



Much Ado About Nothing

By William Shakespeare

Study Guide



Introduction

The Theatre Institute at Sage (TIS) is under the umbrella of the Department of Arts and Letters (DAL) at Russell Sage College and is dedicated to providing quality live theatre and arts-in-education programming to Capital Region students, teachers and residents and enhancing the educations of Sage students by providing opportunities through involvement as support staff and student teachers. Programs include educational support services for TIS and DAL productions (such as in-class preparations, residencies, teacher in-services and study guides), a Saturday Theatre Arts school, a Winter break Circus Skills camp, a Spring break Stage Combat camp, and two three-week summer camps; Summer On-Stage and Summer Shakespeare Institute.

Theatre at Sage

The Theatre Institute at Sage represents a commitment by Russell Sage College to develop and continue to provide teachers, students and Capital Region residents with quality live theatre and arts-in education opportunities.

Theatre Etiquette

Live theatre is an active and interactive experience

As members of the audience, you play an important part in the success of a theatrical performance. Please review the following theatre guidelines with your students prior to your visit.

Theatre Is a Two-Way Exchange/ You are our partners.

Actors are thrilled when the audience is engaged and responsive. We want you to laugh, cheer, clap and really enjoy your time at the theatre. However, please be considerate audience members. Talking, whispering and excessive movement during a live performance is distracting

for the actors, and disruptive for other audience members. Enhance your visit by encouraging your students to look at different aspects of the production. Before the show, identify tasks for your class. Have one group of students look at the set, another listen for the music and sound-effects, a third watch the lighting and a fourth, the costumes. Ask them to observe how details in the production elements help clarify the story of the play. Compare notes after the show about what they observed. Your students will be more informed and they'll be surprised by how much they noticed.

And a few rules:

Food, drinks, candy and gum are not permitted in the theatre. The Theatre at Sage is a nut-free zone. Many children have severe life-threatening allergies; NO PEANUTS or NUT products may be brought to our theatre. No electronic devices are permitted in the theatre because they affect our sound system. Photography, audio and video recording during a performance are prohibited. Students are not permitted to leave the theatre unless they are accompanied by an adult. Thank you for your cooperation.

This Study Guide

This study guide has been prepared by the staff of the Theatre Institute at Sage to help you prepare your students to see the play and to work the performance into your curriculum. In addition to background on the author, story and production history, we have identified activities and areas of curriculum that relate directly to William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Often activities will satisfy two or more of the NYS Learning Standards. For example, an improvisational activity can be used to explore character relationships as preparation for a writing exercise, constructing a model of the stage flight rigging can be used to explore technology, geometry and physics and a visual art activity can be used to identify community members. It is our objective to suggest ideas for the creative, intellectual, social, physical and emotional development of your students. We believe that drama, music and dance activities are vital to a child's development!

Table of Contents

Introduction, Theatre at Sage, Theatre Etiquette	1
Theatre Is a Two-Way Exchange, This Study Guide	2
Table of Contents	3
The Upstart Crow: William Shakespeare’s Life and Historical Context	3
“All Is Not As It Seems” Much Ado About Nothing	4
Themes, Motifs and Symbols	5
Plot Overview	8
Character List	9
Director’s Statement	10
Scenic Designer’s Statement	11
Costume Designer’s Statement	12
Movement and Acting Gender	13
The Case for Teaching Shakespeare as verbal Literature	14
Classroom Activities	16
Resources	17
Contact Information	18

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The Upstart Crow: William Shakespeare’s Life and Historical Context



William Shakespeare lived during a time of great social and political unrest. The England of Queen Elizabeth I (who reigned from 1558 to 1603) was filled with spying, intrigue, religious dispute, persecution, and fear. Nonetheless, it was also one of the richest intellectual periods in human history. The English Renaissance during which Shakespeare lived and wrote looked back to the rich ideas, ideals, and literature of the classical worlds of Rome and Greece. Many of Shakespeare’s most famous works are based on stories adapted from earlier tales.

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 and died in 1616. In what is perhaps the first scholarly debate regarding the Bard, April 23 is often claimed as both Shakespeare’s birth and death date. (The coincidence—perhaps what has developed into the myth of Shakespeare—is that April 23 is also the saint day of St. George, the

patron saint of England). It seems very odd that we know so little of the biography of perhaps the most celebrated writer in the English language. The son of an alderman and successful glove-maker, William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon the third child of eight. Married to Anne Hathaway when she was 26 and he only 18, Shakespeare had no university education, but nevertheless displays extensive knowledge of classical literature, contemporary music, art, history, and philosophy.

