

"I Cannot Heave My Heart into My Mouth"

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Abstract

"I Cannot Heave My Heart into My Mouth" is a personal account by renowned Canadian playwright Judith Thompson of her experiences adapting and directing Shakespeare for inner city children in Toronto, from grades four through six over the past seven years. The essay explores the process of adapting Shakespeare for youth as one of explosive healing, empowerment, as well as a joyous and searing investigation of the self.

I

With the biggest white-out blizzard in ten years raging outside, I held my first Shakespeare meeting for the June 2007 *Midsummer Night's Dream* at Palmerston Public School in Toronto. This was like a joke about the pathetic fallacy — the zero visibility being where all of us, including me, begin with each Shakespeare production, and the bright warm June of performance time representing the clarity and joy we hoped to finally reach. There were about sixty kids, ranging in age from nine to twelve, all, naturally, wanting to play Puck. They sat in a circle and read through several scenes, with only a few lines each. Despite the dramatic range of reading ability, from the mortifying to the Stratford-ready, each child would have a role in the play; the three or four readings I held would help me determine which role was suitable for which child. It would not be helpful to children to give them something they couldn't handle, but I am also careful not to give all the biggest roles to the kids who are clearly gifted with language. This can be quite painful for me, like a soccer coach deciding not to always play her most talented players, but I know it is the right thing — I cast three to four kids in each principal role, and each time I have found it essential to have a balance of those who play Shakespeare easily and quickly and those for whom it is an uphill struggle. More often than not, at the risk of sounding pious, the gifted learn more from the struggler's journey to triumph than the struggler learns from witnessing the sustained excellence of the "gifted." This process has never been about the most professional kid's Shakespeare I could produce (and with the kids I have seen, that could be easily done), but has only ever been about guiding children

through a life-changing, thought-freeing, language-expanding process that empowers, heals, and transforms at the emotional roots, and, while we are at it, trying for the best show we can put on.

Although drama teachers and parents have been doing some version or other of Shakespeare with kids for hundreds of years, doing this in Toronto, Ontario, Canada in 2007 makes this process seminal. According to the U.N., Toronto is currently the most ethnically and culturally diverse city in the world, and this multicultural breadth has been well expressed in our Shakespeare productions. Challenges and opportunities abound, and the rich diversity of the cast has always made the process that much more rewarding. At the blizzard meeting, the children wrote down their names, emails, and special talents, which means anything from juggling to Middle Eastern belly dancing to singing to speaking Cantonese or Greek. As a director, I use every tool I am presented with, and the extraordinary talents that the children bring with them are theatrical gold, compensating for the inevitable learners' stumbles.

Leslie, a single mother of a boy in grade six, walked me home. In a state of great excitement, she told me that she had made herself a promise last year that she would help us in any way we needed despite a hectic schedule, because, she said, not only did her son Jack have a great time doing Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night*, but "it literally changed his life, Judith, it made him understand he had a right to BE, that he EXISTED in this world, he belonged, and he has been talking of nothing else since last summer. He almost DIED when he woke up with laryngitis; he thought you might not cast him." I answered that, of course Jack would be cast; I have never turned any child away from my Shakespeare productions. I eschew the whole idea of auditions for children: All children can perform Shakespeare. The problem always lies with the adult's reverent and fearful attitude to the text, not with the children. And anyway, I told her, even if Jack hadn't been able to speak the language, it has NEVER been about the most professional production we could do; it has been about finding the Shakespeare in every child, and creating the most fascinating, enlightening, deeply therapeutic, lasting, and rocking production that we can. And I know that is what we have done.

Over the last five years, I have adapted and directed *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Twelfth Night* in two elementary and one middle school in Toronto, Ontario with a company of anywhere from forty to sixty children, aged six to thirteen. I've worked with an enormous range of children — from the "gifties" (children designated as gifted by the school system) and children with an astonishing natural facility for Shakespeare, violin, baseball, physics and just about everything else, to the persecuted "loser" who couldn't raise his eyes from the floor or speak above a mumble. The repressive social hierarchy in which we live in North America begins to form in elementary school and rapidly becomes nearly immutable. Having three older children who had

already been through school, I saw my Shakespeare work as emergency socio-educational work. If social patterns established in school are not disrupted by a life-changing event such as a play, they may become engraved — which means, for many kids, being permanently disabled.

