

**Language, Relatability, and Ease of Access: Bringing the Works of Shakespeare to a Wider Audience**

by

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# **Language, Relatability, and Ease of Access: Bringing the Works of Shakespeare to a Wider Audience**

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University of Pittsburgh, 2022

The works of William Shakespeare are one of the pillars of the Western theatrical canon and bear a great deal of cultural significance in our modern world. However, many people today struggle to understand these more than 400-year-old stories, finding the plays intimidating and believing that Shakespeare is not something they will be able to connect with or understand. This paper explores three key barriers which often make Shakespeare inaccessible to members of the public (*Language, Relatability, and Ease of Access*) as well as the strategies four Shakespearian theatre companies have developed to overcome these barriers. These companies are the Shakespeare Youth Festival (Los Angeles), Flute Theatre (London), Shakespeare Behind Bars (Kentucky and Michigan), and Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks (Pittsburgh). These strategies were tested and put into practice through The Shakespeare Exploration Project, a tabling project designed to make the works of Shakespeare more accessible to the public.

This research offers the following conclusions: in order to make Shakespeare more accessible for all, it is necessary to lean into the large emotions of Shakespeare's characters, focus on the rhythms inherent in Shakespeare's verse (specifically iambic pentameter), and make the theatre space itself into a welcoming and accepting environment where participants and audience members feel free to be themselves and explore. The lessons learned through this research will be useful for any theatre practitioner attempting to make their work more accessible and open to all.

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## Preface

*I can no other answer make but thanks,*

*And thanks; and ever thanks...*

– Twelfth Night (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 3.3.15-16)

In the immortal words of Stephen Sondheim: “No one is alone” – a statement that is perhaps even more appropriate for the collaborative art of theatre (Sondheim). This thesis would not have been possible without the support, expertise, encouragement, and enthusiasm of many people, and I am forever grateful for all of them.

First, enormous thanks to Bria Walker, my wonderful thesis advisor, who took hours of her time to wade through and critique hundreds of pages of writing and who patiently walked me through every step of this project. Without her guidance this project truly would not have happened, and I cannot thank her enough. Thanks also to the amazing members of my committee: Gianni Downs, Kathleen George, and Martine Green-Rogers, for giving up time in their busy schedules and lending their expertise to this endeavor.

Pitt’s theatre department has been extremely helpful while pursuing every facet of this project. Special thanks goes to Annmarie Duggan, who convinced a quiet sophomore who had never heard of a BPHIL and wasn’t particularly confident in her researching abilities that this degree was achievable. Thanks also to my academic advisor Michelle Granshaw, for her help, aid, and advice throughout my years at Pitt.

The Pitt Honors College has been incredibly supportive during the past two and a half years in a variety of ways. Thanks in particular to Kayla Banner, Laura Nelson, and Patrick Mullen, Jr.,

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I am forever grateful for the wonderful individuals at the four theatre companies I studied who agreed to be interviewed for this project. From Flute Theatre: Oscar Fabres, Alistair Hoyle, and Joshua Welch. From the Shakespeare Youth Festival: Blaire Baron, Julia Eschenasy, Kila Packett, Valouria Perez, and Julia Wyson. From Shakespeare Behind Bars: Curt Tofteland. From Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks: Catherine Aceto, Elena Alexandratos, Chuck Beikert, Christine McGrath, Jennifer Tober, and Allie Wagner. Thanks also to Hannah Dewhurst, Maria Manuela Goyanes, Andy Kirtland, Ella Mizera, and Katie Trupiano for sharing their expertise and experiences in interviews. The enthusiasm of each person listed above for theatre and Shakespeare is infectious, and their willingness to give up their time for interviews, emails, and other miscellaneous questions is much appreciated.

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Wolfe. Thank you for your willingness to jump headfirst into whatever I threw at you, your ideas, your laughter, and your readiness to improvise.

Finally, thanks to my amazing friends for their support and encouragement, their willingness to patiently listen to me go on (and on) about Shakespeare, and – occasionally – for offering their shoulders to cry on. And, last but not least, an enormous thank you to my parents, who have supported my love of theatre and Shakespeare for as long as I can remember. Thank you for taking me to that first Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Park production, for walking me through the thesis writing process, and for everything in between. I love you.

## 1.0 Introduction: The Question

*LORD POLONIUS: What do you read, my lord?*

*HAMLET: Words, words, words.*

- Hamlet (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.2. 8-10)

I have always been fascinated by the works of William Shakespeare. At the age of five, my parents took me to my first live Shakespeare production: Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks' (PSIP) production of *As You Like It*. They expected me to quickly get bored, yet I remained fascinated throughout the performance. Although at the age of five I could not have understood the complexity of the language, I found something in that show that held my attention. A few years later, when I was roughly eleven, I read my first Shakespeare play in a class at my homeschool group – also, coincidentally, *As You Like It*. In the years that followed, I read more plays, saw many more Shakespeare productions, and performed in scenes, monologues, and full-length performances of Shakespeare's works.

And, as the years passed, I slowly fell more and more in love. I loved the stories, loved figuring out the puzzle of the language – so different from what I was used to hearing in my everyday life. I was fascinated by the characters – strange in so many ways, yet shockingly familiar too, even though they had “lived” 400 years ago. I loved the window into other worlds the plays gave me – worlds that I could barely imagine but that Shakespeare brought to life vividly in front of me. Worlds filled with clowns and fairies, kings and queens, magical islands and dangerous forests.

Later, as I got older and learned more, I discovered that most people do not fall in love with Shakespeare as I did. This realization, in turn, caused me to wonder about my immediate connection with the plays. I was no smarter than other children my age – I struggled with the language just like everyone else. I have always loved stories, but so do all humans – storytelling is part of our evolutionary makeup. I loved theatre and performance and had done so from a young age, but my attraction to Shakespeare was clearly more than a simple enjoyment of any story that was acted out in front of me. Over and over again, something had drawn me back to *Shakespeare* specifically.

All of this brought me to the conclusion that, if it was not something special about *me* that caused my love of Shakespeare (and I determined it was not), then it must have been something about the presentation. My first experience reading Shakespeare was very different from the way many others are introduced to Shakespeare and his works. My homeschool group was a relaxed environment, where my dozen-or-so classmates and I read the play out loud, stopping to work through the language and discuss the parts we found particularly interesting. There were no tests or papers. Many of my classmates, including myself, would return to the class semester after semester to read more of Shakespeare's plays together. I do not think I was the only person to leave these classes as a devoted fan of Shakespeare's works and much more confident in my ability to understand his language and his plays.

Thinking about all of this, however, only created more questions. If, as my own experiences and my observations of others showed, young children can connect with and enjoy Shakespeare's plays and language, why are so many teenagers left befuddled by *Romeo and Juliet* in ninth grade English class and never pick up another play? Why are so many adults intimidated by Shakespeare, believing that they cannot understand his language? And if it *is* a matter of the presentation – of

*how* one is introduced to Shakespeare – how could Shakespeare be presented in a more approachable and relatable way?

Through questions such as these, asked over the span of several months, I arrived at my question of study: **What theatrical tools can be utilized in order to make the works of William Shakespeare more accessible?** Over the summer of 2020, I was honored to receive a Summer Undergraduate Research Award (SURA) from the University of Pittsburgh Honors College to study this question. I spent several months researching the common barriers that members of the public often face when interacting with Shakespeare, as well as several theatre companies that are working to overcome these barriers. It is this research that I will primarily be utilizing in this thesis.

## **1.1 Method**

My thesis is divided into three sections: common barriers that individuals often face when interacting with Shakespeare, an overview of four theatre companies working to overcome these barriers, and a discussion of how the Shakespeare Exploration Project I ran in the fall of 2021 helped to further explore and effectively tackle said barriers. I will briefly lay out each section below.

I spent the first part of the summer of 2020 searching for articles that discussed the common barriers that members of the public often face when interacting with Shakespeare. Through this research, I discovered that this question has been severely understudied in the past. In fact, due to a lack of previous scholarly research, it was necessary for me to search chat boards and other

similar online sources in order to answer this somewhat basic question.<sup>1</sup> Remarkably, I learned that very few people have asked the general public why they have problems when interacting with Shakespeare.<sup>2</sup>

The first common barrier I discovered was related to the language barrier. Shakespeare's Early Modern English is not the English you and I are used to speaking and can be quite challenging to understand even for those who are well-versed in Shakespeare's plays. This can cause many people to find it difficult to connect with and relate to Shakespeare's works. This is directly related to the second problem people often face with Shakespeare: the belief that his 400-year-old stories are not relevant to their 21<sup>st</sup>-century lives. Lastly, attending a theatrical production is expensive, in terms of time, money, and comfortability. Many people simply do not have the resources or the time necessary to attend a play, and if they do, they may feel unwelcome in the theatre space itself due to disability or cultural barriers. There are several other common barriers – and I will be touching on a few of them briefly – however, in my research these three were the most common.

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of the information shared in section two comes from this research (readers will notice that chapter includes many opinion articles written by journalists, theatre critics, and teachers). Another source which proved helpful for determining reasons why members of the public may choose not to attend the theatre in general was (Treanor).

<sup>2</sup> I was later able to observe what barriers members of the public who participated in the Shakespeare Exploration Project seemed to face when interacting with Shakespeare. These observations were generally in agreement with what I learned from the chat boards and online sources. This will be discussed more in subsequent chapters.

After doing this preliminary research, I decided to focus on interviewing Shakespearean theatre companies that work to overcome the three barriers of language, relatability, and ease of access. Many different organizations operate with the specific objective of overcoming one or more of these barriers, and I was lucky enough to be able to conduct background research and interview actors, artistic directors, students, and directors of four such companies. These companies are:

1. Flute Theatre Company (Based in London, they adapt Shakespeare's plays into various games and activities that are performed for and with individuals on the autism spectrum).
2. Shakespeare Youth Festival (Based in Los Angeles, California, they produce full-length, original language, Shakespeare productions performed by students ages five through seventeen).
3. Shakespeare Behind Bars (Based in Michigan and Kentucky, they facilitate several programs with incarcerated and at-risk individuals, but are most famous for their program in the Luther Lockett Correctional Facility, a medium-security prison in Kentucky, where incarcerated individuals perform a full-length Shakespeare production every year).
4. Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks (Based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, they present a full-length Shakespeare production every September in city parks around the Pittsburgh area. Their productions are completely free, and, since they are performed in public spaces, are always open and accessible to all).

A review of these four organizations and their specific strategies for making Shakespeare more accessible make up chapters three through six of my thesis.

