

Etudes: an online theatre & performance
studies journal for emerging scholars

Child's Play: The Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching Young People to Appropriately Shakespeare

By Tony Tambasco

Abstract

The legacy of Shakespeare in American theatres and classrooms is bound up with white-supremacist and ethnocentric programs to create an American monoculture that centers whiteness and northwest European values and works. Approaches to teaching Shakespeare that do not confront the history of white-supremacist appropriations of Shakespeare will ultimately reinforce those values, but even in settings of limited contact hours, it is possible for artists and educators to teach their students approaches to Shakespeare that emphasize the process of interpretation that always accompanies the presentation of his works. I had the opportunity to work with students in such a setting at the Bay Street Theater in 2018, and I believe that work can offer a template for others to follow to introduce students — even young students — to some of the concerns of reading and performing 400 year old plays according to their own values and sensibilities.

In the case study that follows, I describe the context of Shakespeare as a cultural brand that leads to his use as a teaching tool, the urgent necessity for confronting the racist and ethnocentric ends to which that branding has been applied, and ways that we might empower students to confront that history in their first experiences with Shakespeare in a “production class” of a professional theatre's education department with students aged 9-12. I believe these students left the production class with not only a better understanding of how to perform Shakespeare's verse, but why and how they should privilege their own, more inclusive values when encountering Shakespeare's works.

Child's Play: The Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching Young People to Appropriate Shakespeare

By Tony Tambasco

The popularity of Shakespeare's works on American stages has translated into his works being deployed in "production classes" in the education departments of professional theatres. Production classes are primarily designed to teach students what it means to be in a complete performance by giving them an opportunity to do so through the class, and to gain a better working knowledge of the performance techniques most relevant to the performance genre in which the class is situated. When Shakespeare is the focus of such a class, instructors run the risk of unwittingly reinforcing the prejudices that have become part of the institution of Shakespeare in American theatres and beyond. With the direct intervention of educators, however, even production classes with limited contact hours can be used to teach students to make Shakespeare their own, and to create a more inclusive legacies of Shakespeare in performance.

In the summer of 2018, I directed a thirty-minute cut of *The Comedy of Errors* for the Bay Street Theater's "Shakespeare Mini-Mainstage" program for young performers. In my earliest rehearsals with this group of students, aged 9 to 12, I decided to explain some of my reasoning behind the cuts I had made, which provoked productive discussion about some of the challenges in presenting Shakespeare in the 21st century. I found that these students were capable of understanding the foundations of some of the most pressing work that scholars and professionals alike are conducting with regards to Shakespeare and performance. Even young students are capable of seeing Shakespeare as the product of interpretive frameworks, which encourages them to think of Shakespeare as theirs to cut, adapt, and

appropriate, rather than to merely venerate. My work with these students has shown me that young students are not only capable of engaging with these topics, some of them may be *eager* to do so, provided they are sufficiently inspired or motivated.

In light of the social justice protests that swept the United States in the summer of 2020, and the amplification of scholars examining Shakespeare's role in reinforcing white supremacy, I believe that this is a critical pedagogical opportunity not only worthy of further exploration and implementation, but also presents an urgent necessity in fostering approaches to Shakespeare that encourage diverse interpretations of his works. BIPOC artists and scholars alike have broadly commented on the dominance of Shakespeare's plays in American culture, and the ways in which those plays were deployed to exclude non-white artists from the cultural authority that they represented (Thompson, "Practicing a Theory" 4). Shakespeare, white supremacy, and public education have gone hand-in-hand in the United States for over a hundred years. Through the 19th century, while Shakespeare was popular on America's stages, his works barely appeared in America's classrooms (Haughey 60). Partly due to the increased number of European immigrants from non-English-speaking countries, Shakespeare became a major part of school curriculums (Frey 541). While contemporaries offered a variety of reasons for the inclusion of Shakespeare in educational curriculums, social activists commonly viewed Shakespeare's inclusion in these curriculums as a tool of "Americanization" (Wyke 45–46). This agenda was explicit, with Joseph Quincy Adams, the first director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, arguing "the idolatry of Shakespeare was very important for preserving in America a homogeneity of English culture... when foreign immigration, in floodgate fashion, poured into our land to threaten the continued existence of the homogeneity" (Fawcett 10). Whatever other uses educators intended for Shakespeare's

plays, they were a tool for converting European immigrants into Americans by replacing their cultural traditions with English ones (Demeter 70). Despite appeals to Shakespeare's "universalism" from scholars like Harold Bloom (Bloom 1), Shakespeare's cultural authority in the United States is attributable to his being white and male, and the utility of his plays in reinforcing the dominance of the English language and cultural ideologies (Thompson, *Passing Strange* 64). The history of Shakespeare's use as a tool of reinforcing white supremacist and ethnocentric ideologies creates a legacy of racist appropriations that is harmful to students and artists who are Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color (BIPOC), and unless countered with explicitly anti-racist interpretations, will tend to reinforce exclusionary and oppressive worldviews when encountered on stage or in classrooms: the plays themselves do not resist racist interpretations (Grier 244). It is, then, the responsibility of teachers and theatre artists to approach Shakespeare in an anti-racist way to avoid silently reinforcing the legacy of Shakespeare's racist appropriations.