As a playwright, I am drawn to extreme characters, and children are human beings in a blessed state: The music of their souls is in their voices, and the light of their beings is still in their eyes; by grade eight the music and light begin to fade rapidly, so the right time to intervene is in elementary school. I have worked with a head-banger with a genius for math, but zero social skills, who wanted to be a King; I have worked with children whose mother or father had just died, others with a parent coping with cancer. I have worked with an Iraqi refugee whose extended family was trapped in Baghdad, as well as a West Indian Canadian "brainiac" with borderline Aspergers Syndrome who fell in love with Malvolio's yellow stockings and big green cape and discovered that he had a comic genius that earned him a standing ovation; the Italo-Canadian girl with the beautiful voice and smothering mother who wanted to turn the Shakespeare experience into a franchise and make lots of money until her daughter showed her that the value of the experience was not something that could be spent. There was the girl whose mother was transitioning from female to male and whose father was stalking them (people who didn't know her thought she was a boy, and while she wanted to be cast as a female, she would only wear pants and cried when a skirt was mentioned); the electrifyingly talented brother and sister twins with two Mums who had recently divorced; the boy who needed a psychiatrist to speak to him every morning before he could go to school; and Z., who disrupted, yelled over and over that he was BORED, insulted me and everyone else, and threatened to walk out at dress rehearsal because he wanted to go on a field trip to the ROM (Royal Ontario Museum); the shy, almost mute, Chinese Canadian girl whose mother had been a celebrated classical actress in Beijing. I have gently guided, cajoled, walked out of rehearsal, and even yelled, ironically, begging them to be quiet, until I had no voice — each time I have at one point despaired and prepared to shut down the show, each time the children came through, and each time the show has been a raging, blazing, extraordinary success.

So, a snowstorm on the day of the first meeting is fitting.

Each time, the process of working with children on Shakespeare has revealed to me a layer of meaning in the plays that I had not seen before, partly because several of the children were already, at eleven years old, more knowledgeable about the details and names and dates of the plays than I was — I personally dive more deeply into the world of a play every time I work on it and find moments and insights I had not discovered previously — and partly because, in answer to the parents' questions, I needed to determine why doing each play would be somehow educational or enlightening for the children.

II

"Things won are done. Joy's soul lies in the doing." — Troilus and Cressida, 1.2

"Action is eloquence." — Coriolanus, 3.2

Of primary importance to me is that the process of rehearsing and performing a Shakespeare play moves learning from a tedious, demoralizing passivity to an empowering, galvanizing ACTIVITY. Passive learning is only successful for a minority, but all creatures learn by doing because the doing is empowering; the learners own the process and feel that they are creating it for the first time, rather than being receptacles. What is learned passively is soon forgotten; what is learned by doing stays forever.

For example, when a few concerned parents chastised me for choosing *King Lear* rather than a comedy, I told them that not only were the comedies not funny to me and not funny for children (much of the humor is *Animal House* or *American Pie* lewd and stupid), but in my opinion, they had little to say about what matters in the lives of children, especially the diverse group of young Canadians that would be presenting the play, which included not only children who were third, fourth, and fifth-generation Canadian, but also new immigrants and even refugees from the transition houses down the street from the school.

King Lear is a celebration of children. Contrary to popular perception, I told the surprised parents, it is not about old age and dying, but about children — their absolute honesty without regard for consequence (Cordelia's "I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth" [*King Lear*, 1.1.91-92]) and their breathtaking capacity for divine forgiveness (both Cordelia with Lear and Edgar with Gloucester at the Dover Cliffs). This divine forgiveness is a sharp reminder that none of us deserves our children, and some less than others. Lear is not an exceptional older adult; he is only one of the many shallow, selfish, egotistical, greedy, driven adults who do not deserve the children they have. Our children, the play argues, are our only hope, and we must learn from them. That is why the play is profoundly empowering for children to play. The theme of disguise is made for children: Edgar becomes Poor Tom, a persona in which he can rant and rave and hop around and live like an animal; Kent becomes the loyal servant Caius, so that he can stay with Lear, who is too solipsistic to recognize him (this latter reminds me of my daughter's friend, whose estranged father didn't recognize her when she was his cashier at a Loblaws supermarket).

It was Winter 2001. My daughter was in crisis. Eleven years old, with two charming, clever and lovable little girls below her and two surly, brilliant, and often cruel teens above her, she

was the middle child, different from all the others. She was flailing, almost drowning at the smart bilingual, alternative school in which her sibs had thrived. Her classmates were brainy, athletic, inventive, good-looking, and brutally judgmental, blatantly contemptuous of anyone who could not keep up. They were cookie-cutter conformists, ostensibly taught to be kind and inclusive, but they had read the subtext of the adult lectures and quickly understood that beneath the pious instruction was this reality: In actuality, they had license to be manipulative, exclusive, vicious, strategic, ruthless, and unrelentingly cruel. As long as they held bake sales for hungry children in Africa and marched in support of the Kyoto Accord with their parents, it didn't matter that they were engaged in psychological torture at school on a daily basis.