Additionally, in the fall of 2021, I ran the Shakespeare Exploration Project in association with Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks' production of *Hamlet*. This project gave members of the public several different ways to interact with, discuss, and explore Shakespeare's stories and plays. One goal of this project was to show that the works of Shakespeare, and theatre in general, can be accessible and fun for everyone, no matter your previous experience or familiarity with Shakespeare's plays and language. Additionally, this project also allowed me to incorporate and test several of the strategies I learned from the professional theatre companies I studied. A summary of my tabling experiences and my own conclusions about what strategies worked when introducing the public to Shakespeare's plays and language makes up the seventh chapter of my thesis.

## 1.2 Conclusions

Through the synthesizing of my previously conducted research, I discovered that many of the barriers members of the public face when interacting with Shakespeare are mental barriers. As a brief explanation of what this means: while interviewing the executive director of the Shakespeare Youth Festival, the question came up if children entered their program with any preconceived notions or prejudices against Shakespeare. To my surprise, the director told me that this was not the case. Children, she told me, when they are young enough, have no expectation that they will not be able to understand Shakespeare, as no one has told them yet that his language is too difficult for them to handle (Wyson).<sup>3</sup> The children must work on their understanding of the

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<sup>3</sup> This quote can be found on page 48.

language, of course, but they are much more persistent and much less likely to become frustrated since no one has knowingly or unknowingly informed them that Shakespeare is not for them.

While I was not expecting this answer, it makes sense. If you have been told that Shakespeare is very difficult to understand and even harder to relate to, it is easy – and natural – to become disheartened and/or biased, believing that you simply cannot understand it, so there is no point in trying. Shakespeare is presented as homework in our English classes, something to struggle through and then take a test on, not a story to be connected with, watched, and enjoyed. And, as I learned through my research, these negative experiences in school often continue to shape a person’s views on Shakespeare even long after graduation.

Conversely, of course, this also means that if Shakespeare is presented in an accessible way to students at a young age, it is likely that you will have devoted Shakespeare fans for life, as my own experience shows. At the age of five, no one had told me that Shakespeare wasn’t for me. And as I got older and started reading more of the plays, I became proud of my ability to understand the unfamiliar language, proud to be reading something that “wasn’t for me.”

But what about the majority of people who did not have good experiences with Shakespeare as children? What barriers do they face? And is there a way to break down those barriers? Much of this thesis explores four theatre companies' answers to these questions.

### **1.3 Why?**

This is all well and good, but at the end of the day why is any of this important? Why did I choose this area of study to focus on? Why should you care? The answer to these questions has several parts. First, there is the fact that, for as long as I can remember, Shakespeare has been an

important, influential, and wonderful part of my life. Through conversations with friends, family, employees of the four theatre companies I studied, and strangers at the Shakespeare Exploration Project, I know that I am far from alone in this experience. Most simply, I have conducted this research and written this thesis out of a desire to share something that has brought me so much joy during my life. I believe that anyone – no matter their previous experience or familiarity with the language – can understand and enjoy Shakespeare’s plays, if they are given the right introduction and support. And I believe that everyone should have the opportunity to attend a Shakespeare production should they wish to do so. This thesis is my way of working towards that goal.

Speaking more directly to other scholars and theatre practitioners, this thesis includes several strategies that can be utilized for breaking down the barriers that surround Shakespeare and his plays. It is my hope that this project will lead to further research on the barriers that often keep people from interacting with Shakespeare, as well as other ways in which these barriers can be overcome.

Along with the above, there are many more Shakespearean theatre companies that could be studied, and it would be wonderful if these theatre companies, as well as theatre companies as a whole, could work together to make theatre more accessible for all. This is particularly important as theatre attendance is on the decline. If live theatre – both Shakespearean theatre and in general – is to survive, it must find ways to innovate and to reach community members of all ages and backgrounds who have not been able to attend the theatre before.

Lastly, I hope that this project will help to raise the general knowledge of, and appreciation for, the works of William Shakespeare. I do not believe that Shakespeare’s works should be placed on a pedestal as something that only the initiated can appreciate or automatically viewed as something too complex and antiquated for enjoyment or understanding. Shakespeare

should not be intimidating, and everyone should feel welcome in a theatre. At the end of the day, art, no matter what it is, should be for everyone.

## 2.0 Barriers

*Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,*

*Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.*

– The Tempest (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 3.2.148-149)

*In my experience, reading or watching Shakespeare is, by turns,  
baffling, tiring, frustrating and downright unpleasant.*

– Peter Beech (Beech)

When starting this research project, my first order of business was to discover *why* so many people find Shakespeare unpleasant. Was it the language? The themes? The characters? Are the shows too long, the plots too convoluted and archaic? Do the jokes just not land as well as they did 400 years ago? For those who dislike Shakespeare (and, as I would learn, the people who dislike Shakespeare *really* dislike Shakespeare) *what specifically did they dislike?*

My other main objective during this early chapter of my research was to learn why so many people who otherwise might have been interested in attending a Shakespeare performance or other theatrical event did not.<sup>4</sup> What kept them out? Was it the time? The money? The location? Or

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<sup>4</sup> Please note that this thesis is referring to the world as it was before the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of writing, most arts establishments had not yet fully reopened, and it was hence too early to determine the long-lasting impacts of the pandemic on the theatrical arts.

perhaps other reasons like a lack of access for disabled patrons, problems with finding childcare, or simply not having access to information about what shows were performing where?

When going into my research, I thought that it would be fairly straightforward to find research articles tackling these questions, especially for the broader theatrical world outside of Shakespeare. After all, as anyone in the theatrical field will be able to tell you, the question of how to get more people from diverse backgrounds into the theatre is a hot-button issue. To my surprise, however, I discovered that, outside of Broadway theatre, studies focusing on theatrical audience engagement are few and far between. One study I was able to find, focusing on the San Francisco Bay Area, found the following to be true for the 25 theatre companies studied:

In terms of race/ethnicity, theatergoing audiences are nearly 90% white, which is more than double the prevalence of whites in the general population of the Bay Area counties studied. The average household income for the theatergoers... was \$40,000 higher than the average household income for the overall population... The average age for a theatergoing patron is more than 11 years older than the average age of the general population, [and]... in terms of education, fifteen percent more of the theatergoing audience had a graduate degree than the general population. (Lord 5)

These numbers are supported by my own experience. As a 20-year-old attending theatrical productions before the Covid-19 pandemic, it was quite striking to look around a good-sized theatre audience and note that I was generally one of the youngest patrons in an audience primarily made up of middle-aged and elderly, non-disabled, white-passing individuals.

This is, of course, a problem for a few different reasons. For one thing, audiences made up predominantly of one age bracket, race, and social class can limit what is performed onstage as theatres try to cater their seasons to shows that will appeal to their audience base. A theatre whose

audience is primarily made up of elderly white patrons may be less likely to perform the works of Jackie Sibblies Drury, for instance. This, in turn, has the unintended consequence of helping to enforce the belief that the theatre is not welcoming to people who are not white, elderly, or middle class as members of other groups are less likely to see people like themselves represented onstage. While this is not, of course, to say that individuals can *only* watch performances that are about “people like them,” it is a fact that, when some groups go unrepresented, members of these communities may become even less likely to attend performances in the future, believing the shows are “not for them.” This creates a negative feedback loop as audiences become even more homogenous.

And, perhaps most bluntly, if attendance continues along this trend, live theatre will not survive. As theatrical audiences age and pass away, there is a real question of whether the next generation will step up to replace them. Many members of the theatrical community seem to agree that if live theatre is to survive, it will be necessary to bring in members of the younger generation, as well as underserved and underrepresented communities – all those who have been unable to, or have chosen not to, access live theatre in the past.

Given all of this, and what a large topic of discussion these issues are in the theatre community today, I had assumed many other people would be researching the common barriers that members of the public face when attempting to interact with live theatre. Although I had been unsure of how many articles I could expect to find focusing specifically on Shakespearean theatre, I had expected to find a good deal of prior research focusing on getting underserved communities and the general public into the theatre.

To my surprise, however, thorough searching turned up very few academic articles related to theatrical barriers. Additionally, something notable about these articles – both related to

Shakespeare and to theatre in general – was that they were remarkably lacking in statements from the general public themselves. Perhaps this was my own naïveté, but I was surprised to discover that no researcher seemed to have asked the public – the people who one would imagine would have both the most to say and the largest stake in the outcome of the study – why they have issues interacting with Shakespeare and theatre as a whole. To overcome the barriers that surround Shakespeare and theatre most effectively, I believe that more fieldwork must be done to get the thoughts and opinions of the general public. I am hoping that this may be an area of study for other researchers in the future.

In my case, in order to hear from the general public as to what keeps them from the theatre generally and Shakespeare in particular, I found it was necessary to turn to opinion articles, personal blogs, online forums, and chat boards. After sifting through these various sources, there were several barriers that I saw appearing over and over again. These were the three barriers of language, relatability, and ease of access. I will be exploring each of these barriers in turn in this chapter, using the research I was able to compile from the previously mentioned non-academic sources. In chapters three through six, my discussion of the four theatre companies I researched will be built around an examination of how each company works to overcome one or more of these barriers.

## **2.1 Language**

This barrier is perhaps the easiest to understand, and it was not a surprise to me that it appeared so often in a list of complaints about Shakespeare. To put it quite simply: Shakespeare is difficult to understand. Even scholars – people who have dedicated their lives to understanding

Shakespeare's language – sometimes struggle with the language, and a quick scan of many versions of Shakespeare's plays will turn up footnotes attached to particularly difficult passages stating that the meaning of a passage remains unknown, or is generally debated.<sup>5</sup>

Given that even Shakespearean scholars sometimes have difficulty with Shakespeare's language, is it any wonder that people without advanced degrees and years of experience often struggle? Much of Shakespeare's comedy is incomprehensible to a modern audience – in one memorable instance, his double entendres only land if you speak fluent French<sup>6</sup> – and in many of his plays long-winded and often complex monologues can touch on everything from dogs to confused biblical references and puppet shows in the span of a page, leaving casual readers wondering how on earth the characters got from one idea to another.<sup>7</sup> It is little wonder, then, that journalist Peter Beech and many others find “reading or watching Shakespeare... by turns, baffling, tiring, frustrating and downright unpleasant” (Beech).

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<sup>5</sup> One memorable example from the Folger edition of *As You Like It*: “Editors do not agree about the precise meaning of Rosalind's statement... or even about the person she is speaking to” (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 217).