Shakespeare was part owner of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the acting company which famously performed at the Globe Theater. A rich and varied career produced 37 extant plays, running the gamut from the light-heartedness of the wedding set piece *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to the heaviness of the tragedy of *Hamlet*. His earliest play, *Richard III*, is believed to have been written around 1591; his final plays include the brilliant *Tempest*, believed to have been written in 1610 or 1611. Adding to the myth and the mystery, no manuscripts in Shakespeare's hand survive.

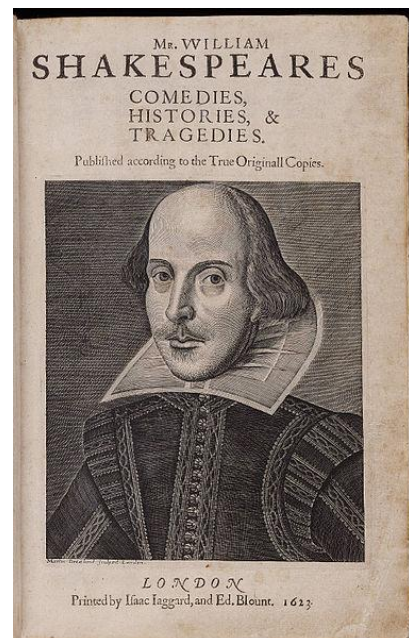
Shakespeare died in April 23, 1616, probably in Stratford, and was buried in Holy Trinity Church in his hometown, a modest town of about 2000 in the early-1600s with a modern population of more than 25,000. Modern Stratford has embraced Shakespeare wholeheartedly and eagerly capitalizes on his name in any way possible, including a pub named "Shakespeareance" and a Bed and Breakfast Inn called "Shakespeare's View."

Shakespeare's place in the history of English literature and language is incomparable. Not only was he responsible for introducing more than 1700 words into the language, including "cold-blooded" and "zany," Shakespeare's influence on his contemporaries and almost every writer (in just about every language) since is continually noted. His works have been translated into almost every language spoken on earth, including Yiddish and Mandarin Chinese (and even Klingon!).

"All is not as it seems": *Much Ado About Nothing*

Although the play is a Shakespearean comedy, defined by the wedding that concludes the play, *Much Ado About Nothing* has a somewhat awkward Act 4 during which the seemingly-pure Hero is accused of sexual indiscretion. If that were not bad enough, the accusation takes place during her wedding and is reconciled in a somewhat absurd plan cooked up by the Friar to fake her death.

The pun in the play's title is on the word "nothing," which would have been pronounced "noting" in Shakespeare's London. Indeed the play is about both "nothing" and "noting" in Beatrice and Benedick's being tricked into confessing their love for each other as well as in Claudio's rejection of Hero at the altar. Taken literally, the title implies that a great fuss ("much ado") is made of something which is insignificant ("nothing"), such as the unfounded claims of Hero's infidelity. The title could also be understood as *Much Ado About Noting*. Much of the action is in interest in and critique of others, written messages, spying, and eavesdropping. This is mentioned several times, particularly concerning "seeming," "fashion," and outward impressions.



Other themes in the play include infidelity/cuckoldry, mistaken identity/masks, and deception. At its heart, the play is also about community and the trust within a close-knit community as we witness the breakdown of that community due to mistrust, lies, and conniving. It might be helpful to think of Messina (the play's setting) as a small town in which everyone knows everyone else, but also in which there is clearly a right and wrong "side of the tracks." Some, like Benedick, Beatrice, Hero, and Claudio, are from the upper class side of town, while the constable Dogberry and the watch, as well as the play's villainous Don John, are from the more seedy side of town.

The doubling and the spying in the play seem to mirror the activities of Elizabeth's throne. Apparently paranoid that English and Continental Catholics were intent on her removal if not her assassination, Elizabeth constructed an elaborate spy network that operated both in England and traveled to the Continent in an effort to expose plots and traitors. Although *Much Ado* is a comedy—and a romantic comedy—the play clearly reflects the suspicions and accusations of Shakespeare's contemporary Europe.