Most of them were reading *Harry Potter* by grade two or three. My daughter, although extremely insightful, bright, and funny, has a learning disability. She couldn't really read well until she was in grade five; she couldn't confidently tell time until grade six and did not learn her timetables at all in elementary school. She was always, ALWAYS one of the two or three not invited to birthday parties, even by our old friends. I phoned one of these friends once and begged them, with my voice shaking, to please include our daughter. They didn't seem to understand what devastation their negligence had caused. It was a painful, awful time, but persecuted kids are heroic, and our daughter refused to change schools. Her choice was based on a combination of hope that she would be able to make things better, some awe-inspiring bravery, and a bit of the conviction that the devil you know is better than the one you don't.

I felt shameless rage at her cruel schoolmates, and even more at their ignorant, uncaring parents. Why couldn't the other kids see what a gentle, kind, insightful, joyful, funny as hell, generous, life-affirming creative ball of fire she was? I wanted them to applaud her bravery in facing both very challenging academics and cruel and judgmental peers. I wanted them to see that she was capable of great things, things that they would have lots of trouble with, such as . . . playing Shakespeare. After all, Shakespeare is about heroism, bravery, and struggling with adversity. His characters are often fighting for their lives, their dignity, and their convictions, just as my daughter was.

I knew that my long-suffering, partly learning-disabled daughter would swim powerfully and easily in Shakespeare's turbulent waters. She was extraordinarily intuitive, often seeing truths that the rest of us missed. She had a superb sense of rhythm and idiomatic English, she always chose the most luscious, onomatopoeic words, she was a person living in the PRESENT, and despite what she had been through, acted without self consciousness when on stage or in front of a camera. (She was very photogenic for that reason, also, whereas many kids tighten their faces under scrutiny and become someone else.) My daughter had also shown magical powers of insight from a very early age and could see through the masks that people wore. She was the child who shouted out that

the emperor had no clothes, often speaking painful truths. The juicy sound of the words, the flow, would fill her and move her along in the play, like a rushing current — and so I volunteered to direct *Hamlet* at the school. It was essentially a rescue mission for my daughter and all the other outsiders.

When people asked me WHY I had undertaken such an enormous and stressful project, I gave them the secondary reason I was doing this. I said it was because it was my turn to give back to the school. And this was absolutely true. I had never been on the parent council, as I was decidedly not a committee person, nor been one to decorate the gym or drive the baseball team around. I had been a nursing, working mother for almost thirteen years. I still had fairly young children, but I knew it was time for me to step up and make a serious contribution. My teaching schedule at the University of Guelph allowed me to take an hour and a half, twice a week, for four months, with a full ten days or so in June, to direct *Hamlet*. My university supported and encouraged us in lending our practice to the community.

As far as my daughter went, my hunch was correct. After some resistance and a few stumbles, she rose to the challenge, flourished, and triumphed as Gertrude. She would never allow me to explain the meaning of her words to her, as I did to the others — she protected her instinct and had faith that she would sense, or "FEEL the meaning," as an eight-year old actor said to me recently, rather than knowing it through analysis. She fell into the words, spoke the words, absorbed them into her body, filtered them through her personal experience, and then suddenly understood everything to be probably the most powerful actor on the stage. She fell into her words as Ophelia had fallen into the brook:

There is a willow grows [aslant] the brook
That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples . . . (*Hamlet*, 5.1.166-69)

But long it could not be, but that her garments, heavy with their drink, pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay to "muddy death."

This was the outsider speaking to her classmates, telling them through Shakespeare that they had driven her, like Ophelia, to despair — that even though she may have appeared to be happy (just as Ophelia sings old songs whilst she is drowning), she was dying. She pointed out that they had watched her losing her wits and drowning in sorrow just as dispassionately as Gertrude had watched Ophelia. But most importantly, my daughter had not disappeared under the water as Ophelia did — she had survived and now risen above their persecution by leaving behind her old, sweet, naive victim-self in the stream. Now she was powerful, able to shape words into eloquence,

with an articulate distance. They couldn't make her cry or feel badly about herself anymore. She was a Queen.

The ascension and empowering of my daughter and a few other outsiders was, for me, the most gratifying result of the experience of doing *Hamlet* at Hawthorne School. There was the girl I mentioned earlier, whose mother was in gender transition from lesbian woman to man. This girl was usually mistaken for a boy, and although she wanted to play Rosencrantz as a female in the play, she cried when the costume designer brought out a dress. Naturally, we allowed her to wear a kind of feminine costume with pants. This child was in the process of discovering the difference between physiological gender and gender performance. Her work on the role undoubtedly helped her think more clearly about her struggle with gender. Are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern concerned friends, or traitors? Did they betray Hamlet, or themselves? Was her mother "betraying" her gender or doing what was right and true, following her instinct? Was she herself a loyal friend to herself, or a traitor? Was she "two-spirited," just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem to be one friend in two bodies? Did they deserve their punishment? Was the process of working on my adaptation of *Hamlet* a pedagogical exercise? Yes, because pedagogy is less about attaining, than analyzing and using, information and because it is always about the discovery of the self as an agent in the world.