Deconstructing the myth of Shakespeare's universality and the canonical status of his plays is a vital step towards disrupting "whiteness" as the central discourse of theatrical cultures centered in Shakespeare (Emeka 89). As Ayanna Thompson has argued, the engagement of textual scholarship with performance studies has led to the recognition that Shakespeare was never in his lifetime played from a "coherent, stable, fixed, and defined" text, and that his works always have been and will be "defined through the recreation of his identity, image, texts, and performances" (*Passing Strange* 17). B.K. Adams similarly argues that reconsidering the foundational bibliographic assumptions that have underpinned scholarship of Shakespeare's texts may lead readers of Shakespeare to "recognize more readily the political power of the archives as well as some of the inherent unfair structural barriers located in the field" (30). Teaching students the

processes by which a play came from Shakespeare's hand to theirs has inherent pedagogical value — indeed this is what I was hoping to teach them — but it also paves the way for questioning who has made the choices in the text that they will ultimately perform; and further for answering the call of “Shakespeare scholars of color” that Miles Grier describes: to approach these plays “with less reverence and more attention to their encoding and spreading of white supremacist and patriarchal relationships” (249). By teaching students about the processes of textual transmission and explaining the rationale behind our own cuts and edits for performance, we make Shakespeare's plays more accessible by “de-canonizing” them: when students learn that Shakespeare's plays are the result of the same sort of collaboration among actors and editors that most modern plays are, they learn to approach them as works over which they can assert their own agency.

Artists and educators who work with Shakespeare's plays are used to asserting our own agency over them in the course of our work. All performances of dramatic texts are, to some degree, adaptations of those texts, because all performances must make choices of what to exclude or include on the stage. A director staging a production of *Hamlet*, for example, must choose whether to stage the text of the first quarto, second quarto, or first folio, or any of the works that derive from these; or to choose an edition from which to work, and then must choose whether to follow that edition faithfully, or to deviate from it. A director may choose to cast actors whose gender matches the characters, or to cast actors without regard to their gender, or to re-gender the characters to suit the gender of the performers. All of the above will have a profound impact on how the theatrical narrative is read by spectators, and all are necessary considerations when staging a specific production in a specific time and

place, and with a certain company of actors: to say nothing of broader discussions about directorial concepts and actor's choices.

The same is true of scholarly approaches to dramatic texts. In preparing an edition of a text, an editor has greater leeway than a director does; an edition may be footnoted in a way that a performance may not, but editors choose their audience, and this will determine the type and depth of noting and emendation in their texts. An editor chooses, whether consciously or unconsciously, to either enable greater performance interpretations, or to use their editions to restrict them, and create an edition that can variously enable literary, dramatic, or diplomatic readings (Dessen 234). Similar choices are introduced pedagogically with both *what* is selected for reading, and in which context: choosing to devote a semester to studying *Hamlet* is a choice, choosing to survey Shakespeare's tragedies is another, choosing to exclude *Hamlet* from such a survey another. Whether artists or scholars, we inevitably make choices in how we approach Shakespeare's plays: an approach free of interpretation is impossible.

What I believe makes this work an urgent necessity rather than a mere pedagogical curiosity is the gravity of white supremacy in our broader cultural interpretations of Shakespeare. Interpretations of Shakespeare that fail to confront the white supremacist framework in which his work is received ultimately reinforce white supremacy: the same can be said for ethnocentricity, settler colonialism, and every other form of exclusion by which elite cultural materials have been leveraged to oppress those whom dominant cultural powers deem disposable. And pretending that we are not active interpreters – that we do not create meaning for others through our interpretations of Shakespeare's plays – has the same effect.