It seems likely *Much Ado About Nothing* was first performed in 1598 or 1599. The text survives in one authoritative early version, the Quarto of 1600, with the play not reprinted during Shakespeare's lifetime and next appearing in the First Folio of 1623. Because stage directions are an anomaly in Elizabethan printed drama, what we see today on the stage is a reconstruction or a supposition. Thus, stagings and productions can vary, as can interpretations of the text itself. Thus, whether the line in the final scene—"I will stop your mouth"—is spoken by Leonato or by Benedick can have great influence on our understanding of the relationships at the play's closing.

One of the few plays in the Shakespeare canon to be spoken almost entirely in prose, *Much Ado* is notable for the "merry war" between Beatrice and Benedick and the malapropisms of the hilarious Dogberry. While Dogberry's mistaken language is cause for audience laughter, it is also the cause of frustration as we realize how limiting language can be as well as how easy it is to misinterpret or misstate one's case. If we can misunderstand Dogberry, then is it not also possible to receive incorrect information regarding Hero's supposed sexual indiscretion with Boarchio? In Messina, it would seem, so much is subjective, understood only through the eyes of individuals. What is truth? And whose truth?

The play has been filmed numerous times, perhaps most famously by Kenneth Branagh in 1993 (in what is Kate Beckinsale's film debut as Hero). A new film is to appear in 2012, directed by Joss Whedon (of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fame). Important stage versions include the recent London production with David Tennant and Catherine Tate as Benedick and Beatrice.

Just as with "wherefore" (which means "why" not "where" in Elizabethan English), "much ado about nothing" has entered the parlance of colloquial English, a favorite of newspaper headline writers.

Theatre Institute at Sage Education Staff

Themes, Motifs and Symbols

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Ideal of Social Grace

The characters' dense, colorful manner of speaking represents the ideal that Renaissance courtiers

cultivated form in their social interactions. The play's language is heavily laden with metaphor and ornamented by rhetoric. Benedick, Claudio, and Don Pedro all produce the kind of witty banter that courtiers used to attract attention and approval in noble households. Courtiers were expected to speak in highly contrived language but to make their clever performances seem effortless. Benedick and his companions try to display their polished social graces both in their behavior and in their speech.

Deception as a Means to an End

The plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* is based upon deliberate deceptions, some malevolent and others benign. The duping of Claudio and Don Pedro results in Hero's disgrace, while the ruse of her death prepares the way for her redemption and reconciliation with Claudio. In a more lighthearted vein, Beatrice and Benedick are fooled into thinking that each loves the other, and they actually do fall in love as a result. *Much Ado About Nothing* shows that deceit is not inherently evil, but something that can be used as a means to good or bad ends.

The Importance of Honor

The aborted wedding ceremony, in which Claudio rejects Hero, accusing her of infidelity and violated chastity and publicly shaming her in front of her father, is the climax of the play. In Shakespeare's time, a woman's honor was based upon her virginity and chaste behavior. For a woman to lose her honor by having sexual relations before marriage meant that she would lose all social standing, a disaster from which she could never recover.

For men, on the other hand, honor depended on male friendship alliances and was more military in nature. Unlike a woman, a man could defend his honor, and that of his family, by fighting in a battle or a duel. Beatrice urges Benedick to avenge Hero's honor by dueling to the death with Claudio. As a woman, Hero cannot seize back her honor, but Benedick can do it for her via physical combat.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Public Shaming

Even though Hero is ultimately vindicated, her public shaming at the wedding ceremony is too terrible to be ignored. In a sense, this kind of humiliation incurs more damage to her honor and her family name than would an act of unchaste behavior.

Noting

In Shakespeare's time, the "Nothing" of the title would have been pronounced "Noting." Thus, the play's title could read: "Much Ado About Noting." Indeed, many of the players participate in the actions of observing, listening, and writing, or noting. In order for a plot hinged on instances of deceit to work, the characters must note one another constantly.

Don John's plot to undo Claudio also hinges on noting: in order for Claudio to believe that Hero is unchaste and unfaithful, he must be brought to her window to witness, or note, Margaret (whom he takes to be Hero) bidding farewell to Borachio in the semidarkness.

Entertainment

From the witty yet plaintive song that Balthasar sings about the deceitfulness of men to the masked ball and the music and dancing at the end of the play, the characters of *Much Ado About Nothing* spend much of their time engaging in elaborate spectacles and entertainments. The play's title encapsulates the sentiment of effervescent and light court entertainment: the two hours' traffic onstage.