Before rehearsals began, I needed to write my adaptation. This performance couldn't be more than one hour and forty-five minutes or so, and *Hamlet*, is a three-and-a-half hour play. *King Lear* might even be four hours, and *Twelfth Night* is almost as long. In each case — with the exception of *Macbeth*, which needed very little adaptation at all in the writing — my adaptation consisted of lots of trimming and of building textual bridges to make sense of what was left. I have only had to actually write about twelve lines myself for this bridge building. I felt no need whatsoever to make the language simpler, to make the context of our own city or neighborhood recognizable, or to identify the characters with familiar figures. When working with children, I feel, it is important that the costuming be period, and never modern. Children need the distance of the language and the costume. They need to travel to another world to know their own world.

With each play, I began by typing out the play to see where I might need to cut or slightly revise for children aged nine to twelve. I was determined not to modernize the language — I had never seen this succeed. I had seen several children's Shakespeare adaptations and found all of them problematic. There was the director-friendly one in which there is one narrator, who is the best child reader, and the play itself is compressed to about forty-five minutes. Each character only needs to memorize about four of five lines of Shakespeare, with much of their lines being introduced (e.g., "and Romeo sighed and said, 'she speaks!'"). Although this is a convenient way of dealing with kids who have soccer games and swim lessons and no time to memorize or rehearse,

I did not feel I had seen the play. I felt instead that I was watching a recital of a diluted, distorted retelling of the play. I decided that the kids were going to do Shakespeare — a shorter version, yes, but not diluted or sanitized.

The task of editing is simple with Shakespeare. Whole sections slide out with great ease; in *Hamlet*, for instance, the entire Fortinbras story line, although significant for helping adults understand the socio-political context of the play, is really not very important for kids aged nine to thirteen — or, I should say, because I was interested in the play from a psychological perspective, Fortinbras just didn't need to be there, and we didn't miss him at all. The lengthy speeches about the history of the conflict between Denmark and Norway, his whereabouts, and his intentions all disappeared without a discernible effect.

Another aspect that is easy to cut is Shakespeare's tendency to give us twenty-five examples or illustrations of a point where one or two will do. I would narrow the examples to one or two so that the actor could memorize the lines, understand them, and feel clever. I immediately cut the many lewd and vulgar lines and speeches, which meant cutting much of what Hamlet says to his mother in the closet scene — in fact, some of my favorite lines in the play:

Nay, but to live
 In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
 Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
 Over the nasty sty . . . (*Hamlet*, 3.4.91-94)

I also had to cut almost all of what the Fool in *King Lear* says, most of the jokes between Sir Toby and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and much, much more. There is a lot of tugging and topping and country matters in Shakespeare. I would have to be the one to explain the material, so I cut it rather than risk embarrassment or offense.

I did not cut any of the violence. Why? Because nothing animates a ten to twelve-year-old boy like a sword. Many of the boys who couldn't speak up or look anyone in the eye and had absolutely zero expression in their faces burst into beautiful life when given a sword and trained in a swordfight. The most delightful moment of our *King Lear* was probably the moment when Cornwall orders Gloucester's eyes to be taken out. I had Goneril and Regan each pluck out an eye and hold it aloft as if it were a ruby. At that moment, though it is not in the text, I had Edmund appear downstage and the three of them, along with the choir, began singing the song that the brilliantly talented Ben Stein had written as a setting for Edmund's speech, which concludes, "Stand up for Bastards," while the evil sisters joined Edmund in a brief, but sexy, formal dance. Because I not only kept the eye-yanking scene but exaggerated it, it took on a gleefully cartoonist aspect

that made the action not just palatable, but fun for the kids. And my hope is that as they get older, when they read about torture, they may be able to truly absorb the lesson that hunger for power must never be under-estimated; it enables those afflicted by it to cut off all empathy with terrifying ease and to cause others to suffer horribly. They will reflect and see through the comic surface I provided in a way they were not ready to or able to when they were actually doing the Shakespeare. Other moments of violence, such as when Queen Gertrude drops dead from the poison drink meant for her son or when Polonius is mistaken for Claudius and killed behind the arras, demonstrate the point that violence, particularly revenge, will always touch the innocent; the Toronto Boxing Day 2006 gang shooting of the fifteen-year old innocent bystander Jane Creba was prominent in my mind when imagining this scene.

Is it harmful for a twelve-year-old girl to play Ophelia's mad scene? To play "madness" (as opposed to truly experiencing mental illness) is a joy for a young actress, a release from all the common sense that is suffocating their fire and their creativity. Their eyes can be wild again, they can move their bodies in strange, jerky, ungraceful ways and twist and turn, screw up their faces, rub dirt all over their pretty dresses and pretty faces, and let their hair go wild, and crazy, and knotted; best of all, they can say what is forbidden, be disrespectful to those they have been taught must be deferred to (the Queen), and tell the truth: "My father is dead because of YOU!" It is a safe madness because it is manufactured. I am confident that at some point, possibly months or years after the production, the actress playing Ophelia will understand that strange behavior is not to be ignored. As Willie Loman's wife, Linda said in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, "Attention must be paid."