<sup>6</sup> KATHERINE: Le foot, *et* le count. Ô *Seigneur Dieu! Ils sont les mots de son mauvais, corruptible, gros, et impudique, et non pour les dames d'honneur d'user. Je ne voudrais prononcer ces mots devant les seigneurs de France, pour tout le monde. Foh! Le foot et le count! Néanmoins, je réciterai une autre fois ma leçon ensemble: d' hand, de fingre, de nailes, d' arme, d' elbow, de nick, de sin, de foot, le count.* (Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 3.4. 50-57)

<sup>7</sup> Two Gentleman of Verona, 2.3.1-27.

Indeed, Beech's critique is hardly new. Throughout history, many people have been baffled by Shakespeare's writing, either due to the difficulty in understanding the language or because they consider the writing to be, quite simply, bad. English politician and diarist Samuel Pepys, who was never shy about his personal opinions, attended a Shakespeare production in 1662 and wrote, "[We went] to the King's Theatre, where we saw *Midsummer's Night's Dream* which I had never seen before, nor shall ever again, for it is the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life" (Pepys, "Monday").<sup>8</sup> Leo Tolstoy, himself the author of such lengthy and convoluted works as *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, believed that "Open Shakespeare ... wherever you like, or wherever it may chance, you will see that you will never find ten consecutive lines which are comprehensible, unartificial, natural to the character that says them, and which produce an artistic impression" (Kirsch). Being "comprehensible" is surely the bare minimum required for a successful theatre production, and for many people in the past 400 years, try as they might, Shakespeare is not even that.

In the modern-day, Shakespeare's reputation for incomprehensibility has not been helped by the fact that many people associate Shakespeare's plays with boring, stressful, and unpleasant English classes, where passages are either skimmed over entirely or dissected into a confusing mess, and the answer "I don't know" won't earn a passing grade. As director Mark Powell puts it:

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<sup>8</sup> Pepys goes on to note "I saw, I confess, some good dancing and some handsome women, which was all my pleasure," so it is perhaps comforting that the evening was not entirely for naught. It should also be noted that Pepys would attend many Shakespeare productions in his lifetime, including a production of *Hamlet* which he considered: "very well done," two years before the disastrous *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, so perhaps he is less opposed to Shakespeare and more opposed to *Midsummer* specifically (Pepys, "Wednesday").

“A well meaning [sic] 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” (Powell).

When Shakespeare is introduced in this setting, it is easy to understand why so many people struggle with the language and become anxious and disheartened when they do not understand a passage. In this situation, many people may form the conclusion that they simply *cannot* understand Shakespeare – that it is “just not for them” – or may have so many negative connotations attached to Shakespeare that they never attempt to read another play. Writing about students in a drama program, Powell notes, “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 [Shakespeare]. They had all experienced him separately in schools, behind desks. Shakespeare had made them feel stupid rather than empowered” (Powell).

“Shakespeare had made them feel stupid rather than empowered.” This, at the end of the day, is the crux of the problem. For those who do not like the challenge of piecing together Shakespeare’s meaning or who had negative experiences with his language in the past, why would they choose to attend a Shakespeare production when they could attend a different show just as easily and understand more with less effort? It is this problem that theatre companies must work to overcome if they are going to get more audience members with varying levels of familiarity and comfortability with Shakespeare's language into the theatre.

## **2.2 Relatability**

Our second common barrier, relatability,” can be summed up most simply as the belief that Shakespeare – a white Englishman who lived 400 years ago – is out of date. Shakespeare, many

people believe, was all well and good for the Elizabethan world, but his plays are not particularly relevant to our modern 21<sup>st</sup>-century struggles. His themes are stale and outdated, his characters flat and unconvincing, his ideas at best antiquated and at worst downright offensive. As Peter Beech writes, “Shakespeare is out of his depth... He cannot be a beacon for the future, because he belongs in the past” (Beech).

Dana Dusbiber, a high school English teacher from California, summed the problem up succinctly when she wrote that, “I do not believe that a long-dead, British guy is the only writer who can teach my students about the human condition” (Strauss). When we have thousands of modern authors – authors who have seen world wars, instant communication, and hundreds of other things Shakespeare couldn’t even have imagined, why should we read the words of a man who lived and died 400 years ago? Why is Shakespeare venerated and taught in school, while so many other diverse voices receive little or no recognition? Surely people writing now or in the more recent past will have more to say to our modern moment, and they will say it in language that is often much more straightforward and easier to understand.

In order to overcome the barrier of relatability, it will be necessary for this belief – that Shakespeare is old, outdated, and out of touch – to be overcome. In order to keep Shakespeare applicable to our modern lives, theatre companies must learn how his plays can be presented in a way that makes his words, stories, and themes relevant and thought-provoking to a 21<sup>st</sup>-century audience.

### 2.3 Ease of Access

Our last barrier, “ease of access” signifies several different factors that, in one way or another, all keep individuals out of the physical space of the theatre building itself. Several of these factors are related to expense: the price of a theatre ticket, or the expense of paying for childcare and parking. Others are related to issues of physical accessibility: unreliable public transportation and a lack of time.

Additionally, one very important barrier related to ease of access is psychological. For many people, especially members of underrepresented communities, the theatre may be an unfamiliar and/or unwelcoming space, containing few people who look like them either onstage or in the audience. This can make the experience of attending a theatrical production uncomfortable and may dissuade individuals from attending another performance. Each of these factors will be explored more fully in the rest of this section.

It is an undeniable fact that theatre tickets are expensive. According to the Theatre Communications Group’s annual fiscal report on professional not-for-profit theatre in the US, the average ticket price of the 173 theatre companies of varying sizes who participated in the study was \$37.33 (Theatre). For many otherwise interested individuals, the price of buying a ticket keeps them away from the theatre, especially when it is compared with the much lower price of a movie ticket.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, due to the high cost of tickets, many people view attending a play or musical as something that is done only occasionally, as a special event. Even for those who are financially

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<sup>9</sup> According to the National Association of Theatre Owners, the average price of a movie theatre ticket in 2019 was only \$9.16 (National).

stable, expensive tickets (and poorly advertised discounted tickets) mean that the theatre is not viewed as something that is attended often.

Also related to the factor of expense, it should be remembered that it is not only the ticket price itself that will have to be paid. For many people, it will be necessary to organize and pay for childcare, as the majority of theatres are not particularly open to children who may become fidgety, need to be taken outside, or start to cry in the middle of a production. Additionally, in order to get to the theatre space itself, it will be necessary either to pay for parking – which can get quite expensive depending on the location – or to pay for public transportation.

Another factor is the time needed to attend a theatre production – a time that is increased if it is necessary to take public transportation. Relating this to the issue of expense, the time needed to attend a theatre production may be viewed as lost income, if someone could be earning money at a job during the roughly three to four hours they are spending at a play and traveling to and from the theatre.

Public transportation itself has a large impact on many people's ability to access a theatre space. Especially if a theatre is off the major public transportation routes, reaching the theatre can be a headache for anyone interested in attending a show who does not have a car. Additionally, since so many theatre productions take place at night, a show beginning at 8 PM will often require an audience member to be catching public transportation home around 10:30 PM. Depending on where you are, public transportation late at night may be unreliable, unsafe, or both. In Pittsburgh, for instance, public buses come much less frequently at night, meaning that someone who was trying to catch a bus after a performance might be waiting for half an hour or more before they were even able to board a bus. When all of the above barriers are added together, for many people, attending a theatre production is simply not a feasible use of their time and money.

Finally, there is the fact that many people – especially those who are not white, middle to upper class, and middle-aged to elderly – may feel unwelcome in a theatre space. Quite simply, if you do not see other people who look like you onstage or in the audience, or if you feel that the theatre space was not created to be open, accessible, and welcoming to you, you are likely to feel uncomfortable or out of place in the theatre. One prime example of this is the fact that even today, most theatre spaces remain fairly inaccessible to people with physical disabilities, often because the theatre building itself was not originally designed to be accessible. Additionally, the etiquette that surrounds the theatre (sit still, be quiet, do not interrupt the show) can be difficult for many neurodivergent people. If you are a member of one of these groups, it is highly likely that, should you choose to attend a theatre production, you will feel uncomfortable and/or out of place, with the strong awareness that this space was not designed to be open to you. And it is likely that all of this will, in turn, make you less likely to attend another production.

Another example of this phenomenon comes from Jose Solis, a Honduran theatre critic based in New York City who wrote that:

In the 2017-2018 season, 75% of Broadway audiences were Caucasian, according to statistics compiled by the Broadway League. Theater clearly has a people of color problem: It's not only that many people of color have no interest in revivals of revered but irrelevant plays featuring beige ensembles, it's also that when we do come to the theater, we are told that we're invading white spaces. When I see a show with a white friend, people often ask the friend if they brought me to the show and ask me if it's my first time at the theater.

(Solís)

In order to overcome these barriers and encourage more people to attend a performance and participate in theatre, it will be necessary to make the theatre into a space that feels safe, welcoming, and inclusive for everyone, where people can relax and be themselves.

The multiple factors that make up the barrier of ease of access impact everyone to some degree, and they are relevant for all kinds of theatre, from Shakespeare to the works of modern playwrights. If we are to get more community members into the theatre, it is necessary to address these barriers, which too often keep those who would like to attend a theatre production out.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

The barriers of language, relatability, and ease of access are not the only things that keep people out of the theatre. They are, however, some of the largest barriers, which, if not addressed, may have far-reaching consequences for theatre in general and Shakespearean productions in particular. Throughout the rest of this thesis, I examine the different ways in which four Shakespearean theatre companies have worked to overcome one or more of these barriers in the communities they serve.

### 3.0 Heartbeat Hellos: Flute Theatre

*Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind.*

– A Midsummer Night’s Dream (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 1.1.240)

*Near the beginning [of the performance of The Tempest], there was an assertion of [the autistic individuals’] right to be present in social space – ‘This island’s mine!’ The learning of language became a beautiful dialogue of balletic hand movement... It was not only a joy to behold the children being freed into movement, language and liveliness – it also revealed new depths in the Shakespearean text – depths both of meaning and of music.*

– Border Crossings blog post, written about Flute Theatre’s production of *The Tempest*

Twenty people sit in a circle on the floor, facing each other across a rug decorated to look like Prospero’s magical island of *The Tempest*. Some are adults, most are children or young adults. Families sit on the outside of the circle, looking in. Each person in the circle taps out a slow, steady rhythm on their chest. Some of the children and young adults are assisted in tapping out this rhythm, or an actor gently taps it out for them. In time with the beat, each person in the circle half-chants, half-sings “Hello,” greeting each participant by name. For instance, “Hello Max... Hello Max... Hello Max... Hello Max... Hello.” The song, based on the heartbeat rhythm of Shakespeare’s iambic

pentameter, mimics the sound of the heartbeat in the womb and has a calming effect, helping to ground the participants in the moment.