Counterfeiting

The idea of counterfeiting, in the sense of presenting a false face to the world, appears frequently throughout the play. A particularly rich and complex example of counterfeiting occurs as Leonato, Claudio, and Don Pedro pretend that Beatrice is head over heels in love with Benedick so that the eavesdropping Benedick will overhear it and believe it.

Another, more serious reference to counterfeiting occurs at the wedding ceremony, as Claudio rhetorically paints a picture of Hero as a perfect counterfeit of innocence, unchaste and impure beneath a seemingly unblemished surface.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Taming of Wild Animals

The play is peppered with metaphors involving the taming of wild animals. In the case of the courtship between Beatrice and Benedick, the symbol of a tamed savage animal represents the social taming that must occur for both wild souls to be ready to submit themselves to the shackles of love and marriage. Beatrice's vow to submit to Benedick's love by "[t]aming my wild heart to thy loving hand" makes use of terms from falconry, suggesting that Benedick is to become Beatrice's master (III.i.113).

War

Throughout the play, images of war frequently symbolize verbal arguments and confrontations. At the beginning of the play, Leonato relates to the other characters that there is a "merry war" between Beatrice and Benedick.

Leonato accuses Claudio of killing Hero with words: "Thy slander hath gone through and through her heart" (V.i.68). Later in the same scene, Benedick presents Claudio with a violent verbal challenge: to duel to the death over Hero's honor.

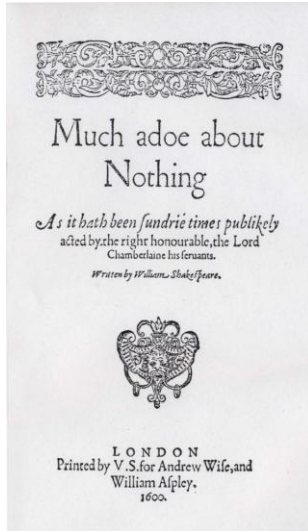
When Borachio confesses to staging the loss of Hero's innocence, Don Pedro describes this spoken evidence as a sword that tears through Claudio's heart: "Runs not this speech like iron through your blood?" (V.i.227)

Hero's Death and Resurrection

Claudio's powerful words accusing Hero of unchaste and disloyal acts cause her to fall down in apparent lifelessness. When Friar Francis, Hero, and Beatrice convince Leonato of his daughter's innocence, they maintain that she really has died, in order to punish Claudio and give Hero a respectable amount of time to regain her honor. In a symbolic sense, Hero has died, since, although she is pure, Claudio's damning

accusation has permanently besmirched her name. She must symbolically die and be reborn pure again in order for Claudio to marry her a second time.

Plot Overview



LEONATO, A KINDLY, RESPECTABLE NOBLEMAN, lives in the idyllic Italian town of Messina. Leonato shares his house with his lovely young daughter, Hero, his playful, clever niece, Beatrice, and his elderly brother, Antonio. As the play begins, Leonato prepares to welcome some friends home from a war. The friends include Don Pedro, a prince who is a close friend of Leonato, and two fellow soldiers: Claudio, a well-respected young nobleman, and Benedick, a clever man who constantly makes witty jokes, often at the expense of his friends. Don John, Don Pedro's illegitimate brother, is part of the crowd as well. Don John is sullen and bitter, and makes trouble for the others.

When the soldiers arrive at Leonato's home, Claudio quickly falls in love with Hero. Meanwhile, Benedick and Beatrice resume the war of witty insults that they have carried on with each other in the past. Claudio and Hero pledge their love to one another and decide to be married. To pass the time in the week before the wedding, the lovers and their friends decide to play a game. They want to get Beatrice and Benedick, who are clearly meant for each other, to stop arguing and fall in love. Their tricks prove successful, and Beatrice and Benedick soon fall secretly in love with each other.

But Don John has decided to disrupt everyone's happiness. He has his companion Borachio make love to Margaret, Hero's serving woman, at Hero's window in the darkness of the night, and he brings Don Pedro and Claudio to watch. Believing that he has seen Hero being unfaithful to him, the enraged Claudio humiliates Hero by suddenly accusing her of lechery on the day of their wedding and abandoning her at the altar. Hero's stricken family members decide to pretend that she died suddenly of shock and grief and to hide her away while they wait for the truth about her innocence to come to light. In the aftermath of the rejection, Benedick and Beatrice finally confess their love to one another. Fortunately, the night watchmen overheard Borachio bragging about his crime. Dogberry and Verges, the heads of the local police, ultimately arrest both Borachio and Conrad, another of Don John's followers. Everyone learns that Hero is really innocent, and Claudio, who believes she is dead, grieves for her.