I knew that in a way, expecting these sixty-odd kids to perform Shakespeare with three hours a week of rehearsal for a few months was like expecting them to all train for the four-minute mile or to learn a new language over the next few months. I wanted them to walk onto the stage as if they owned it, to gain control of their voices and bodies to communicate an idea, to understand multiple points of view (do we ever know Shakespeare's point of view?), to know the earthshaking, head-turning power of words, and to understand that each of them has the potential to communicate thoughts just as powerfully, poetically, and persuasively. I knew that I did not have time to explain everything in the play, as it was all we could do to just get through the play a couple of times, nail down the blocking and the most fundamental meaning of each scene. But what I learned from experience is that in the process of immersion, most of the children came to understand what they were saying. Of course, I would shout out the meaning quickly, and their parents would help them, but ultimately, they had to feel it in their bodies. Cleopatra pleads with the poisonous asp on her breast to hurry up and kill her: Untie "this knot intricate," she pleads (*Antony and Cleopatra*,

5.2.304-5). In elementary school, the "knot" that is the children's lives is rapidly forming, but they can still trace the knot to its beginnings and start over. I don't need to explain this to them, I don't have the time, and very few of them would understand even if I did explain it. The same few fully absorb the meanings they NEED to absorb, no matter how difficult the language, just by being in the play.

III

And since you know you cannot see yourself
So well as by reflection, I, your glass,
Will modestly discover to yourself,
That of yourself which you yet know not of. (*Julius Caesar*, 1.2.67-70)

This is my leap of faith, and it has always been rewarded. Youth learn that the English language offers us infinite choice, of words extant and words that can be created, as Shakespeare, of course, created so many: radiant, zany, accused, barefaced, countless, courtship, exposure, fitful, fretful, gloomy, disgraceful, lonely, monumental, and thousands more. Phrases like "household word," "melted into thin air," "cold comfort," "heart of gold," and "flesh and blood."

When a kid gets a word "wrong," other kids are very quick to jump in with "THAT'S NOT A WORD." And it is a very short leap to "that's not a thought." Children become so terrified of opprobrium they won't think out of the carefully constructed box, because to jump out of the box is to jump into otherness, which is an undiscovered country. Death, for Hamlet, is "the undiscover'd country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns" (*Hamlet*, 3.1.78-79). That speech might be aimed at children aged nine to twelve. Like Hamlet, they are on the precipice of action; before asking if they can play soccer, for instance, they think through the consequences, and sometimes, the specter of rejection stops them cold: "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" (3.1.82-84). Words, words, words. Shakespeare is full of phrases that one wears like amulets that stay in the throat and lodge in the soul, phrases that pry our eyes and our minds open. This is when language becomes like the Force in Star Wars. It is there to be used, if one stumbles on the way. I wanted the kids to encounter that Force. I felt it was the most powerful tool I could humbly give them.

Each time I have directed a Shakespeare play, there has been a particular phrase from the play that became the unifying theme of our production. The theme of the Hawthorne *Hamlet* was a phrase I came across while adapting the play. In act 2, scene 2, Hamlet says: "I could be

bounded by a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space — were it not that I have bad dreams" (2.2.254-56). In the middle school *Macbeth*, the unifying phrase was:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas in incarnadine,
Making the green one red. (*Macbeth*, 57-60)

This latter made sense in working with twelve to fourteen-year olds because the play explores the resonating power of choice. When we betray our own ethics and do what we know to be wrong, we are haunted forever, and there is nothing that can remove our guilt. When children reach grade seven, we begin holding them responsible for their actions. And if they make the choice to behave unethically in grade seven, the consequences are felt for a very long time. And in *King Lear*, our talismanic speech was:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp,
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just. (*King Lear*, 3.4.28-36)

This speech was the centerpiece of our production. Toronto has an enormous homeless population, many of whom freeze to death every winter. Most Torontonians have learned to ignore or step over the homeless, who sleep right on the downtown sidewalks. We do not ask them into our homes. We do not demand that they be taken care of. They are a nightmare that we have still to confront. Ben Stein set this speech to music. It was sung beautifully by the whole cast at the beginning of the play and at the time of the speech, and by the end of the play, the cast had a deep understanding of its meaning. In *Twelfth Night*, I would say the governing line was: "I have unclasp'd / To thee the book even of my secret soul" (1.4.12-13). When I read the above phrases, the earth stops turning for a moment. The blood rushes to my head and in my temporary madness, I feel I fully understand each play.