After each member of the circle has been greeted by name, the same activity will repeat, this time utilizing different emotions. One group in the circle will start a “happy hello,” complete with exaggerated facial expressions and enthusiasm. After performing the “happy hello” for a few beats, this group will “pass” the emotion and the hello to someone else in the circle. After everyone has gotten a chance to try, the emotion will change – angry, sad, surprised. Many of the participants start to laugh, clearly enjoying the silly sharing of emotions.

These are the “Heartbeat Hellos,” which open every workshop and performance of Flute Theatre in London, England. Since 2014, Flute has been using the words and themes of Shakespeare to create games that help children and young adults with autism develop skills they may struggle with, such as making eye contact, expressing emotion, and soothing inner nerves. The Heartbeat Hellos help to create a calming space, as well as giving autistic individuals the opportunity to practice recognizing and expressing emotions in a safe and fun way. According to David Jobson, an autistic individual who is also a Flute Theatre trustee, “[The Heartbeat Hellos is] a simple game, and yet it reaches out to so many autistic youngsters, and it helps them speak out” (Heartbeat Hellos: the why). At the end of every performance, a similar process will repeat, this time chanting “Goodbye” instead of “Hello.” The Goodbye circle is a little slower, like a lullaby, helping to calm nerves and reinforce the idea of a safe space before the performance ends.

Flute Theatre was founded in 2014 by Kelly Hunter. A successful actor with the Royal Shakespeare Company, Hunter realized in 2001 that she wanted something more from her professional career. As Hunter tells it,

So I took myself off to the Glebe school, a special school in Beckenham and offered my services to teach Shakespeare to people with no access to the arts. I gave myself the task of creating ways to use Shakespeare so that it lived, wholly and completely in the moment, for the people engaged in it. The school welcomed me with open arms. “You can play with anyone here, except those children” they said, pointing to a closed door, “because they have autism and they won’t be able to play.”

I did play with those children. For an hour once a week, every week, for three years and little by little they taught me how to teach them. ... They struggled with making eye contact and they struggled with articulating their thoughts and feelings. I focused on alleviating these struggles through directly using moments in the plays that spoke to me as genius; where-in Shakespeare invented his loving eye and his seeing brain. The rhythms of the iambic [pentameter] became a soothing means of transition at the beginning and end of every session where the “extended panic attack” – so deeply felt within someone with autism – seemingly became calmed.

These games have become the Hunter Heartbeat Method. And everyone can play them. (Hunter “The Hunter Heartbeat Method”)

As I was told during an interview I conducted with Flute: “Each game challenges a different aspect of autism, be it speech and language, be it physicality, be it eye contact, be it spatial awareness” (Hoyle). Every game is created and developed in collaboration with autistic individuals in order to determine what will serve them most effectively. Anna, a girl on the autism spectrum, “first played with us in 2017 and she’s still playing. When we first met her, she asked us to make her a ‘hugging game’ which we did the following year for our production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. This game... is entirely thanks to Anna” (Escola).

The Hunter Heartbeat Method as a whole is very physical, and instruction is often given through physicality as well as through spoken language. One game, used to help the children overcome anxieties surrounding making eye contact, involves two participants (usually an actor and one of the autistic individuals), playing lovers in a Shakespearean production. Both participants start the game by walking around the space. Once they are directed to, they make eye contact with each other and then do a hand gesture as if their eyes are bugging out of their heads, as is often seen in cartoons. This goes along with a fun sound effect. Both participants then giggle, bashful, and turn away. This process repeats several times. Often, the silly sounds and movements, and the positive reactions, will help overcome some of the anxiety that the autistic individuals may feel about making eye contact (He).

Another game, based on *The Tempest*, is used to practice teamwork, as well as working with and interacting with others. In this game, one or two people play Prospero, who is walking around his island. A few other participants play Caliban, who, unbeknownst to Prospero, is following closely behind him. Every once in a while, Caliban will jump and shout at Prospero, trying to scare him. Prospero, hearing this, turns around and says “Caliban!” and Caliban ducks down and “hides” from Prospero. This repeats several times, as more and more people join in as Caliban. Eventually, everyone has joined in, and Prospero has a small army following him, yelling and jumping. Finally, the Calibans get caught, and they all fall down on the floor (CONVERSATIONS).

Flute’s first full-length production was *The Tempest*. “Fifteen people with autism become the participants for each performance, sitting with six actors in a circle around a painted floor cloth, which represents Prospero’s island. ... The actors invite the children to join them on the island as the story unfolds through sensory games, which the children and actors play together” (The

Tempest.) Since then, Flute has also adapted *Pericles* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into original, interactive shows for individuals on the autism spectrum. Performances have been held all over the world in a variety of languages. Every performance, no matter the location, starts with Heartbeat Hellos and ends with Heartbeat Goodbyes.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, Flute has taken their work online, adapting *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Pericles* for the virtual format. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Flute has performed these shows online almost 1,000 times. In these personal performances, the autistic child or young adult will sign onto Zoom, where they will spend an hour with a small group of actors, playing games remotely. Flute's website also includes several videos of different games that have been adapted to the virtual format that families and students can watch and play at home, as well as full versions of their productions of *Pericles* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Over the past seven years, Flute's innovative productions have been performed in several countries and many languages, helping to break down the barriers that keep many autistic individuals and their families out of the theatre. As we will discuss more throughout this chapter, Flute's impact on both the autistic individual and their loved ones has been remarkable. As David Jobson said, "When [Kelly] invited me to rehearsal and I tried the games I suddenly felt alive inside and connect[ed] with not just people, but myself, feeling alive from my feet all the way to the top of my head" (Flute Theatre trustee).

Flute sums up the work they do with autistic individuals succinctly, "We give a place and a voice to this marginalised population and in return we grow as artists: the ongoing creation of our Hunter Heartbeat games continues to be led by the unique and individual minds and bodies of the people with autism we play with" (Flute Dreams). And they do it all through the works of Shakespeare.

### 3.1 Language

When I contacted Flute, asking for an interview, they connected me with two of their actors: Alistair (Ali) Hoyle and Joshua (Josh) Welch. Both men seem to be in their late 20s. They laugh easily while sharing their experiences with Flute, joking around and finishing each other's sentences. I get an overwhelming sense of kindness and enthusiasm – for theatre and Shakespeare, and for the work that they do. When I ask them to describe a typical Flute performance, Hoyle tells me that:

The games are in chronological order of the script. They're created using text from Shakespeare, but they're reduced down to an essence.

So [for instance, in] “The King's Game” [from our production of *Pericles*, the King says:]

“Pericles!”

Pericles says, “Oh my heart, oh my head” [Ali gestures to his heart and head].

[Then] the king says “You're dead!” [and “knocks” Pericles over,] and then Pericles pops up and says “I'm fled!”

And then there's a lovely comedic “Doh!” [Ali smacks his forehead].

But to get to that point, you've got to know the text of *Pericles* backwards, because it's the essence of the relationship between the King and Pericles... [Shakespeare includes a lot of other details, of course, but that's] the *essence* of that relationship. (Hoyle)

Within the companies I have studied – and within Shakespearean theatre companies as a whole – Flute is fairly unique in this reduction of Shakespeare's plots and language down to their “essence.” As Flute has stated: “The language is the least important” (HUNTER HEARTBEAT).

As Hoyle mentioned, Flute does use lines from Shakespeare in their games – for instance, “He could not please me better” (Shakespeare, *Pericles*, 2.3.76), “Night and silence. – Who is here?” (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 2.2.70), or the aforementioned “This island’s mine!” (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 396) – and their shows do tell the story of the original plays. However, Flute will generally utilize only one or two lines of Shakespeare’s dialogue per game, and the focus of the games is not on the language. This may sound strange to those of us who have come to love the beauty of Shakespeare’s words – is Shakespeare still Shakespeare, one might ask, without his language? However, Flute believes that, “The words are not essential. What you’re after is a conversation of the body, and a conversation of your deeper soul... you can play the game either with or without words” (Flute Theatre, “The Storm”). Shakespeare’s stories, characters, and emotions are powerful enough, in Flute’s view, that they can be truthfully explored even without speaking. This, in turn, has the added benefit of opening the works of Shakespeare to those who are nonverbal, as many of Flute’s participants are.

That being said, Flute’s utilization of specific Shakespearean phrases in their shows is remarkable. During performances, Flute does not stop to explain the words and phrases they are using. Instead, they merely repeat the words multiple times as they play and replay the games. Eventually, many of the autistic individuals will learn the words and will start to say them with the performers (He). Although these lines are very short, this can tell us a lot about the true accessibility of Shakespeare’s language. Although Shakespeare has a reputation – certainly earned in many places – of being difficult to understand, it can be helpful to remember that much of his dialogue is *not* overly complex. When reading – or especially when watching – a Shakespearean production, you may not understand every word, however even someone fairly unfamiliar with Shakespeare will probably still be able to follow the plot. “This island’s mine!” was written by

Shakespeare, yet it is very easy to understand Caliban's meaning. Sometimes this reminder – that despite his reputation, not all of Shakespeare is difficult to understand – can be comforting (and empowering) when someone is intimidated or frustrated by the language.

For Flute, their choice to utilize but not focus on Shakespeare's language has the added benefit of allowing the shows to be performed for people who speak many different languages. Flute has toured to many different countries, and in each location, their shows are performed in the language of the country they are visiting. Although there will often be a translator in attendance to help out as necessary, the physical nature of the shows and the (relatively) small amount of dialogue needed for each performance means that the Flute actors are able to memorize and perform the shows in other languages. When, for instance, Flute took their production of *Pericles* to Poland and Romania, the actors learned and performed the show in Polish and Romanian.

Flute maintains that they are not “dumbing down” the shows, and they make it clear that they are not patronizing the autistic individuals with whom they work (Scen:se). Rather, they are simply choosing to explore the universal themes of Shakespeare in other ways – ways that involve, but do not depend on, language. Some of these strategies for exploration will be articulated in the next section – relatability – below.