Leonato tells Claudio that, as punishment, he wants Claudio to tell everybody in the city how innocent Hero was. He also wants Claudio to marry Leonato's "niece"—a girl who, he says, looks much like the dead Hero. Claudio goes to church with the others, preparing to marry the mysterious, masked woman he thinks is Hero's cousin. When Hero reveals herself as the masked woman, Claudio is overwhelmed with joy. Benedick then asks Beatrice if she will marry him, and after some arguing they agree. The joyful lovers all have a merry dance before they celebrate their double wedding.

Character List

Beatrice - Leonato's niece and Hero's cousin. Beatrice is "a pleasant-spirited lady" with a very sharp tongue. She is generous and loving, but, like Benedick, continually mocks other people with elaborately tooled jokes and puns. She wages a war of wits against Benedick and often wins the battles. At the outset of the play, she appears content never to marry.



Benedick - An aristocratic soldier who has recently been fighting under Don Pedro, and a friend of Don Pedro and Claudio. Benedick is very witty, always making jokes and puns. He carries on a "merry war" of wits with Beatrice, but at the beginning of the play he swears he will never fall in love or marry.

Claudio - A young soldier who has won great acclaim fighting under Don Pedro during the recent wars. Claudio falls in love with Hero upon his return to Messina. His unfortunately suspicious nature makes him quick to believe evil rumors and hasty to despair and take revenge.

Hero - The beautiful young daughter of Leonato and the cousin of Beatrice. Hero is lovely, gentle, and kind. She falls in love with Claudio when he falls for her, but when Don John slanders her and Claudio rashly takes revenge, she suffers terribly.

Don Pedro - An important nobleman from Aragon, sometimes referred to as "Prince." Don Pedro is a longtime friend of Leonato, Hero's father, and is also close to the soldiers who have been fighting under him—the younger Benedick and the very young Claudio. Don Pedro is generous, courteous, intelligent, and loving to his friends, but he is also quick to believe evil of others and hasty to take revenge. He is the most politically and socially powerful character in the play.

Leonato - A respected, well-to-do, elderly noble at whose home, in Messina, Italy, the action is set. Leonato is the father of Hero and the uncle of Beatrice. As governor of Messina, he is second in social power only to Don Pedro.

Don John - The illegitimate brother of Don Pedro; sometimes called "the Bastard." Don John is melancholy and sullen by nature, and he creates a dark scheme to ruin the happiness of Hero and Claudio. He is the villain of the play; his evil actions are motivated by his envy of his brother's social authority.

Margaret - Hero's serving woman, who unwittingly helps Borachio and Don John deceive Claudio into thinking that Hero is unfaithful. Unlike Ursula, Hero's other lady-in-waiting, Margaret is lower class. Though she is honest, she does have some dealings with the villainous world of Don John: her lover is the mistrustful and easily bribed Borachio. Also unlike Ursula, Margaret loves to break decorum, especially with bawdy jokes and teases.

Borachio - An associate of Don John. Borachio is the lover of Margaret, Hero's serving woman. He

conspires with Don John to trick Claudio and Don Pedro into thinking that Hero is unfaithful to Claudio. His name means “drunkard” in Italian, which might serve as a subtle direction to the actor playing him.

Conrad - One of Don John’s more intimate associates, entirely devoted to Don John. Several recent productions have staged Conrad as Don John’s potential male lover, possibly to intensify Don John’s feelings of being a social outcast and therefore motivate his desire for revenge.

Dogberry - The constable in charge of the Watch, or chief policeman, of Messina. Dogberry is very sincere and takes his job seriously, but he has a habit of using exactly the wrong word to convey his meaning. Dogberry is one of the few “middling sort,” or middle-class characters, in the play, though his desire to speak formally and elaborately like the noblemen becomes an occasion for parody.



Verges - The deputy to Dogberry, chief policeman of Messina.

Antonio - Leonato’s elderly brother, and Hero and Beatrice’s uncle.

Balthasar - A waiting man in Leonato’s household and a musician. Balthasar flirts with Margaret at the masked party and helps Leonato, Claudio, and Don Pedro trick Benedick into falling in love with Beatrice. Balthasar sings the song, “Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more” about accepting men’s infidelity as natural.

Ursula - One of Hero’s waiting women.

