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31. LOOKING FOR SHAKESPEARE

Transformation through Double Framing in the Adolescent Journey

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Shakespeare is appropriated by educators and others to serve their own purposes (Allen, 1991, p. 42–43), whether they be to teach the heritage of English literature, to perpetuate the examinations system, the Shakespeare industry and its Bardolatry, or, in this case, to promote adolescent response. The perspective from which Looking for Shakespeare begins is that of an inquiry into the layers of personal meaning in the play: Shakespeare’s “open text” challenges participants to reassess and transform their perceptions and their worldview (Allen, 1991, p. 45). A four-week intensive theatre workshop for adolescents which began at New York University in 1999, the program was conceived for inner-city adolescents who may not have had any theatre background to get to know and to perform a Shakespeare play. We adopted an integrated arts approach, employing improvisation, role play, visual art, creative writing, movement and music to explore and illuminate the text.

What is often missing for participants in traditional drama education is learning to hold several different worlds in the mind simultaneously, in order to reflect on the personal meaning that is generated as the metaphors are explored. With this in mind, Looking for Shakespeare attempts to build a bridge between the historical and cultural world of Shakespeare, and the contemporary world of the participants. Underpinned by Jan Kott’s (1965) seminal text, Shakespeare our Contemporary, we worked together to find meanings in the text that resonated with the participants’ lives. We encouraged them to make a connection between the play’s themes and their own lives, so that young people would discover Shakespeare and experience transformations of self-image in the process. The adolescents built a bridge to Shakespeare by creating contemporary characters, which then played Shakespeare as a play within a play; each young person would play a role within a role (Martin-Smith, 2000). The development of the project can be traced back to 1999 when we explored scenes from Hamlet, Macbeth and Much Ado as a troupe of players. The second summer it was Twelfth Night and A Midsummer Night’s Dream, performed at a young person’s rave. The third summer, our focus was on As You Like It, set in the fictional Arden Correctional Facility for Exceptional Juveniles, where the worlds of juvenile detention and the banished Rosalind and Duke Senior co-existed. The participants were in role as inmates who performed the play as part of their prison therapy. The fourth summer, we performed Cymbeline as a way to settle a turf war between two Lower Manhattan gangs, The Royals and The Army of Darkness. Over these four years in New York, the artistic team continued to weave elements
of contemporary life and Shakespeare together in a way that resonated with the young people and our local community.

In 2004, we brought Looking for Shakespeare to Goldsmiths University of London. We set Romeo and Juliet in the midst of 1960’s East End gang culture. The worlds of the Mods and Rockers from the film Quadrophenia (1979) and the world of the Montagues and Capulets were juxtaposed, and provided a forum for discussions of different types of parental authority (Martin-Smith & Hayton, 2006). The second year, we performed A Midsummer Night’s Dream in a futuristic Athens, with the mechanicals as secret police modelled after the Keystone Cops. The play was set in the authoritarian world of Theseus, King of Athens, co-existing with the fairy world of Oberon and Titania. Inspired by Marian Warner’s (2000) essay “Rough Magic and Sweet Lullaby,” our outdoor production explored the dark world of Titania’s fairies, who emerged onto the stage through the windows of the ivy-covered walls of Goldsmiths College only to be threatened by Puck, played by four actors simultaneously.

The third year we performed Shakespeare’s journey play Pericles: Prince of Tyre, set at a fictional Thames River Festival, while telling the participants’ own immigration stories. Pericles’ journey is a story of sorrow, suffering and joy: the loss of his kingdom, as well as the loss of his wife Thaisa and daughter Marina. To understand Pericles’ journey, the adolescents were challenged to take a longer perspective of life than they possessed. Yet they resonate with Pericles’ suffering because they too have suffered on their long journeys to London, with or without their families. Shakespeare’s play helped them to focus time, both speeding it up and slowing it down, so they could connect their stories with Pericles’ story. The Looking for Shakespeare production of Pericles employed Shakespeare’s original text, co-written with 17th Century Southwark brothel owner George Wilkins, to echo issues of child slavery in our contemporary world. Actively experiencing these multiple perspectives helped the young people to transform their self-images through personal narrative to include virtual times and cultures. Transformations in their self-images, their contemporary characters and their Shakespeare characters were revealed in their “Me Projects”, life-size self-portraits in pastel and coloured marker on brown paper (Martin-Smith, 2010).

The most important benefit to young people in engaging them in the performance of Shakespeare’s plays is that the engagement is not primarily about the plays themselves. Rather, performances of Shakespeare’s plays, which hold a “mirror up to nature”, engage young people in a reflection on their own lives. Hamlet, for example, is not only a play about the killing of a king: the killing of a king is a metaphor for Hamlet’s self-destruction because of a secret he cannot reveal. Looking at Hamlet in this way encourages young people to make personal meaning through the performance of the play. Antonin Artaud’s Theatre and its Double helps us to understand the power of the play within the play as a framing device for the life journey:

… if theatre doubles life, life doubles true theatre… This title will comply with all the doubles of the theatre which I thought I’d found for so many years: metaphysics, plague, cruelty… the pool of energies which constitute Myths,