

How Performing in Theater Can Help Build Empathy in Students

(Courtesy KQED)

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Aug 22, 2016



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One of the first exercises Kyle Ware does with teachers in the Kentucky Shakespeare [From the Page to the Stage](#) development workshop is to get them on their feet and using the words of Shakespeare in action, in a game called, “Shakespearean Insults and Compliments.” Ware, who is director of education for the company’s extensive schools program, said that teachers take each other down and lift each other up using the words of the Bard—no matter if they’re accurate: “Thou art an ill-fated huggermugger!” is an example Ware gave.

“Then the other person might throw something back at them. The idea is that, when put in context, this insult is something that can easily be understood. Even though I don’t exactly know what a *huggermugger* is, I get it.”

From the Page to the Stage was developed by Kentucky Shakespeare in conjunction with the [Folger Shakespeare Library](#) in 1991, as a way to help teachers get the most out of teaching Shakespeare to their classes, and has been honored by the Library as an exemplary program and used as a model for other professional development programs. The idea behind it, said Ware, was to get Shakespeare “back up on its feet,” where it belongs. Since Shakespeare’s plays were meant to be performed, Ware said they have seen that students get more out of Shakespeare when they are doing both reading and performance.

Ware also shows teachers ways to let kids interpret the text when doing analysis, often using Othello’s Act III, Scene III as an example, which he studied with a recent group of high schoolers. Ware tells

teachers about a particular student's reaction to Iago, who doesn't say much, but let's Othello do all the talking, and therefore all the work of the scene:

IAGO: My noble lord--

OTHELLO: What dost thou say, Iago?

IAGO: Did Michael Cassio, when you woo'd my lady,
Know of your love?

OTHELLO: He did, from first to last: why dost thou ask?

IAGO: But for a satisfaction of my thought; No further harm.

OTHELLO: Why of thy thought, Iago?

IAGO: I did not think he had been acquainted with her.

OTHELLO: O, yes; and went between us very oft.

IAGO: Indeed!

OTHELLO: Indeed! ay, indeed: discern'st thou aught in that? Is he not honest?

IAGO: Honest, my lord!

OTHELLO: Honest! ay, honest.

IAGO: My lord, for aught I know.

OTHELLO: What dost thou think?

As Ware tells it, a student then popped up and said, "Hey, he's clownin' him!"

"So that is exactly what's happening in this scene - Iago is clowning Othello," Ware said. Though 'clownin' someone isn't exactly a scholarly term, Ware said that's more than all right: what matters is that students are making connections between themselves and the feelings of 400-year-old Shakespearean characters.

"And when a teacher hears that, she says, 'Yes, I see my own window to my students. I see my own window into this work.' Then hopefully, they can relay this idea through their own curriculum, their own text analysis. That's the thing we try to do, leave them [educators] with the tools to do this kind of work."

THE BENEFITS OF THEATER

In his book [*Doing Well and Doing Good by Doing Art*](#), UCLA professor James Catterall details the results of a twelve-year study in which he followed secondary students who participated in music or theater arts in school into their adult lives to see if the arts made a difference, and what kind of difference it made. Catterall found a strong association between high school theater and inner development. "Sustained student involvement in theatre arts (acting in plays and musicals, participating in drama clubs, and taking acting lessons) associates with a variety of developments for youth," he writes in the first chapter. "Gains in reading proficiency, gains in self-concept and motivation, and higher levels of empathy for others."

Ware said that teachers he works with find Shakespeare more challenging to teach in today's digital climate, an observation Ware himself makes when he works directly with students in classrooms. In recent years, Kentucky Shakespeare has added Shakespeare workshops that work with students and teachers on developing skills like conflict resolution, body language and empathy—ways of communicating they feel may be getting lost when most interactions happen screen-to-screen instead of face-to-face.

One such program was a four-week residency conducted by Kentucky Shakespeare's producing artistic director, Matthew Wallace, at a Jefferson County school for students with behavioral and emotional disorders. Wallace, who is also a facilitator at the [*Shakespeare Behind Bars*](#) program

conducted in the Luther Luckett state prison, had experience in teaching conflict resolution using acting techniques and Shakespeare.*

For art and humanities teacher Sharon Lillie, who applied for a Very Special Arts grant to bring Wallace and crew to the school twice per week for four weeks, teaching Shakespeare in this way to her students—boys and girls who had already been kicked out of traditional school—the experience was “absolutely worth it.”

For more than two hours, Wallace worked with eleven of Lillie’s ninth- and tenth-graders on the [first scene of Romeo and Juliet](#), in which the servants of the two warring households get into a fight.

“You would think that working on a scene where the characters fight wouldn’t be such a great idea with our kids,” said Lillie. “But it worked. They learned the lines, they learned what the lines meant, they talked about things like: what kind of body language does somebody have when they’re ready to fight? What about when somebody’s backing off? How would you step into the area, and out? How would you vary your tone of voice?”

Lillie said that, once the students had gone through the text and learned what the words meant, performing even the most confrontational scenes was fun for them because they weren’t themselves: they were the characters.

Since many of her students end up in the special school in the first place because they have a hard time reading physical or verbal cues, practicing them “for pretend” strengthened their ability to read others’ reactions. Being able to do this in a safe environment, said Lillie, with the added fun of acting, made a visible difference in her students.

“On the days when Matt came,” Lillie said, “Their homeroom teacher reported these students got along a lot better the rest of that day. They were more relaxed with each other, they could take things a little less seriously than what they had been doing.”

Wallace, who said that his workshops often focus on issues like conflict resolution, was adamant that he never wants the scenes themselves to turn into some kind of therapy. “The brilliance of Shakespeare is that, at the time the plays were performed, it was still a mostly oral society, ” Wallace said, noting that most of the population was illiterate. “So it’s all about the words—the sounds of the words, and how it makes you feel when you hear them and when you are saying them. We think that sort of visceral experience of saying these words out loud is valuable,” he said.

“It’s using the healing power of the arts to create this structure and using teamwork. And the building of empathy is huge.”

At the end of the four-week workshop, the students performed their Romeo and Juliet scenes in the cafeteria for the whole school, which Lillie considered a symbol of how far they’d come: though the students were visibly nervous, they didn’t get stage fright and they remembered their lines.

Throughout the experience, students kept a journal of their thoughts and feelings. While many had recorded positive details about the experience, Lillie remembers two students especially, one who wrote, “I really love this.” And another, who wrote, “It was fun to be joking on each other and getting away with it.”