David Baecker

Director, Associate Professor of Theatre, Russell Sage College

Discusses the production and his concept of using an all female cast of actors

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING is often regarded as a problem play. The majority of it is written in prose, so Shakespeare’s sacred verse is only intermittently spoken. Despite much comic plotting and fun, the real action of the story does not kick in until very late in the play. Finally, for a romantic comedy, it has some moments as sad and dark as any tragedy.

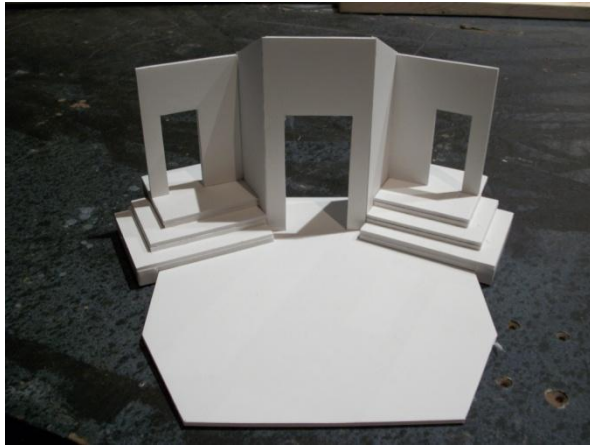
As a director, my job is to reconcile these points with the elements that make MUCH ADO so attractive, namely, the characters and the tone. Beatrice and Benedick’s conflicts about falling in love are endearing and human. Their reluctance to display vulnerability and the absurd lengths to which they will go to conceal themselves make for a very rich comedy. Added to that, the teasing and cajoling by the other characters gives the play a holiday mood that in the absence of a strong plot structure, feeds the audience on merriment and good humor. One should leave MUCH ADO feeling good and I think that Shakespeare’s tone is one of the story’s chief strengths.

A note on the concept: casting an all-female company takes us back to the roots of a Shakespearean

production, but now in reverse. The jokes that Elizabethan audiences would have enjoyed delivered from an all-male cast are stood on their head and gender comedy is discovered anew. I have enjoyed “manning-up” with this adventurous corps of women and matching their talents with the wit of the script. Have fun!

Duncan Morrison

Production/ Resident Scenic Designer, Russell Sage College



Model for the set of Much Ado About Nothing



Constructing the Set

Shakespeare’s language is timeless, and as such his plays have been set in times and locations as various as 19th century Paris to a futuristic world on Mars. This production stays a little closer to its’ Elizabethan roots. With the actors costumed in period appropriate garb, the set design is intended to create a space that evokes theater spaces of that time and still allowing the audience to focus on the performers and Shakespeare’s text. While not a literal translation of the Globe or Rose, the set incorporates several details that are common to most Elizabethan theaters. As in those, we have a large opening in the upstage center wall and two more entrance/exits on the far left and right sides of the stage. All of these open on to the main deck, which has been thrust out into the auditorium seating area, similar to an Elizabethan stage. This brings the performers closer to our audience and hopefully approximates the connection that would have existed between the 17th century players and their “groundlings”. The wood plank walls are meant to be a simple, earthy backdrop for the lights, costumes and actors. A little bit of today, a little bit of yesterday and, hopefully, timeless.

Jenn Dugan

Production/ Resident Costume Designer, Russell Sage College



Costume for the character of Beatrice/Kristie Wortman

I'll be honest, Shakespeare isn't the easiest for me to costume. The language is not easy to understand the first time you read it, and there are always hidden meanings. Once I get past that, however, I love costuming Shakespeare productions. The history, the details, the colors, the trims and the silhouettes are all enlightening and enchanting.

In doing research, I came across the Elizabethan Sumptuary Laws, a set of rules set by Queen Elizabeth I as to what you could or could not wear, specific colors and fabrics, based on your social class. While initially I tried to abide by these rules in costuming the characters of "Much Ado", it soon became impractical as I wanted the richer colors on characters that aren't in the highest class, and it's impossible to stick to fabric rules. Fabric and color are among the most important things to me as a designer, and luckily living in the modern world, a costume designer has artistic license to dress the characters how they are envisioned.

The biggest challenge for this show: making our fabulous female cast look like males. Add shoulder pads, facial hair, wigs, and a little macho attitude and we have a well rounded Shakespearian looking production.



Wigs in Men's Hair Styles



Experimenting with Male Makeup

David Bunce

Teaching/Artist-in-Residence, Russell Sage College Stage Combat and Movement Instructor on Acting Gender

I have been working with the cast of *Much Ado About Nothing* on the creative puzzle of how female actors can portray and create the illusion of being male characters. We have approached this as an exercise in comparing the movements of the different genders.