Yet history is not destiny. As Farah Karim-Cooper notes: “we must take a deeper look at our monuments and rather than idealise the past through them, we must put them to work as we build the future,” and

teaching our students the processes by which the monuments of Shakespeare's plays were made gives them the tools to do this (12). Just as examining the repercussions of the absence of a single, authorial text from which Shakespeare's plays derive has opened the door to more diverse understandings of Shakespeare in our broader community, I believe doing so is an opportunity to open this door for our students in their first interactions with Shakespeare. Foregrounding our textual choices, and the rationales behind those choices, can help remind all of our students and artistic partners that our choices (and biases) govern what we study and perform. Educational programs, such as the one I taught at the Bay Street Theater, despite their limited scope and resources, provide opportunities for this work.

In the year I directed the course, the class met five times between August 20 and 24 for three hours per meeting, with the performance taking place on the Bay Street Theater's set of their then-current production of *Evita* following the final class meeting. The class was, at that time, offered for students aged 9 – 12 (The Bay Street Theater). All instruction, auditions, and staging needed to take place within 15 total contact hours. The Shakespeare Mini-Mainstage class follows a pattern of educational programming that is commonly called a “production class.” These classes tend to be designed to provide students early in their performance training with the opportunity to perform in a complete show, as opposed to a recital of scenes or songs, and to teach the start to finish process of performing a role in that context. Musical theatre programs tend to use cuts in the “Broadway Junior” series, which are authorized adaptations for young performers, often based on Disney movies or musicals (“Broadway Junior Show Finder”). Whereas the brand-name of a Broadway musical may be the authorizing agent behind the appeal of musical theatre production classes, the name “Shakespeare,” and all the baggage that goes with it, is part of the

authorizing agency of any Shakespeare-based production class: these students are participating in the cultural systems that attend on Shakespeare whether they know it or not, and whether the instructor addresses those systems or not.

The limited instructional and rehearsal period necessitated that I focus on the broad strokes of the rehearsal process. The first day was devoted to introductions, theatre games, and casting, with the games serving as both warm-up exercises and auditions. One of these games, the "One Line Audition," as described by Matt Buchanan in his book *Directing Kids*, was particularly useful for establishing parameters of the class. This game involves students using a common line of text, and then asking the students to perform that line. The students will perform the line several times, with the instruction that they should try, as much as possible, to tell the class everything we need to know about the character or the play by their performance of the line. The aim of the "One Line Audition" is to encourage and reveal the confidence and creativity of the students, while also asking them to be clear in both their speech, and in the creation of a character through that speech (Buchanan 71). Another important feature of this game was that we used lines from *The Comedy of Errors* for the "one line," which helped establish that Shakespeare's words were not sacred, encouraging the students to play with them. Roles were assigned at the end of the first meeting, and the students were instructed to prepare for the second meeting by reading the script and making note of any words they didn't understand, especially (but not necessarily) their own lines.

The second class meeting was devoted to introducing the students to the basics of the play and Shakespeare's language, and this was where I explained the rationale of the cuts. In advance of the class, I was responsible for preparing an approximately thirty-minute long cut of *The Comedy of Errors*, the chief logic of which was to cut broadly and deeply to achieve the

desired running time, while providing a role for every student in the class. We began the second day by defining all of those words that the students were uncertain about, and I prompted further questions about definition during our read through. The read through also afforded me the opportunity to make sure the students were clear about the narrative action of the play. After the conclusion of each scene, I asked the students to describe the action, and asked them if anything about the story was unclear; reminding them that with seventy-five percent of the show cut, it would be natural for things to be unclear. This prompted the student playing Dromio of Syracuse, who was familiar with *The Comedy of Errors*, to ask about material missing from our script that helped establish the relationship between Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse, which prompted discussion about bullying in Shakespeare.

Here I explained to the students the nature of the cut – that the missing lines consisted of jokes about sixteenth century politics, and centered on fat-shaming Dromio of Ephesus' wife: I found the political jokes obscure, and the jokes about fat people being fat cruel and unfunny. The student playing Dromio of Ephesus asked if their character was attracted to his wife **because** of her weight and shape, saying “maybe he likes her like that.” Other students in the class echoed the sentiment, and seemed confused by the idea that it would be accepted that there was something inherently wrong in finding attractive a person of large girth.

This led to a discussion about comic tropes, and how those tropes reflected cultural values, which change just as language does. They asked if we had to reflect Shakespeare's values in our performance, and I told them that we did not, but asked them to consider that Shakespeare gives voice to Dromio of Ephesus in protesting his beatings (some lines of which I preserved in our cut), and also rebukes Antipholus of Ephesus for his cruelty: implicitly rebuking those who laughed at his beating of the Dromios.

Because the audience has been primed to laugh at Dromio of Ephesus, they may be shamed to question why they laughed at a rich man beating a helpless slave if we followed Shakespeare's humor: a proposition to which they assented.