The quote from *Hamlet* — "I could be bounded by a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space — were it not that I have bad dreams" (2.2.254-56) — spoken in the largest sense to the earth, the tiny planet in the unimaginably endless universe, and in a slightly smaller sense, to living in Canada, to being an artist in Canada — when we do well here, we dream we are Regent of Our Arts, but the reverse is the nightmare attitude of other Canadians who believe you haven't made it unless your plays are on Broadway or your life is in Hollywood. The line speaks to the small-town Ontario where I grew up, every innocuous coffee shop and Dairy Queen and downtown corner saturated with meaning, at one time the most important place on earth to the school neighborhood (which is essentially a village within the city of Toronto, a diverse, welcoming, artistic village), to the classroom itself, to the smaller social groups, to the home, the kitchen, to the self: I could be bounded by a nutshell and count myself king of infinite space . . . were it not for my bad dreams.

The bad dreams can be interpreted in many ways; one interpretation is the prison of reputation, a particular evil in school. If someone is pegged as a nerd in grade one, the tag seems to stay on and on. Kids are imprisoned by their reputations in school, the culture of their families, and always by their inherent otherness — their "original sin," to use a Catholic term — and in the case of differently-abled kids, chubby kids, and visible minorities, by their obvious differences. Their iron-clad reputations are established the moment they walk into the school. And if they don't break out of that prison of reputation, such as the one theatricalized by Jean Paul Sartre in his play *No Exit*, they will be pushed deeper and deeper into that particular hell; and often their attempts to break out are manifested in drug use and violent, misanthropic behavior.

Each group of kids allows me to see the play in a unique light and to interpret the play through their lives and their voices. In a later *Hamlet* production, a boy whose mother was going through treatments for breast cancer performed the part of Hamlet. Memorably, the closet scene, in which Hamlet's anger is manifest, was possibly an outlet for M.'s anger at the disease that was attacking his beloved mother, pulling her away from him, just as Claudius, a destructive, metastasizing force, is pulling Gertrude away from Hamlet. *Hamlet*, then, is about something different for every child that performs in the play. And so, for other plays, other characters.

In *King Lear*, Carol, a very shy, first generation Chinese Canadian girl, played Cordelia. Her mother, a once-famous actress, was extremely critical and would denigrate all her performances. Carol was terrified of her mother's judgment. When she uttered the famous lines, "I cannot heave my heart into my mouth" in response to King Lear's demand that she praise him and eloquently express her filial love in order to earn a portion of his land, it was a moment of true epiphany for Carol. Her mother might not have made the connection consciously but from my point of view,

Carol saying to her mother that she would not and could not be what her mother wanted her to be and that she would respectfully, fearfully, but adamantly be herself, whatever the consequences.

A significant part of the success of these Shakespeare productions is the music that has been composed for each of them. In the first production, a teacher who happened to be a brilliant musician improvised, with some guidance and direction, underneath the action of the play, as well as, of course, during the transitions. He sat in on a few rehearsals, and I would suggest, for example, that he play under a certain speech, and always between scenes; he caught fire and brought an amazing energy and emotional power to the piece. The students let his responses flow through them so that there was a synergy. He was responding to the Shakespeare musically, and that guided the children in their own response. Subsequently, two composers, Bill Thompson and Ben Stein, who also had a child at the school, created brilliant and awe-inspiring music, set to Shakespeare's words, for the children to sing. For example, Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech, first spoken by Hamlet, was then sung by the complete choir to a melody created by Mr. Thompson. The singing of this song to a memorable and emotionally loaded melody saturated the children's consciousnesses. They understood the meanings layered into the speech in a way that I don't think they ever could have done without the music. The choir sang approximately twelve to fifteen songs for each play, and the children were humming the songs all summer long.

Before I decided to do *Hamlet* at Palmerston School, I did a practice run — the first Palmerston Enrichment Cluster — a couple of hours a week with ten to twelve children working towards a ten-minute presentation for enrichment night. I decided to ask each child to bring one or two lines from Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech translated into their own ancestral language. We had TEN languages represented: Cantonese, Hindu, Norwegian, German, Gaelic, a Ghanaian tribal language, Greek, Italian, French, and Arabic. We painted the phrases in each language on huge sheets of white paper and put them up all over the gym. I chose the speech because all the exquisite words, the slowly evolving argument with the self about the nature of death, move towards the revelation that self-criticism and over-thinking blunt impulse and skew instinct. This is something that children need not just to hear, but to believe. In this case, Hamlet's impulse is to end his life, and he declares himself a weakling for not doing so, but I discovered that the children tended to disregard this feeling and move directly to the revelation that it is a good thing to just ACT — that ACTING is positive and life-affirming, and that thinking too much equals doubting oneself. On the other hand, if your impulse is NOT a good one, start thinking and you will think and talk yourself out of it. So like an optical illusion, Hamlet's most famous lines work both ways, and kids know this.