We first worked to identify not only male characteristics, but also female. What makes a woman's movements feminine? We would exaggerate the swaying hips of a female walk as much as we would the erect posture and leading chest of the male walk.

Here are some of our discoveries:

1. Females tend to walk on the straight line, the toe pointing much like the tight-rope walker, controlled, graceful.
Males tend to point their toes out to either side and walk on two separate railroad tracks, shifting their weight from one foot to the other, almost flopping one foot down, then the other.
2. Females generally have a center of gravity in their hips and pelvis, and they tend to shrink into themselves, almost in an effort to appear smaller or take up less space.
Males center their gravity in their chest, shoulders and upper back, particularly when they flare out their pectoral muscles in an effort to create a larger silhouette.
3. Females sit with legs crossed, up straight, no slouching.
Males sit with their legs apart, often hunched over to rest their elbows on their knees.
4. Females tend to offer their hand palm down, and simply let their hands hang if not using them.
Males tend to offer their hand palm up, and when at rest pick at their hands like they are well worn tools.

5. Females tend to run with erect posture, more concerned with the journey than the destination. Males tend to lean forward and charge chin first with the intension of getting somewhere.
6. Females lift their brows with a wide-eyed wonder that embraces the person to which they are speaking. Males scowl with the pensive ferruled brow of thought or distrust.

We went on to compare the ways that females and males react differently in different situations.

These are of course gross generalities and no two people (male or female) move in exactly the same way. But these observations gave us a good base from which each actress could make further decisions about the movements of her specific character. And it was an excellent observation exercise.

No More Reading Shakespeare

Last semester I was asked to come into the class of a Russell Sage College professor in the English Department. The course was Teaching Adolescent Literature. Members of the class were graduate education students headed for the middle and high school classroom.

I was asked if I could provide some new or special perspective or ideas to reaffirm Shakespeare as part of the curriculum. You see, this professor was struggling with what year after year seems to be a general student disinterest in Shakespeare and his plays.

I wrestled with the idea. I believe Shakespeare's work is relevant. I believe his work can be an incredible tool to teach grammar, rhetoric, dramatic structure and powerful stories and themes. But how to get the students to care?!

I am a career actor, yet I struggle with the task of sitting alone and reading one of Shakespeare's plays for the first time. I don't understand many of the words, I have to stop and look them up. I can't relax and enjoy the story. It seems much more of a task than a pleasure. I can't imagine how uninteresting it must be for the average high school student.

But on second reading, or third when I understand the plot and the archaic words, phrases and references, I thoroughly enjoy it. I can lose myself in his wonderful plot and fascinating characters.

And working on it, speaking those words is the most fun of all. It requires not only the research and thought to dissect what is being said, you can wrap your mouth around those wonderful words.

So here is my conclusion, we should not be teaching Shakespeare's work as written literature. He never expected people to read it. The plays were not printed in his lifetime. If he had expected readership, he might have written entirely different material. Shakespeare expected his work to be spoken, to be heard, to be acted.

And here is the start of my revolution:

We should be teaching Shakespeare not as written literature, but as verbal literature. We should be teaching our students the art of verbal communication, in other words how to talk to each other. And I mean really talk. To use rhetoric, alliteration, onomatopoeia and all the other tools in the English language available to us. Shakespeare was a genius in the art of people talking to each other. We can

use his work to instill in students not only an appreciation of, but also an enjoyment of the spoken word. What could be more descriptive and more enjoyable than telling an adversary:

"Out of my sight, thou dost infect mine eye!"

Richard III, Act I, Sc 2 (Lady Anne)

The idea that just looking at you gives me a nasty case of pink eye! That is an insult!

Shakespeare gives us a wealth of descriptive language and word images. He is reputed to have contributed 1,700 new words or phrases to the language. Listen to the description of the night before battle given by the Chorus in *Henry V*:

*"Now entertain conjecture of a time
When creeping murmur and the poring dark
Fills the wide vessel of the universe.
From camp to camp through the foul womb of night
The hum of either army stilly sounds,
That the fixed sentinels almost receive
the secret whispers of each other's watch."*

King Henry V, Act III, Sc 6

Several years ago in the introduction to his book, *Shakespeare's Advice to the Players*, British Director Peter Hall lamented the demise of the spoken word. He blamed the cause on the advent of communication technology. He makes sense. Since the explosion of emails and texts in our lives, we can get by quite well hardly ever speaking to anyone. Oddly, Peter Hall wrote those words before the development of texting and when emailing was in its infancy. Just imagine how much we can avoid talking to each other now.

