

Introduction

Why Perform Classroom Plays?

If you're holding this book open and reading these words, chances are you have already made the leap into classroom theater with your elementary- or middle-school students. Or you are part of a community youth theater, a home-schooling group, or a summer camp that offers drama. If so, you've already seen how readily children embark on play production. You see the connections between acting and reading, writing, social studies, art, music, even science, as students explore ideas from different times and different worlds.

Perhaps your school district already sponsors periodic field trips to local theaters, brings in professional actors for special performances, or provides videos of stage productions for your students. Attending plays and watching actors perform has a lot of value, and most educators appreciate these cultural offerings. In that case, it should be an easy step to convince your principal or coteachers that rehearsing and performing drama is a profitable way to spend precious classroom hours, disguised as a fun activity.

Having students create their own theatrical performance is entirely different from having them watch it. It is an activity in which every one of your students can participate, under your guidance and by your timetable. It costs virtually nothing and requires no tickets, no special buses, no chaperones, and little if any technology. All students can act, regardless of how proficient their reading is—and it is the rare child who doesn't want to be onstage at least for a few minutes.

Letting children perform in short plays and inviting them to watch their classmates perform focuses their energy and sparks excitement in ways that listening to stories or watching professionals cannot do. Words can unexpectedly come alive for the child who speaks them. A character who is "silly" or "scary" on the page becomes meaningful when a child dresses up and becomes that character herself. A silky polyester blouse that belonged to Grandma, a neighbor's cape from last Halloween, and a pair of big sister's leggings suddenly becomes a costume, and the child wearing that costume walks out and feels the magic.

And Why Shakespeare?

Joy, greed, love, jealousy, sadness, gluttony, fear, playfulness, curiosity, and giddy delight: These are some of the human emotions and conditions reflected in Shakespeare's characters. What child has not felt all of them by a very young age? Trickery and practical joking, murder, celebration, revenge, war, poisoning, madness, and courtship: These are all woven into Shakespeare's dramas, and they fascinate children. Plus, in Shakespeare's plays, these emotions and themes are meant to be acted out—not simply read or passively studied. Most children learn best by doing, and acting lets kids “own” the speech and the rhythm, the humor and the pathos.

By introducing William Shakespeare to elementary-school students, you are giving them a huge gift. Most children have heard the word “Shakespeare”—such is the power of his immortality. If older siblings or friends have attended a Shakespeare play, acted in one, or read one in school, your students will already associate Shakespeare with “the big kids” or with adults. And they will be ready to learn who he was and what he was all about. They will be excited to learn that Shakespeare wrote more varied, complex, and poetic plays than anyone before or since. They will be impressed that Elizabethan theater took the place of television, the Internet, movies, and magazines for thousands of ordinary people. You can emphasize that Shakespeare was a very real person who cared deeply about perfecting his craft.

Working with fourth and fifth graders in my own local school brought me into a new relationship with these plays. I immediately shed the pretensions of a literature student and an educated theatergoer and felt part of a completely absorbing learning experience. Let me put that another way: It was so much fun! My own delight in Shakespeare grew when I watched fourth graders speak his lines and heard them chat confidently offstage about the dilemmas of his characters Lysander and Hermia, Puck, Romeo, and Lady Macbeth.

Producing Shakespeare with children, we learn or relearn what the plays are about and what their purpose is, namely to remind us of our history and our common humanity, to instruct, and to entertain—all at the same time.

Practical Matters

How long will it take you to produce one of these plays? It depends. If you are in a school setting and have a half-hour to forty-five-minute reading period once a day, then you will probably need at least three weeks. Count in time for reading aloud a story version of the play, learning some background, and reading the