From the beginning, I had to work on their voices. Projection, or fullness of the voice, is a very slow process. Children who have been taught that their voice, their opinion, their feelings don't matter, whether through outright criticism, intimidation, fracturing of the family, brutal siblings, or just living in a crazy grown-up world, have tiny, strained voices. All I can do is help them begin the process of freeing their voices, and thus strengthening their selves. Working on a Shakespeare play with kids has always been, for me, a psycho-therapeutic process rather than a lesson in entertainment or high culture. In fact, it is quite out of character for me to choose to work on Shakespeare. Although I am, like every other drama nerd, besotted with his sublime poetry, earth-shaking insights, and deep compassion for the underdog, I am very disturbed by his classism, sexism, racism, empire-boosting, and British jingoism. We never really can be sure of his political positions, but we do know that he couldn't have survived without the endorsements of royalty and the ruling class and therefore had to pander to them in one way or another. Kate's final speech in *Taming of the Shrew* comes to mind, as do the dreadful portraits of Caliban in *The Tempest* and of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. No matter how progressive directors and actors try to spin these characters, the intentions of the author are clear.

So why would I choose to do Shakespeare with children? I do avoid the problematic plays I have mentioned, and I look at the work the way I looked at the fairy tales I read to my children. Somehow the larger, psychoanalytic value of the stories, which are usually about the triumph of the undervalued (with the help of loyal friends), outweighed the possible harm done by a little girl reading about cruel stepmothers and girls whose dreams are totally fulfilled by a Prince kissing them back to life from a coma. Shakespeare is the same. The searing insights, the unparalleled use of the English language, and the character movement all add up to a positive. And somehow, the distance the kids have to travel to understand and utter Shakespearean language gives them a theatrical strength that contemporary language does not.

IV

How Performing in a Shakespearean Tragedy Gave Them the Courage to Come to School

James, 11, had to talk to his psychiatrist every morning in order to find the strength to get dressed, go to school, and face his tormentors. James spoke in a strange, formal manner, was persnickety, knew just about everything, wore his hood and his coat zipped up to his chin even on warm spring days, and would hold his hand up for twenty minutes in a rehearsal and then when I stopped rehearsal to call upon him, would remark that there was a piece of lint on my sweater. He was decidedly uncool; the other kids steered clear of him in my presence, and out of my presence,

apparently tormented him. It took extraordinary bravery for James to come to school, like going into an enemy camp. But he loved drama, especially Shakespeare, so his parents brought him to the first meeting and offered to help. They were very caring, even hovering over him. He read very well, but with a hugely comical exaggerated theatricality. I decided NEVER to say the word "subtle" with James because after the joyless, dead, hesitant readings of so many of the others, his full understanding of the meaning, his love of words, his exuberance and life, although way, way over the top, was a joy. We were doing *Hamlet*, so naturally I cast him as Polonius: wise and yet foolish, a devoted family man, always thinking, always strategizing and yet walking foolishly into dangerous situations; an acrobat with words, sometimes skipping, sometimes falling on his face. His famous "to thine own self be true" speech, although slyly mocking parental advice, happens to be very good advice, and the best advice for our James, who was an imploding, emerging, terrified self in danger of twisting permanently in on himself and shutting the door on his boundless potential. When James played Polonius, he began to see himself as not only an expert on Shakespeare, which, being a gifted kid, he was (he pointed out many things that I missed in the text and understood every reference, the historical background and so forth), but also as a wise parent, someone who, although lovably goofy, was respected by his son and daughter, both played by the most popular kids in the school: "Give thy thoughts no tongue, nor any unproportion'd thought his act. . . . Those friends thou hast, grapple them unto thy soul like hoops of steel . . . Above all, to thine own self be true" (*Hamlet*, 1.3. 59-78).

Z., 9, a "giftie" about two feet tall, was an excellent reader of Shakespeare, but completely unmanageable, rude, disruptive, and prone to repeating bizarre phrases over and over; he became Edmund in *King Lear*. There were many times I considered asking him to withdraw for the sake of the other kids, but I decided to persist. He told me that he would not be at the dress rehearsal because his class was going on a field trip to the ROM (a hugely popular museum in downtown Toronto) and he didn't want to miss it. I told him that he had signed a contract, and that this was unacceptable. His mother was called and came to the school. I pleaded with her and tried to explain the importance of a dress rehearsal, not just for Z. and me, but for all the cast members. I said that I would happily take him to the ROM myself, the next day. His mother glowered at me and yelled, claiming it would destroy him not to go on the field trip. I said that if he didn't come to rehearsal, he was out. He came, the mother staring daggers at me, Z. sobbing hysterically. As soon as we stepped into the rehearsal room (the gym), I handed him a large plastic sword that someone had bought at the Dollar Store, and he was transformed. Forgetting all about the field trip, he threw on his beautiful velvet cape, jumped on stage, and began Edmund's famous "Stand up for Bastards!!" speech. As the choir sang the song that our brilliant composer Ben Stein had made from the speech,

Z. pirouetted and did stage leaps around the stage with his cape and his sword, bowed when given a stranding ovation, and then ran offstage to find his mother and sit on her lap for the rest of the performance so that he wouldn't disrupt the rest of the show. From then on, he would be on time and show respect for others.

