Kill Bill: Why we must take Shakespeare out of the classroom

Mark Powell  The Guardian  March 17, 2014

Shakespeare wrote to put money in his pocket, food on the table and fire in the bellies of his audiences, not strike modern teenagers with fear. Most of Shakespeare's audiences were illiterate. His words were chosen to be spoken or heard, not to be read and deadened behind a desk - they wither when performance is removed.

Our schools are full of Shakespeare, but often in completely the wrong places. Old uncle Bill has become the relative that we invite to family gatherings out of habit, not because we actually want to. He sits there in the corner sharing his stories with anyone who'll listen; the adults lend a patient ear out of a sense of duty and most of the kids have no concept of the vitality of his youth.

Even before, and most definitely since, the recent plummet in drama's status as a specialist subject in schools, many young people's first experience of Shakespeare is in an English classroom taught by enthusiastic purveyors of imagination, but primarily non-theatre practitioners. It's an English teacher's remit to analyze language, but pick apart every word of Shakespeare and you've dissected the butterfly - pretty in parts but a nonsensical whole and certainly unable to fly.

A well meaning English teacher can take a student through the meaning of every word in a sentence and it soon becomes a drawn out and confusing process. Shakespeare's audience didn't know the meaning of every word uttered (uncle Bill was busily making new ones up) but the sounds and pictures they created kept viewers enthralled for hours.

English teachers agree that Shakespeare's language isn't intended to be desk-bound; it's crafted for stage. Simple. Well, not so simple these days. Recent governments have decreed that Shakespeare is so key to our national identity and intelligence that he should be studied by all the children in a specific year group. Great, you might say, but it's not.

Over the past few years I've welcomed fewer and fewer school groups to our theatre. The planning and paperwork involved is prohibitive. Consider as well the amount of staff needed to accompany such a group and the knock-on cost of cover needed back at school. Don't forget the travel time to get to a theatre for what is often a three hour show, plus travel time back. Trips can rarely happen in a school day because of other "core" subjects missed, and
teachers can’t be relied upon to give up their evenings to deliver what has become a luxury.

If a teacher does manage to get kids to a theatre for a rare visit, it’s not always useful. Students who are inexperienced theatregoers think that a particular director’s version is how Shakespeare intended his play to be done, when actually the personal interpretations can be brave, boring or bad enough to put a child off theatre for life. So, a teacher keeps the class in school and tries hard to explain the play.

Teachers are supposed to have all the answers, but dramatic literature is a playground of opinions: why does Juliet say this? Why would Macbeth do that? The real answer is that we don’t know, but teachers are not encouraged to say just that: “I don’t know.” Their own suppositions are often reported back in essays as facts. Plays aren’t meant to be taught like this. They are meant to be explored on their feet. Actors and audiences are supposed to argue over meaning, finding multiple ways of delivering word and deed.

Our BTEC acting course has just started work on The Tempest. These are engaged, talented young people from a range of secondary schools who auditioned to be on the course, but the majority expressed disdain, dislike and hatred for poor uncle Bill. They had all experienced him separately in schools, behind desks. Shakespeare had made them feel stupid rather than empowered.

Let’s give English teachers a break, give drama teachers a boost and give young people an important sense of equality. You don’t need an expensive education to understand the words, but you do need the luxury of time, space and specialism to put his words on their feet and try them out.


Read & Respond

After reading the article, respond to the following questions on a separate sheet of paper. Write in complete sentences.

1. What metaphor does author Mark Powell use to describe Shakespeare? What point is he making through this metaphor?

2. How does the author believe Shakespeare should be read? Why?

3. According to Powell, why has it become difficult for teachers to take their students to see plays by Shakespeare?

4. What can you infer is the author’s occupation (other than as a writer)? What specific sentences helped you make this inference?

5. Does this article contain a certain bias? Explain.

6. Based on this article, how do you think we will be studying Shakespeare in class?
1. What metaphor does author Mark Powell use to describe Shakespeare? What point is he making through this metaphor?

   He compares Shakespeare to the old uncle we "invite to family gatherings out of habit, not because we really want to." This implies the idea that reading Shakespeare is more of a disturbance than of a joy. He is pointing out the fact that teachers are often obligated to teach Shakespeare, but it cannot be fully experienced as it was originally intended.

2. How does the author believe Shakespeare should be read? Why?

   The author believes that Shakespeare plays are meant to be seen and acted out onstage, not read sitting down. This is because this was how William Shakespeare originally intended when he wrote them.

3. According to the Powell, why has it become difficult for teachers to take their students to see plays by Shakespeare?

   He states that it has become difficult to plan these trips because of the paperwork and supervision required to take students on a fieldtrip. Also, often the trip cannot take place during the normal school day, and it is unreasonable to ask teachers to take students on a fieldtrip during the weekends.

4. What can you infer is the author's occupation (other than as a writer)? What specific sentences helped you make this inference?

   The author works in theater, because he states that he has "welcomed fewer and fewer school groups." This indicates that he may have a high position in the theater. He also may be a director or drama teacher because he states "our BTEC acting course." The "our" in this sentence implies some ownership of the students.

5. Does this article contain a certain bias? Explain.

   This article contains a bias because the author is clearly associated with the theater, and therefore he naturally has the opinion that experiencing Shakespeare onstage is the best and only way to experience his works.

6. Based on this article, how do you think we will be studying Shakespeare in class?

   Only include this question if you are planning on acting out either the entire play or large portions of the play in class. This engages them in the play, especially the more fun fight and death scenes. By reading this article, students can understand why it is so important to do this.