### **3.2 Relatability**

In a similar vein to several of the other companies I explore, people have often wondered why Kelly Hunter chose Shakespeare for her work with autistic individuals. Why the (often convoluted) works of a man who lived and died 400 years ago, 350 years before autism was even diagnosed? According to Hunter, she chose Shakespeare, which is complex and rich in meaning,

because we as humans are “complex and rich in meaning” (Autism). Additionally, she believed that, with the proper support and practice, everyone can learn to access and convey their feelings, which is something that autistic individuals often struggle with, and which Shakespeare does with great success in his plays (Autism). Hunter has stated that the idea of large, exaggerated emotions that is used in, for instance, the Heartbeat Hello’s, comes straight from Shakespeare, where the characters have strong, overpowering emotions that define them: “Juliet is in love, Hamlet is depressed, King Lear is mad” (MAKING).

This idea of the importance of Shakespeare’s emotions was supported by Josh Welch during our interview when he told me that,

I think it's such a shame that so many people think “Well, Shakespeare’s not for me because it's a lot of clever people talking, stuff I can't understand, and whenever I see a production I have to pay 80 odd quid to go and see it, and then not understand it and not be moved by it.” Whereas, [in reality] it's this amazing body of work [that] should be accessible to everybody, because it... tracks the human experience... Anyone who's ever had any sort of trauma or upset, which is everybody, knows what it feels like to feel like the characters in Shakespeare’s plays. (Hoyle)

This is, of course, true for autistic individuals and those who are not on the autism spectrum as well. As we will see throughout this thesis, many people have discovered that Shakespeare’s emotions can be very helpful in allowing members of the public to find a way into his plays.

Through Shakespeare, Flute’s autistic participants explore not only the depth and complexity of emotions but are also given the opportunity to learn more about themselves and about life. As Hunter has said, even though “I’m [working] with children I don’t believe this is educational, I think it’s spiritual. There’s a sharing of what it feels like to be alive. And in that the

children become educated, and so do we as adults” (Autism). This exploration of what it means to be alive is beneficial for everyone, as both the actors and the participants learn and grow through the work.

Flute does all of this through a focus on four keywords, which flow throughout Shakespeare’s works and which guide Flute’s work and performances. As Flute describes it, “Shakespeare’s use of the keywords: eyes, mind, reason, and love are his way of exploring what it means to be alive. This was [Hunter’s] way into Shakespeare, and her way of creating theater games for those who struggle with eye contact and who struggle with focusing on what’s happening in front of them, instead of letting all the other information in their brains drive them mad” (Shakespeare’s Keywords). The parts of the Shakespearean scripts that Flute adapts will generally be moments when the characters are utilizing one or more of these concepts – concepts that repeat over and over again in Shakespeare’s canon (Shakespeare’s Keywords). The games that make up the Hunter Heartbeat Method use these four words to get past the internal anxiety and the “extended panic attack,” that many with autism face, helping them to unlock and develop these four key areas (HUNTER).

One of the main ways in which Flute explores these key concepts of eyes, mind, reason, and love is through music. As mentioned above, Flute does not utilize much language in its pieces. They do, however, include musical elements in almost all of their games. Many autistic people find music soothing and may connect with it better than they would the spoken word. As Flute actor Holly Musgrave stated:

The anxiety about when things are happening and what is coming next is very common for people with autism. I imagine that the certainty of music in its beats and notes is [comforting]. In rehearsal, Kelly has often called the music we make a ‘womb of sound’;

like the Hunter heartbeats, we create a constant rhythm and warm harmonies that banish the sensory overload and any worries about what is next. Our participants can know that they are safe for this heartbeat and the next and the next, or for these four names, or for this [scale]... [The music is] always there... ready to cut through the noise and the chaos to remind our participants that they are free to play and abandon their worries for the time being. (Musgrave “Marcus”)

Given Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter and the many songs that appear in his plays, Shakespeare is already quite musical. Flute has leaned into this musicality even more in its games and exercises. For the Heartbeat Hellos, this is based on the music and rhythm of Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter. Many games, both online and in-person, involve the actors singing or humming, creating a calming environment. An anxious participant may have their name sung to them soothingly as they play a game. As will be seen throughout this thesis, music is often a sort of universal language, allowing people to find connection and relatability even across a language barrier, and Flute certainly supports this theory.

As mentioned above, Flute’s first production was *The Tempest*. According to a reviewer, “*The Tempest*... lends itself perfectly to this kind of devised, interactive theatre. The play... deals in magic; there’s also a clear physicality to many of the characters and a certain playfulness which allows the actors to introduce the young participants to the world of the play” (Kressly). The same can be said for Flute’s other productions – *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Pericles*. I find it likely that these ideas – of magic, playfulness, and characters with a clearly defined physicality – would work well to introduce many people to Shakespeare whether or not they are on the autism spectrum. These elements are fun, easy to understand across the centuries and easy to connect with. For many people, unlocking the sense of joy, discovery, magic, and fun that exists in many

of Shakespeare's more lighthearted plays may provide an effective way into an otherwise challenging piece.

As Flute has summed up the work they do:

These games are derived from Shakespeare's poetic exploration of how it feels to be alive, specifically through his obsession with the eyes and the mind and with reason and love; how we see, think and feel, which forms the spine of his poetry throughout the whole canon. "Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind" (Helena, *AMSND*) has three of these keywords in just one line and Hamlet's coining of the phrase "The Mind's Eye" can be seen as an apotheosis of this poetic exploration... Through focusing on moments in Shakespeare where characters emerge through seeing, thinking and feeling, [the] games offer people on the spectrum an opportunity to express themselves; exploring eye contact, language skills, spacial awareness, facial expressions and imaginative play. The children play the games with actors in a safe loving space where everyone involved can begin to share [a] common human experience. (Hunter, "Shakespeare's Heartbeat")

Through the games that Flute plays and through the process of exploring emotions and what it means to be alive, Flute has given many autistic individuals the ability to be present, to be grounded in the present moment, and to state with Demetrius, either verbally or nonverbally, "We are awake" (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 4.1.202) – a line that repeats many times throughout Flute's work. Flute explains why they chose to use Shakespeare for their work succinctly: "You're giving [the participants] the chance through these games to discover who they are... Because through Shakespeare we discover ourselves" (Rey).

### 3.3 Ease of Access

When I asked Hoyle and Welch about the barriers that autistic individuals often face when accessing theatre, they became serious. As Welch told me,

The most obvious barrier interacting with theater in general, is... [that] the conventional theatre isn't designed [for autistic individuals] ... You're told you have to go to the theatre... and sit and be quiet and watch a play. It *should* be a space where you can express yourself, but you have to sit and behave yourself, so it's not... Society has put this barrier up, where [you have to] behave “normally” in a social situation [like] the theatre. (Hoyle)

Hoyle concurs, “The main barrier, really, is the one that society has put up, and this need to conform to it” (Hoyle).

In section two, one of the common barriers for underrepresented communities was the belief that the theatre is not open to you or is not a welcoming environment. For autistic individuals and their families, this barrier is extremely high. As the parent of a Flute participant put it,

As a parent... when people say “Oh, there’s this thing on for autistic people” or “Autistic people are welcome” I know that I sometimes have that thought “Yeah, but you don’t mean my child...” And so I think twice. And I know there are lots of parents like me... who have had experiences over many years of their child being told they’re welcome and then [when they go, they’re told]: “Do you want to take him out for a bit?” or “He’s a bit difficult” or “Something might get damaged.” (Coming)

At Flute, this is not the case. Instead of expecting the autistic individuals to sit quietly and interact with the performance only in the “socially acceptable” way, the focus is placed on accepting the participants and adapting the performance and the games to what each person is bringing to the table. As another parent shared,

As Tim [the parent's 18-year-old autistic son] galloped around the stage, made loud inappropriate comments and flapped his arms, I fretted repeatedly about whether to take him out and whether he was spoiling it for everyone else. What was breathtaking, was the way the actors immediately adapted what they were doing to incorporate what Tim was experiencing and communicating with his behaviour into the performance. In other words, they entered into Tim's world rather than demanding that he enter theirs. Whether he was jumping, talking in a loud Cockney accent, or rocking back and forth, two actors worked with him to incorporate what he was bringing into the show. It worked! He relaxed, he felt accepted for himself, he began to visibly enjoy the sensory games and humourous use of Shakespeare's text. What's more, the same was happening, in different ways, with all the other participants and actors. (Testimonials)

This idea of learning to communicate and exist in the autistic person's world instead of forcing them to follow the rules of the neurotypical world has been emphasized by Flute many times. "This is a space where everybody is welcome. Where everybody's celebrated. Where everybody's idiosyncrasies and unique ways of being in the world are part of what happens in the space, they're part of the drama" (Coming). As Flute puts it, "Somehow, the children have their mode of communication, we have ours, and we meet in the middle" (Shakespeare and Autism).

This acceptance of the autistic individuals also means that participants are celebrated no matter how they choose to participate in the games. As Hunter has said, "Nowhere in our space would anyone say 'That's not the way to play' Instead, the opposite is true. We applaud that and say 'what a lovely way for you to join us.' So we listen to them and they listen to us" (Coming). Holly Musgrave shared her experiences working with Lumen, one of Flute's long-term participants:

I [have played the games] with Lumen for years. Although Lumen didn't necessarily want to sit down [and play the games in the "traditional way"] for the first year or so, the drama of the games lived in him. Lumen's laughter, his cheeky moments of eye contact, even his giggling responses to run and hide were all part of the point of ecstasy that Kelly so often talks about. It was always in these moments, where Titania first sees Bottom, where Thaisa is lost to the sea, where Helena again catches Demetrius' eyes to tell him she loves him, that Lumen would react. He could feel the tempo changes and the surges in pitch as we performed. He was already playing with us, just with a different set of instructions and responses. (Musgrave "Lumen")

This acceptance of every individual no matter how they would like to play also means that no Flute performance is ever quite the same as the games are adapted in the moment to work with each individual and their specific needs. As Hunter tells the story, "That first class that I taught, there were twelve children, and four of them were nonverbal – they never spoke – and four of them never stopped speaking... So everything that I invented can be adapted for those four who don't speak and those four who do and for the four in the middle... Everything has to be adapted to accommodate all of us" (Autism).

This ability to adapt the show in the moment is facilitated in a few ways. For one thing, before each show, Hunter will meet each participant and their family and get to know a bit about them. As Hunter explained: "I will always greet the families... and ask the child's name... and find out a little bit about where they've come from, who they are, and what they might be expecting and experiencing... and if there are... any triggers that the parents may want to tell us about, or anything we may need to be aware of" (Coming). This gives the Flute actors a heads-up on the specific needs of each of their participants for that show, allowing a little preplanning.