I cannot but react to the kids through their finding Shakespeare in these unexpected ways. When I saw Z. connect to the text, I knew that there was hope for him — a will, a balance, a driving need to burst out of his imprisoning body and reputation. Grade school and high school and Shakespeare are all about honor and reputation. Hermione, in *The Winter's Tale*, says:

For life, I prize it
As I weigh grief, which I would spare: for honor,
'Tis a derivative from me to mine,
And only that I stand for. (*Winter's Tale*, 3.2.42-45)

Our reputation is our imprint upon the earth. When the kids have performed Shakespeare brilliantly, they leave a magnificent footprint in the here and now. And whatever may happen in their lives, that imprint cannot ever be taken away from them. In *Twelfth Night*, Orsino says to Caesario (Viola): "I have unclasp'd / To thee the book even of my secret soul" (*Twelfth Night*, 1.4.13-14). That line speaks to me about the process of artistic creation. When the kids let even a smidgen of their secret souls into the role they are playing, great acting happens, even if technique is almost non-existent. *Twelfth Night* is a play about the revealing of our true selves, our souls, apart from our bodies. Viola says to Olivia: "Make me a willow cabin at thy gate / And call upon my soul within the house" (1.5.268-69). Sebastian, after meeting Olivia and feeling her love for his twin aimed at him, says:

This is the air, that is the glorious sun,
This pearl she gave me, I do feel 't and see 't,
And though 'tis wonder that enwraps me thus,
Yet 'tis not madness. (4.3.1-4)

Twelfth Night is also a play about the ecstasy that is love, about the undeniable, undefinable power of love. Sebastian is conceding that love is somewhat like madness, but is asserting that it is not madness. Nothing is more real or more urgent. And, indeed, just because a grade-five crush is pre-sexual, does not make it any less intense than adult romantic love.

R. came running up to me, frantic, at a rehearsal: "Sorry I haven't memorized all my lines because my mother has insomnia because her boyfriend broke up with her, and she's going to

lose the house, and she wants to get back to her first boyfriend, the one I really liked but he isn't returning her calls, so she was up all night crying in my bed, and I have to take care of her." She was only ten, and her mother was only twenty-six, and despite all the stresses in her life, R. was a dazzling Olivia, playing the brilliantly witty, hyper-organized, in-control person she may have wished her mother to be. J. and K., twins who have two mums who subsequently separated, played Viola and Sebastian. In *Twelfth Night*, a play about the construction of gender disguised as a gentle romantic comedy, Olivia is head over heels in love with Viola, Viola loves Orsino, Orsino loves Olivia, and Antonio loves Sebastian — this is a very gay play! Sadly, even in the most progressive communities, in a country where gay marriage is now legal, within elementary school culture, the word "gay" still produces giggles. The twins, although popular, were not about to scold or lecture anybody. It was the process of learning and performing the play that stopped all the giggling. The twins were affirmed and empowered by performing the twins in the play.

The Malvolio story line in *Twelfth Night* is sometimes played as pure comedy, but I have heard of productions in which Malvolio is so deeply humiliated by the bullying that he hangs himself. In fact, a student at our school did try to hang himself after an anti-bullying workshop. This tells me that the workshops are worse than useless; they are dangerous. Doing this play, by contrast, gives us sharp insight into the process of such humiliation, which is an everyday occurrence at school. In the beginning, we are on the side of the teasers because Malvolio is a self-important boor. When the teasing turns to false representation and physical humiliation, we then see the ugliness of the event and feel empathy for Malvolio. The playing out of this nasty journey teaches children in a way that no twenty-minute "just say no to bullying" presentation ever could. They see clearly that what began as essentially a flirting, bonding experience for Maria and Sir Toby and Sir Andrew has become a living hell for the object of their fun. They had successfully othered or objectified Malvolio and therefore treated him as if his life was worthless. This is the very chilling subplot of what seems like a benign comedy about mix-ups in love.

The kids rarely articulated what they had learned. But I absolutely know that they have. My nine-year old daughter, who has been in three of the productions, told me that although some of the kids didn't really understand what they were saying, even after I explained it, eventually, after doing it enough and being a part of the whole, they all could "feel what it means"; she looked at me and repeated, "They FEEL the MEANING." They don't need to put what they feel into words.

Not yet.

References

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