigned to each school group. It was obvious to those of us observing this group activity that the learners were motivated and focused. An example of the “authentic teaching and learning” which took place was described by one of my colleagues, “The (drama) students were really putting the groups through their paces; some were starting with relaxing and breathing exercises; some were having to repeat words and/or phrases over and over to get the emphasis correct; one guy was saying (in isiXhosa), ‘No, don’t recite, speak the lines, like you’re talking.’ But what was so great about the teaching was the spirit in which it was accepted – with cheerfulness, ease, good humour.”

### The play

The patchwork performance in the afternoon, lasting approximately an hour and 15 minutes, would probably not have justified a paying audience, but the audience there, the learners, were totally engaged and completely silent during the staging. Each group had been given an opportunity to test their prepared scene on the stage and choose props from those we had provided. One school brought their own costumes and props. Although these are probably not strictly necessary – Ackroyd points out that “it has been calculated that 80% of Shakespearian scenes written for the Globe Theatre needed no props at all” – we felt that many learners would benefit from being able to use some concrete means to assist the imagination. After all, how could one do Macbeth without three wigs and at least one dagger!

### Feedback

Below are a few reflective comments elicited from the learners by means of a second questionnaire filled in before they dispersed for the school holidays:

#### **What did you enjoy most about the workshop today?**

<b>Rehearsals 53%</b>	<b>Performance 37%</b>
My group was too amazing and our director was the best person ever.	I loved seeing the productions from the different groups, they were interesting.
It was a mind expanding practice & we learnt a few new techniques.	Because every group was doing well and I join (enjoyed) everything.
We had a chance to develop these ideas from each other.	I never did play a drama before but I perform right in front of audience.
It was really fun because a lot of group dynamics, it made Macbeth make sense.	Because they all follow what happen in the story

<sup>1</sup> Beckerman, B.(1962), *Shakespeare at the Globe: 1599-1609*(p.106), New York

Because she was not rude/cruel and she teach us. She didn't talk difficult words.	When I performed I felt like I knew the movie (Tragedy of Macbeth) While I didn't, And I think we made it.
I never acted before, but today I did and I enjoyed it, the rehearsals were good and I learned.	Because it was nice and we do well everything he said to his wife we have scotched the snake not killed it, we will eat our meal in fear and sleep in the affliction of these terrible ..
Because I sis well when we were practicing so it all started as a trouble when we had to perform.	Because I see all the stories coming together.

**Was there anything about today's workshop that you found too difficult?**

YES 31%	NO 59%
The rehearsals.	The support system was very strong, this made everything easier.
Because I'm so afraid at the stage because it is my first time to be there.	Because before we perform the Shakespeare we practice it first.
We were not prepared to do this it just comes up we were needed at Rhodes.	Because we worked together without laughing at each other.
I found it difficult to read some of the big words.	Because tutor was very kind so if you knew nothing you can ask him.
Remembering my lines.	Because our director made the play so easy for us to understand.
I stumbled a countless time during my performance, and it was difficult for me to improvise.	My view on Shakespeare has changed. Shakespeare is not so difficult if you act it out and do everything with understanding.

**Anything else?**

- Thank you for everything. I enjoyed myself. It was a great way to start my holiday.
- It was a wonderful day and a lot of knowledge was gained. BYE!!
- I think workshops like this should be done more often because they would help a lot with our setwork work.
- I would like to thank Sis S. for making us practise correctly and teach us how to look at audiences when you're in stage.
- I would like to perform Shakespeare again cause I sein my self in big Things.
- I would like to say that I enjoyed the Tragedy of Macbeth and I would like to do it again.
- I thank all of you for welcoming us and I want you to do the same in others.
- I would like to know more about Shakespeare if i can have a change to watch it live.
- I think Shakespeare is a great thing to experience because it has bombastic words.
- I had an insight on the way people at that time spoke their English and also the way that power could turn one into a cruel person.
- Didn't Shakespeare write Gnomio and Juliet?

## Reflections

The teacher that attended from a township school answered the learners' questionnaire and wrote, "I have always wanted to reintroduce Shakespeare, this is going to happen from now." The problem that he faces is that his colleagues are reluctant to approach Shakespeare for many reasons, according to him, mostly since they were not taught Shakespeare themselves either at school or at college/university. There are many other issues which these responses raise about teaching, especially in the local township schools. Firstly, apart from the undeniable appreciation shown for the experiential learning which took place during this "active" approach, the feedback also reveals the value of a simpler pupil-centred technique which, surprisingly, seems to be an innovation for some learners: for example the non-threatening environment which is created by group work and which allows for questioning and the exploration of alternative views was enjoyed by many of the learners. The value of learning effective teamwork skills was also appreciated by many learners and remarked on in their feedback. Secondly, the intrinsic value of performing in front of an audience was new to almost all the township learners, and while a few showed in their responses that the pressure of having to perform made them feel uncomfortable, many others learners enjoyed the challenge and took pride in their performances. Hopefully this growth in confidence may contribute to a more positive self- image permanently.

## Conclusion

That learners find it an enjoyable experience to see a Shakespeare play "as a living dramatic whole" (p.19), O'Brien (1982), as an alternative to ploughing laboriously through the text line-by-line, was demonstrated amply by this project. Obviously a close reading of the text is necessary for serious study, but the active, page to stage method, in my opinion, is better than screening a film version to introduce a play to senior learners, and is a wonderful way to initiate the younger ones. An unsolicited remark after the workshop by one of the few learners studying a Shakespeare play for matric, sums up the success of the day for me: she didn't know that Shakespeare could be such fun and that she would be able to understand so much of it because "it's hard reading it on the page, but when you read it together, it's just easier to understand."

"Strange things I have in my head that will to hand,  
Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd."

## References

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