Of course, this information can only go so far. According to Hoyle and Welch, each performance requires a great deal of intuition and flexibility from the actors, as they determine in the moment what is working and what is not for each participant. As Hoyle told me, during a performance, “You are constantly scanning your team, you're reading body language about what they need, what part in the game they're going to play to get the most out of the experience, if they're gonna be helped a little, if they're gonna be helped a lot, or if they're gonna be completely independent. It is this constantly moving, shifting thing, and [performances] can take up to two and a half hours sometimes because every single participant will play the game at least once” (Hoyle).

I believe that this idea – of encouraging and celebrating participants for the unique ways in which they may interact with a piece – is a valuable lesson for anyone attempting to make Shakespeare more accessible. As is often said, in art there are no right or wrong answers. However, since many people were introduced to Shakespeare through the guise of high school English classes, there may be a lingering idea that Shakespeare is “academic,” and that there is a “correct” way to approach his works. This may, in turn, create some anxiety as participants do not want to share an idea that they believe may be “wrong.” However, if participants see that they are not shot down for voicing their ideas or opinions, this may overcome the idea that Shakespeare is too academic and too difficult to understand. No matter who one is working with, it can be helpful to take a lesson from Flute and remember that, when introducing the public to Shakespeare, “What a lovely way for you to join us,” is almost always a more helpful response than “That’s not the way to play” (Coming).

Another common barrier that many autistic individuals face when interacting with theatre is related to personal discomfort, anxiety, or fear of the unknown. For many autistic individuals,

entering a new space, starting a new activity, breaking a routine, or doing something unfamiliar can create a great deal of anxiety, or even panic. As Flute explains it,

People with autism struggle with concepts of time and space. Time, because you don't know what's coming in the next second, and it feels like you're panicking every second, and space, because there are sensory issues oftentimes which make it difficult to do certain things like walk backward. Because you can't see where you're going or what's behind you and that's alarming. It feels like space and time are conspiring against you. So people with autism will self-soothe in multiple ways to try to deal with the panic. (HUNTER)

In order to overcome these barriers and to help the autistic individuals feel more at home, Flute has developed several strategies. To begin with, as was mentioned above, Hunter will always personally greet every participant and their families in the theatre lobby as they arrive for the show. As Hunter said, "I try as hard as I can to make everyone feel completely at home... Then... we go into the space, and the actors are there to greet the children, and there's a [circling] period which can last as long as it needs to, for the actors to meet the children and the children to join them on the floor cloth to get ready to play. There's no rush for the performance to start" (Coming). This gives the autistic individuals the time they need to feel comfortable in the theatre space before asking them to participate in a new – and perhaps unfamiliar – activity.

Additionally, as was mentioned above, every Flute performance starts and ends with Heartbeat Hellos and Heartbeat Goodbyes. The slow, repetitive heartbeat rhythm of the iambic pentameter creates a soothing pattern that gives the autistic individual the ability to predict what will happen next. As Flute describes it, "We sit in a circle with autistic individuals and we create a womb-like safe space, where, potentially, there is the chance to calm the inner rhythm of the person with autism" (Heartbeat Hellos: the why).

The use of the participants' names in the Heartbeat Hellos – and throughout the performance – serves a calming purpose as well. “Studies have shown that when you hear your name something fires up... in your prefrontal cortex, something that gives you affirmation that you are you. So the most locked away person, in the most panicked world, will have something firing off in their brain that they are known and they are cared about when they hear their name” (Heartbeat Hellos: the why). For someone who may be feeling a great deal of fear about being in a new space and doing a new activity, hearing their name within a soothing and comforting rhythm can help to alleviate these inner anxieties.

Lastly, as was mentioned above, many autistic individuals will self-soothe/self-regulate (or “stim”) when feeling anxious or overwhelmed. Although stimming can manifest in many different ways, some common examples include spinning, rocking, and flapping your hands. In their performances, Flute encourages and supports these behaviors, developing specific games that are based around common stims. “They allow... self-soothing. They encourage... tipping and spinning and rocking, and they engage with it. The actors support [the participants] so they can tip farther and jump higher” (HUNTER). For many autistic individuals, the activities and games that encourage these stims are incredibly calming and can help alleviate anxiety.

At the end of the day, Flute gives their autistic participants “a safe space to explore feelings, to explore talents, to explore who they are as people” (The Hunter). For many people, this experience is very special, and, especially for long-term Flute participants, these strategies have had a noticeable impact. The head of the drama program at one of the schools where Flute works has said that his students

walk into the room and they know it's different, it's big for them. These are kids that spend sometimes the majority of their day in a state of trauma or a state of upset and confusion,

they're a bit lost. Then they come here and they have an actor each to work with them, when does that happen? Never! And they get this beautiful, essentially one-to-one experience and also group experience, that just transcends anything that they've experienced before. And you can [really] see that. I go up to a kid now, even without the context of the actors... and start doing the heart beat [hellos] and you can see it just running through them, it's in their muscles now, this joyful memory of the experience and their desire to want to recreate it. (Testimonials)

For many autistic individuals, the Heartbeat Hellos – and the work that Flute does more generally – have become a comforting space that participants can return to when feeling anxious or overwhelmed or simply when they wish to connect with others.

Along with all of the above, Flute also serves as a safe and welcoming space for the parents and families of autistic individuals. According to Flute, “For a lot of the families watching, what we've heard is that, ‘I've never seen my child be involved in that way, I've never seen them emote, I've never seen them sit in a circle and just smile about something that's going on with them’” (Shakespeare and Autism). During our interview, Welch concurs,

I love... watching the parents, watching the worry and the anxiety, and almost – not to sound so dramatic – but almost the grief of what their child could have been, leaving them [as they go], “Oh my god, I have a kid who has the same ability to play and have fun and have a laugh as any other kid down the street...” They're my happiest memories, when I see a parent's eyes go “Oh, my kid is just having fun.”

... I've worked in settings where people think that autism is something that should be cured like, “When will you make my child better?” You know, we go through all this therapy and all these things to “get rid” of the autism. And it's such a shame that that's a

mindset. It's fear and it's lack of education, and it's... society's thing of "If you have autism there is something wrong with you." (Hoyle)

Until very recently, it was widely accepted that those with autism had no ability to be creative (McVeigh). Flute Theatre, through its use of Shakespeare, has proved these beliefs wrong. Due to Covid, they have now brought their performances to all corners of the globe, reaching families as far away as the United States, Peru, Spain, and India through individualized performances (Home). Along with these one-on-one performances, Flute has also live-streamed countless hours of Heartbeat Hellos to help create a soothing space for autistic individuals all over the world.

Whether online or in-person, Ali Hoyle sums up the work Flute does best:

The essence of humanity is captured in Shakespeare. And so [we] do [Shakespeare], and [we] allow our participants the time, the space, the acknowledgment, the recognition, to have these deeply moving experiences... And what happens is this beautiful unlocking [as] you remove little obstacles... that's what the work does. It's like, "Come into the space, you're welcome, we see you, [and] we recognize you." (Hoyle)

As an audience member wrote, "By generating an atmosphere of inclusive openness, based on the common heartbeat that runs through the text, [*The Tempest*] opened the complex territories of language and expression to the excluded. It invited them to share in moments that were ripe with meaning precisely because of who was sharing them" (Walling).

Flute, in its seven-year history, has worked to make the works of Shakespeare accessible to a population that many overlook. On their website, Flute shares a review, written about their production of *The Tempest* in 2016. The review is only two words, but it sums up Flute and the

work they do remarkably well. For, at the end of the day, Flute Theatre truly is: “Groundbreaking Shakespeare” (Gardner).

#### 4.0 “The Possibility for Brilliance:” Shakespeare Youth Festival

*Those that do teach young babes*

*Do it with gentle means and easy tasks.*

- Othello (Shakespeare, *Othello*, 4.2.129-130)

*When one succeeds in firing the imagination of a child, nothing can quench that enthusiasm – and when one fails, nothing can ignite it. To the child to whom he is introduced as A Very Important Man, indeed, Shakespeare may well remain a distant and impenetrable stranger. To the child fortunate enough to be introduced to him by the right channels, Shakespeare has every chance of being a friend for life.*

- Richard Monette, Artistic Director of the Stratford Festival (Our Mission)

The show: Act 4, scene 1 of *Macbeth* – or “The Scottish Play” if you’re feeling superstitious (and actors are always feeling superstitious). The setting: A dark and misty forest somewhere in Scotland. The format: Zoom (thanks, 2020). The actors: seven kids roughly between the ages of 8-14. The witches – three girls around age 10-12 – are wrapped in black cloaks, gleefully enthusiastic about Macbeth’s downfall. The spirits that visit Macbeth are played by younger actors – perhaps eight years old. All the actors remain engaged throughout the

performance. It is clear that all of them, even the youngest, understand the meaning of the words they are saying.

This is the Shakespeare Youth Festival (SYF), “The country’s youngest Shakespeare troupe” (Our Mission), which stages 6-8 full-length, original language productions of Shakespeare’s plays every year in Los Angeles, California with casts made up entirely of children ages 5-18. Along with their full-length productions, SYF also puts on several recitals every year. This year, thanks to Covid, they have moved their normal productions online; at the time of writing, their most recent performances were productions of *Richard III* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, performed complete with props and costumes over Zoom in April and May of 2021.

SYF was created in 2006, by founder and current artistic director Blaire Baron. Baron smiles easily, and her enthusiasm for Shakespeare and the work she does is clear even through a Zoom screen. Before founding SYF, she performed on and off-Broadway, as well as in TV and film. She has endless stories about her experience with SYF. In an interview, she tells me how the company came to be:

It started in my backyard in 2005 with two little girls: my daughter [and]... my neighbor's daughter. ...That little girl was three and my daughter was four, [and one day we thought,] “If we gave them fairy lines from *The Tempest* would they remember?” And we were giving them lines... and they did it, and then they wanted more, and then more. And then my neighbor called some other neighbors, and they walked over and suddenly we had five, and then it went to twelve... And so we continued it. We decided to give the group a monologue and each one would have two lines. They were ages four to seven and we did it. My in-laws at the time had a little tiny theater in their backyard... and we had 50 people come, and they did this... We were off and running from there. (Baron)

After this first small show, Baron taught the neighborhood children a 24-page version of *The Tempest*. It would be SYF's first show, and it took them nine months to stage. Baron laughs as she tells me that "It felt so long and so impossible. How are we going to do [twenty-four] pages of this? ... It was the most stressful thing I've ever done" (Baron). But they persevered, eventually performing the show four times. It was after one of these performances that Baron was approached by Julia Wyson, whose son had played Ferdinand in that first production. Wyson had worked as an actor in theatres all across the country and had a background in Shakespeare. According to Baron, it was Wyson who told her they needed to keep the program going (Baron). Baron agreed, Wyson became the executive director of the new program, and the Shakespeare Youth Festival was born.