The rest of the second day was devoted to teaching the students the fundamentals of how iambic pentameter works as poetry, and how to use that to both understand and create character. Our third meeting began with me introducing some of the concepts of Shakespeare's original staging conditions, and the rest of our time was spent staging the show. Regrettably, the structure of the class and the program did not allow for any sort of post-show follow up discussion, so I do not have the reflections and testimonials of the students in the course, only my own notes and recollections to guide me now, but their work in the "table work" was revealing: these students not only learned to appreciate Shakespeare's text and staging conditions, they also learned to question Shakespeare's values in the context of their own. For these students, Shakespeare's plays are living documents, subject to active interpretation, and capable of being made to speak to the issues and concerns that they confront in their lives and the world around them.

This class was not designed to be a formal study that tracked outcomes, and the anecdotal experience I am able to report is certainly influenced by the race, socio-economic class, prior education and theatrical exposure of the students, and of course of their parents as well, and a different set of students may have different outcomes. And those outcomes will ultimately be colored by forces greater than what even the best director-educator can achieve in 15 contact hours, but in this class we were able to do more than perform pantomimes of the narratives from Shakespeare's plays. In some ways, the outcomes I achieved can only have fallen short of their potential, as I had not participated in the discourses of

anti-racist Shakespeare, and in my ignorance I missed an opportunity to extend the lessons on textual transmission and interpretation, and the anti-bullying ethos that my students brought to the table, into an anti-racist curriculum component. Next time I will do better.

I therefore offer this case study, in all humility, out of a desire to share the knowledge that even young students are capable of grappling with the complicated issues that form the heart of our own contemporary discourse of the value of Shakespeare, and the challenges in presenting him. If we are unafraid to teach children that Shakespeare is a great playwright from an early age, racist baggage and all, we should be bold enough to also teach them that Shakespeare's greatness is subject to their own creative interpretations.

WORKS CITED

- Adams, B.K. "Fair / foul." *Shakespeare / Text: Contemporary Readings in Textual Studies, Editing and Performance*, edited by Claire M. L. Bourne, The Arden Shakespeare, 2021, pp 29 – 49.
- Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. Riverhead Books, 1998.
- "Broadway Junior Show Finder." *Music Theatre International*, mtishows.com/broadway-junior/shows. Accessed 26 June 2021.
- Buchanan, Matt. *Directing Kids*. YouthPLAYS, 2015.
- Demeter, Jason M. "African-American Shakespeares: Loving Blackness as Political Resistance." *Teaching Social Justice Through Shakespeare*, edited by Hillary Eklund and Wendy Beth Hyman, Edinburgh University Press, 2019, pp. 67–75. *JSTOR*, [jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvrs912p.10](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvrs912p.10).
- Dessen, Alan C. *Rescripting Shakespeare: The Text, the Director, and Modern Productions*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Emeka, Justin. "Seeing Shakespeare through Brown Eyes." *Black Acting Methods*, edited by Sharrell D. Luckett and Tia M. Shaffer, Kindle Edition, Routledge, 2017, pp. 89–105.
- Fawcett, James Waldo. "Folger Library, Memorial to Shakespeare, Dedicated." *The Washington Post*, 24 April 1932, pp 1+. *Archive.org*, archive.org/details/per_washington-post_1932-04-24_20401.
- Frey, Charles. "Teaching Shakespeare In America." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 5, 1984, pp. 541–59. *JSTOR*, doi.org/10.2307/2870059.
- Grier, Miles. "Are Shakespeare's Plays Racially Progressive?" *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, edited by Ayanna Thompson, Cambridge UP, 2021, pp. 237 – 253.

- Haughey, Joseph. "'What's Past Is Prologue': 'English Journal' Roots of a Performance-Based Approach to Teaching Shakespeare." *The English Journal*, vol. 101, no. 3, 2012, pp. 60–65.
- Karim-Cooper, Farah. *The Great White Bard: Shakespeare, Race and the Future*. Oneworld Publications, 2023.
- The Bay Street Theater. *Teaching Artist LOA for Tony Tambasco*. 27 Apr. 2018.
- Thompson, Ayanna. *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- . "Practicing a Theory/Theorizing a Practice: An Introduction to Shakespearean Colorblind Casting." *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*, edited by Ayanna Thompson, Kindle Edition, Routledge, 2006, pp. 1–24.
- Wyke, Maria. *Caesar in the USA*. University of California Press, 2012, Scribd [scribd.com/book/295627848](https://www.scribd.com/book/295627848).