There is ample evidence that strong verbal communication skills are directly related to strong written communication skills. If our kids speak with a knowledge of grammar, they will write with a knowledge of grammar.

Shakespeare gave us a wealth of material (the best ever written) with which to explore the English language, the spoken word. Teach your students to speak the language. Find the fun and excitement of speaking his words yourself.

Take time in your classroom to dissect the language together. Approach the speeches as explanations from one character to another. Play games with your students overemphasizing the sounds of words individually and strung together. Over emphasize the pronunciation of words, spit out those P's and hiss out those S's. Practice painting pictures with the words. Passages of Shakespeare can be performed as Rap.

I have included three reference books in the *Editions: Performance* section in the list of resources in this guide. They are a wealth of information and exercises designed to teach analysis and performance. Your students need not perform Shakespeare's speeches to appreciate working on them. Simply dissecting them and speaking the words can be a wonderful adventure.

New NYS Learning Standards for English Language address a need for verbal communication. I can't agree more.

*"Speak the speech, I pray you, as I
pronounced it to you..."*

Hamlet, Act III, Sc2

David Bunce

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Shakespearean Charades: Played like a regular game of charades, students choose a cue card with the title of one of The Bard's plays and then act it out each word or part for the rest of the class. Rounds can be given time limits and points can be scored for opposing teams.

Silent Movie/Tableau: Each group (of 3-4) will be assigned a Shakespearean play that they are familiar with. Students discuss the major plotline of the particular play and distill into Beginning, Middle and End moments. Each moment will be depicted as a Tableau (frozen pose) and a Caption announced by one of the group members. Students practice going from one pose to the next telling the story in this distilled form.

Master/Servant: In many of Shakespeare's plays, the relationship of master and servant is explored in terms of status and even role-reversal. With students in pairs, experiment with this status relationship by assigning Master/Servant roles and playing out a scene where demands are made and obeyed. Then reverse roles. Discuss what happens when one character has status or power over another and then circumstances change.

Shakespearean Insult Generator: Go to website below and print out three columns of Shakespearean words for students to create various combinations of insulting phrases. Have pairs of students stand opposite one another and practice projection and diction by "hurling" these at their fellow students.
http://www.ariel.com.au/jokes/Shakespearean_Insults.html

Jeopardy Trivia: Make a game show of all the facts and mystery surrounding The Bard. Have students choose a Shakespearean category (Elizabethan Life, Stratford-Upon Avon, Family, Plays, Characters, Theatre, Movie adaptations, etc.) and come up with 5 Facts about Shakespeare that must be answered with a question. Have them quiz a partner or set up a class-wide competition.

Several of the above activities are based in using movement rather than language to explore Shakespeare's plots and relationships. These suggestions are intended to give teachers an approach that will pull the students out of their expectations about Shakespeare and prompt new discussion.

We have included a section on the resources page entitled *Editions: Performance*. The three books listed are a wealth of information and activities to approach Shakespeare as verbal literature.

Resources

Editions: Research

- Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado About Nothing*. Ed. Claire McEachern. London: Arden, 2006. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado About Nothing*. (Folger Shakespeare Library). Ed. Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Washington Square Press, 1995. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado About Nothing*. Ed. Sylvan Barnet. New York: Signet, 1998. Print.
- Asimov, Isaac. *Asimov's Guide To Shakespeare*. Avenel Books, 1978. Print.

Editions: Performance

- Barton, John. *Playing Shakespeare; An Actor's Guide*. Anchor Books, 2001. Print.
- Hall, Peter. *Shakespeare's Advice To The players*. Oberon Books, Ltd, 2003. Print.
- Linklater, Kristin. *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice*. Theatre Communications Group, 1992. Print.

Studies:

- Evans, Bertrand. *Shakespeare's Comedies*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Shakespeare After All*. New York: Anchor, 2005.

Websites:

- Lesson plans and other teaching resources: <http://webenglishteacher.com/muchado.html>
- Teaching *Much Ado About Nothing* at the Folger Library: <http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=2774>
- Shakespearean Insults: http://www.ariel.com.au/jokes/Shakespearean_Insults.html

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