Since this beginning, the company has grown to reach more children from a variety of backgrounds. Early on, Baron knew that she wanted to bring SYF to South LA, to children that otherwise would not have access to programs such as this one. For several years SYF had two troupes – one serving South LA and the other in the wealthier neighborhoods of Hollywood and Hancock Park. A few years ago, Baron and Wyson decided to merge the two troupes. Although the commute may be a little longer for some of the students, SYF believes it's worth it to have a fully integrated performance troupe (Baron). Nowadays, SYF prides itself on being a place where every child is supported and treated equally no matter their background or socioeconomic status. SYF's mission statement makes the objective of the company clear, "In the spirit of cultural generosity and with the goal of creative excellence, we create diverse communities of belonging and self-empowerment with children and youth locally and across the globe through the magic of theater ... and we do it all in Iambic Pentameter" (Our Mission).

Along with their full-length performances, SYF also produces several recitals every year, runs a variety of classes and camps, and facilitates “The Willful Minors” a troupe that performs Shakespearean scenes and monologues in community spaces, libraries, and parks for members of the general public. SYF has also worked overseas in Kenya, Botswana, and Mexico, sharing the works of Shakespeare with the children there and learning about their cultures in return.

Today, SYF performances are generally divided by age, usually into a younger and older group. Both groups perform full-length, original language productions, meaning that you could attend a production where the actors tackling the main roles aren’t even in double digits.<sup>10</sup> A recent full-length production of *The Comedy of Errors*, performed entirely by second to fourth graders, saw nine-year-olds playing the main roles. At the age of thirteen, the girl who played Cleopatra in a recent production of *Antony and Cleopatra* had already performed in eight SYF productions (SYFLA – Spring 2015).

Because getting children involved in Shakespeare early is so important to creating lifelong Shakespeare lovers – and because getting more young people into the theatre is vital for the

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<sup>10</sup> Large roles – Hamlet, Antony and Cleopatra, etc. – are often divided up between two or more actors. This is often done in order to show the internal struggle taking place inside of a character. For instance, in a production of *Richard III*, the role of Richard was divided “into two parts – the external, charismatic climber and the internal, tormented ruler. As the play progressed, the second Richard took over, culminating in the famous monologue where, in our production, Richard literally argued with himself over his identity and whether he deserved to continue” (SYFLA – Spring 2014). While this is not done for all large roles, this setup has the triple benefit of 1. giving more actors a chance to explore these highly complex and challenging characters, 2. providing a new and interesting interpretation of well-known characters, and 3. dividing the memorization load for characters who are particularly verbose.

continued longevity of theatre as a whole – I went into this project knowing that I wanted to research a company that focused specifically on children. I found many Shakespearean theatre companies with some form of youth engagement programs; however, there are remarkably few companies dedicated solely to children and Shakespeare. This may be for a variety of reasons – a perceived or real lack of interest, the belief that Shakespeare is too complicated for children, intimidation about teaching energetic eight-year-olds how to wax poetic in iambic pentameter. SYF, in its fifteen-year history, has proved all these doubts to be wrong. Children – if given the proper time and support – can not only learn and understand Shakespeare’s language, they can also thrive while doing so.

#### **4.1 Language**

Language is arguably the largest and most immediately thought of barrier when introducing anyone to Shakespeare, and for children this would seem to be even more relevant. It bears repeating that SYF does not modernize the language; all productions utilize Shakespeare’s original lines. Because of this, one of my largest questions when going into the interviews with SYF was how the company made this language accessible and understandable to young actors – language that many seasoned adult actors often struggle to understand. The answer, it turns out, has several parts.

To begin with, I was surprised to learn that many students do not enter SYF’s program with any preconceived notions about Shakespeare and his language. This is because when children are young enough, they are often simply unaware that Shakespeare is supposed to be too difficult for them to understand. As Julia Wyson put it,

A lot of times, especially when you introduce it very young, they don't have any idea that they're not supposed to like it or it's supposed to be boring. ... And then... we'll get [the kids] in cahoots with us. ... Once they've sort of gotten the enthusiasm up we'll say "Guys, tell you a secret, a lot of people don't think you should be able to understand this and look, you already are." There's a lot of acknowledgment that A: it's not too hard for you, and B: once you've achieved it, then we let you know, actually this was really hard and you did it, and it's kind of amazing how well you did. And so then they walk out of there going "Yeah, I rock! I'm super smart!" And it really does bring confidence. (Wyson)

Whether or not children enter the program with preconceived notions, SYF believes it is important to validate any thoughts or opinions the students may have about a play. They also emphasize that "It's not about getting the right answer as much as it is about thinking about [the play] and thinking critically" (Wyson). As Wyson told me, "I'm a firm believer in teaching all of them that sometimes I don't know what stuff means. And you look it up, and you figure it out, and you take your best guess" (Wyson). This helps to move away from the mentality that there is one "right answer" or correct interpretation of a line, which may add stress and make students less willing to interact with and try to understand the text. Wyson told me, "I always feel like I'm doing my job if the kids are thinking [about the plays]... and going 'Ooh, what about this?'... and coming up with theories and ideas" (Wyson).

For shorter workshops, both in the US and abroad, SYF will often start its students off in their study of Shakespeare's language with a single line from *Henry IV, Part II*: "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown" (Shakespeare, *Henry IV Part II*, 3.1.31). Baron, writing about her experiences teaching Shakespeare in Botswana (which will be discussed more thoroughly in the

“Relatability” section below), had this to say about introducing Shakespeare to a class of fourth-graders who spoke English as a third language with this line:

*Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.*

No writing! We are up on our feet. Every word conveyed through tone and gesture. UNEASY is not the opposite of “easy,” so we look for a synonym. Uncomfortable... not quite.... unsafe. They know this word. *They get UNSAFE.*

We stand together, acting out what “unsafe” looks like in our bodies and faces. I ask, “Who is a person who wears a crown?” ... A tiny voice calls out: The Queen... Now we talk about POWER.

*Why should a queen feel unsafe? Castles, mansions, fame and money...why unsafe? Can a Queen ever rest? What if somebody wants to take her crown? Maybe she worries all the time! Invaders, Heretics, Cousins....*

...They get it. [The teacher] translates just in case. Hands go up. Every single one of them now wants the opportunity to chant it alone, in front of their peers.

It’s been twenty minutes and Gertrude’s Fourth Grade class shows a visceral, personal understanding of this one Shakespeare line from Henry IV... Then my favorite thing happened:

*They ask for another line of iambic pentameter.* (Baron, “Shakespeare in Africa #4”)

Although the specifics may be different, this line works well across cultures for introducing kids to Shakespeare. Children all over the world understand “unsafe”; they get the concept of power. This line is clear, straightforward, and can facilitate conversations on how the line connects to the modern day and students’ 21<sup>st</sup>-century lives. If there is a little more time, iambic pentameter is

introduced, either before or after the actual lines, much like it is at Flute Theatre: by tapping out a heartbeat rhythm on your chest.

For classes, productions, and other situations where SYF has more time with the students they are working with, Julia Wyson has developed a long list of tactics to help facilitate the study of Shakespeare's language. Different strategies are used depending on the ages of the students and their interest/attention levels. Several of these strategies are listed below.

- Keep it fun, not academic, and make it clear that the teacher does not have all the answers. According to Wyson, the exploration of Shakespeare's texts should be viewed as "A detective challenge. ... I try to keep that sense of fun and discovery and "aha!" and the fact that none of us know when we first read a Shakespeare monologue what the heck he's talking about, but that you can figure it out" (Wyson). Students, especially those who are younger and/or are fairly new to Shakespeare, will generally connect much more with the sense of discovery and play than they will with memorization, academic plot analysis, or close reading.
- Ask questions. As was mentioned above, and will be discussed more thoroughly in the "Relatability" section below, "I love asking the questions that make the kid go 'OOOH, ooh, I get it!' And then they feel this sense of excitement and ownership [over the language]" (Wyson). This sense of discovery – the sense of accomplishment that comes with figuring something out – can help even the most reluctant child become interested and engaged with the work.
- Make it bite-sized. For short workshops or intensives, Wyson recommends focusing solely on one monologue or short scene versus attempting to tackle an entire play. After all, if the students can figure out one monologue, they will be able to use those same tools to

understand another monologue, a scene, or the entire play. During the limited amount of time SYF has during these programs, their main goal is to give the students the tools they need in order to go home and figure out Shakespeare's language on their own.

- Use No Fear Shakespeare and other modern translations as a rehearsal tool. This allows students to see “What [the scene is] ‘supposed’ to mean, and then [go] back and [figure] out why those words mean that” (Wyson).
- Lean into the rhythm. Especially for younger kids, leaning into the rhythm and chanting Shakespeare's words aloud can be very helpful in helping them get the language and meanings into their bodies. Music and rhythm are universal, and especially for children who do not yet read fluently, or for whom English may not be their first language, this physical embodiment of the rhythm can be very beneficial.
- Find the juicy words. While the other close reading tactics described below generally work better with high-school-age students, students of all ages love searching for the “juicy words” in a piece of Shakespeare's text. As Wyson describes it, “Target the words that are really fun and lively. Experiment with how you can say them so that they feel fun and lively, and dig into them a little bit. I play a game where the kid will say the line and I'll say ‘Ok, whatever question I ask you, the answer is the full line.’ And then I'll ask them different questions to get them [to say the line] different ways: ‘Who felt that about you?’ ‘How did he feel?’ ‘Why did he [feel that way?]' It helps them kind of play around with different ways to intone the line” (Wyson).

- Find the lists. Shakespeare utilizes many lists in his monologues and plays. This could be lists of specific things – “wheels, racks, torments” (Wyson)<sup>11</sup> – or lists of more general concepts or ideas such as Jaques’s seven ages of man (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2.7.146-173). Finding and identifying these lists can help students tackle a difficult piece, while also creating a sense of discovery and fun as kids work to find every item. Wyson will often present such an assignment as: “There’s a list in this speech. It has five items in it. What are those five items?” (Wyson). After that, the kids are off to the races, trying to find everything on the list.
- Learn scansion. All older SYF students are introduced to scansion and iambic pentameter. When introducing these ideas, Wyson will often ask the students if they would like to sit down with Shakespeare and ask him questions about their characters. The answer, naturally, is almost always an enthusiastic “yes.” She then tells them, “Well, that’s scanning. Scanning the text is your chance to sit down and figure out what Shakespeare was thinking when he wrote this” (Wyson). She will then talk students through the lines using their new knowledge of scansion, asking them questions about what they think Shakespeare’s intentions may have been: “How is [this line] irregular, and what do you think is happening here?’ [There are] ten lines that are regular, and then you have a trochaic inversion, what do you think is happening?’” (Wyson).
- Try to figure out what will grab each child’s attention. Naturally, some students will fall in love with the scansion while other students will be more interested in the acting, and someone else might simply enjoy the sense of community the program gives them. Don’t

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<sup>11</sup> Wyson is paraphrasing *The Winter’s Tale*, 3.2.185-187.

be afraid to identify what each child connects with, and use those things to help boost their interest. As Wyson puts it, “Different kids will grab onto different things, and that's one of the things I love about Shakespeare is that there's so many little things that kids can grab onto. In some cases it's stereotypical, but if I'm dealing with a bunch of 3rd or 4<sup>th</sup>-grade boys, they like that people fight, they like that there's sword fights. And sometimes... the fact that these characters are gonna be fighting [is enough to get them invested]. ... I'm all for cheap shots like that – if I can woo them [by] dangling a sword in front of them, then that's perfectly legitimate in my book” (Wyson).

- Give everyone a chance to speak. SYF is committed to the idea that every child gets a chance to speak in every show. Students may have different sized roles depending on comfortability level and experience, but every student will have lines and a moment to shine in the performance. This is discussed more thoroughly in the “Ease of Access” section below, but for now I will only say that this is a way of – perhaps subconsciously – showing the children that everyone can learn, understand, and speak Shakespeare’s language, from those who have been doing it for years to the students who are new and may be intimidated.<sup>12</sup>
- Give it time. Along with all of the above, perhaps the most successful tactic for helping the students understand Shakespeare’s language is simply time and “lots of close, intense, private work” (Wyson). SYF spends a great deal of rehearsal and class time ensuring that

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<sup>12</sup> Additionally, many of SYF’s older high school students assist in teaching the younger children, which may help overcome a young student’s belief that this work is too hard for them. Seeing that students who are just a few years older have gained enough comfort with Shakespeare’s language that they are able to help teach others may make less experienced students feel more confident in their ability to understand the language as well.

the students understand exactly what they are saying and are not simply repeating lines that they do not understand the meaning of. As a student told me during an interview, “We often do a lot of text work where... we don't physically stand up and try and act things out. We simply work on our conviction and understanding exactly what we're saying. So, no one can get away with not understanding the words because [they]... make sure we understand every single word. If we don't understand why it's phrased [in a certain way], we will look it up, we will talk about it. We define every single word and we also look out for the poetic flow of it, such as iambic pentameter... We always point out all those little details to figure out how it contributes to the emotions and the actual plot of the scene, and eventually after we discuss that thoroughly we will get up on our feet and work on blocking” (Perez).

- Treat the kids as fully capable of understanding everything you (and Shakespeare!) throw at them. “We don't lower the bar or lower our expectations or dumb anything down. We go, ‘You know what, you can do this; it's like a second language’” (Pineda). This clear respect for their abilities can help boost the self-confidence of a child who is feeling unsure about their interpretation of a text or their ability to understand or perform a challenging piece.

From the videos I have seen, these tactics appear to be highly successful. Watching an SYF performance, it is clear that every child – even the smallest – understands exactly what they are saying. When I asked Wyson what often surprises people the most about SYF productions, she tells me that “What genuinely surprises people on a regular basis is the idea that this is not a trained seal act; this is not a situation where we teach the kids the words by rote and then they get up and

memorize them and do them...That surprises people a lot, that kids are able to think critically about something as nuanced and complex as Shakespeare” (Wyson).

The students’ ability to think critically about difficult themes, characters, and stories will also be relevant in our next section: Relatability.

## 4.2 Relatability

Velouria Perez, a petite teenager with a big smile and a palpable love of Shakespeare, started with SYF when she was nine or ten. At that age, she tells me that she was quiet, with a “pretty bad” stutter, not the type to go up to someone and start a conversation. She credits the Shakespeare Youth Festival with helping her overcome these limitations and pinpoints the moment of the most growth as the year she was given her first lead in a performance – Antipholus of Syracuse in *The Comedy of Errors*. When I ask for her favorite role she’s played during her time with SYF, she starts to giggle. Tamora, she tells me, from *Titus Andronicus* – which is, she’s quick to add, “Not a play you expect to show to kids” (Perez). They toned it down a little, she tells me, but performed the whole thing. She was about twelve years old at the time. She laughs about it with her former castmates now – “This is such a dark play!”

But playing Tamora was very fun for me because I'm someone who is very careful about things I do... And so playing this... completely evil woman, it was so great to break out of everything I knew, to.... just commit to being evil and terrible... It was so much fun to be someone who I was not at all. And I think that's one of the joys of acting in general, and with Shakespeare [in particular]. And it's especially good to get that as a kid – when you're

young, to find an outlet where if you are really mad, guess what, your character can be mad and you can let that all out. (Perez)

This is, perhaps, one of the prime joys of Shakespeare, especially for children. Shakespeare's emotions are large, constantly changing and filling the room. No one in Shakespeare does anything by halves whether it is fighting or falling in love. This is theoretically one reason why *Romeo and Juliet* is read so often in high school – the young age of the characters and the overwhelming nature of their love and hate creates a story that many people believe teenagers, with all their raging hormones and strong emotions, will relate to easily.

Over the years, SYF has developed several strategies for helping children unlock these characters and emotions as well as assisting them in connecting the 400-year-old plays with their modern-day lives. Baron tells me that the first thing she will do with a group of students is to sit them down, play some theatre games to help the kids feel comfortable, and then

Slowly introduce Shakespeare with a story. And usually, those stories are what gets them hooked and the buy-in happens because [they want to know what happens next]. And then we relate the stories to now. Let's say I'm telling *Macbeth*, I'll start with, "Raise your hand if you've ever done something that went against your conscience." And then [they'll slowly start to raise their hands]. And then, "Raise your hand if you stopped sleeping because you felt bad about something" and... they [raise their hands]. And then we talk about how Lady Macbeth can't sleep anymore, and how [the Macbeths] go mad because [their actions] went against their conscience... [And] then suddenly *it's about them* because it's about your conscience, and... they understand the character. So we start with the games, and then go into the stories, [and finally] relate the stories to human nature. (Baron)

By connecting the themes of the plays to the public's real lives before bringing Shakespeare himself into the picture, the stories suddenly do not feel as old and outdated. As Wyson said in an interview, “[We] try to introduce it to them in a way that is very alive and non-academic... All of his plays are so current and so relevant when they are introduced to kids in a way where they say ‘Oh my god I totally understand Prince Hal’s dilemma! My dad doesn’t like any of my friends either and I get yelled at all the time for hanging out with my friends too! I get what’s going on with him’” (Maas).

It is worth noting that this tactic of introducing Shakespeare through connecting his stories and themes with participants' real lives may be more challenging when attempted with those who have already formed opinions about Shakespeare. As one might imagine, if someone has read *Macbeth* and hated it, they may be less open to finding any similarities between the play and their own lives, remembering only their negative experiences and not willing to explore the matter more. However, I believe that the same general idea of introducing the plays through stories and a connection with participants' daily lives could still be pursued. Perhaps, in this case, it would require introducing Shakespeare through a play that participants are unfamiliar with, thus helping to avoid some of the preconceived notions or negative experiences participants may have with plays they have already been introduced to. For other participants, who are at least somewhat open to the idea of learning about Shakespeare, it may be helpful to acknowledge their thoughts and feelings while also asking them to do their best to set these preconceived notions aside for the time being. Either way, these ideas – of familial problems, guilt, feeling misunderstood, and much more, – are relatable to anyone, no matter your age or lived experiences. Because of this, if the preconceived notions can be overcome, I find it likely that the majority of people will find success through the strategies for connecting with the plays that SYF has developed.

When introducing new students to Shakespeare, SYF often uses *The Tempest*, as the kids are usually excited about its fun characters, the magic, and the adventure. The play is also simpler in its storyline than several others, breaking down neatly into different groups of characters each with distinct storylines. *Macbeth* is another popular choice as kids tend to connect with and enjoy the dramatic story elements and larger-than-life characters. SYF often uses *Timon of Athens* with their younger students because the kids connect well with the question of whether someone who only wants to be your friend because of the things you can do for them is really a friend at all. Wyson tells me the story of a little boy who raised his hand during rehearsals for their first production of *Timon* and told her “Miss Julia! There was an episode of *SpongeBob* that was exactly about this!” (Wyson). And this, of course, is where the magic happens. If children are connecting the words of Shakespeare to the antics of a popular cartoon sponge, Shakespeare has undoubtedly gone from boring, outdated, and mystifying, to relatable, contemporary, and exciting.

Although these are the go-to shows for introducing new students to Shakespeare, SYF maintains that nearly every play can be made relatable with a little thought. This includes the classics, of course, such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Macbeth*, as well as lesser-known and less commonly produced works such as *Two Gentleman of Verona* and *Timon of Athens*. SYF connected a recent production of *Troilus and Cressida*, for instance, with the #MeToo movement, showing how the gender roles of the world the characters inhabit can be connected to the issues of our 21<sup>st</sup>-century life.

According to Wyson, SYF has produced all but “eight [or nine]” of Shakespeare’s plays, including ones that remain quite controversial (Wyson). The company has “always refused to be limited by the expectations of what Shakespeare plays are “appropriate” for young performers” (WINTER), and these productions certainly showed that. Some of these shows have been toned

down a little or made less explicit through staging (especially when it involves topics such as sex), but the tough subjects and original language remain.<sup>13</sup> These more controversial productions include a gender-bent version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, a production of *The Merchant of Venice* that (unsurprisingly) caused the company to receive some emails questioning “why we would expose young people to the themes of this complex play” (WINTER), and a tongue-in-cheek production of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* that “opened in a nightclub while a torch singer crooned ‘What’s cute about a little cutie; it’s her beauty, not brains,’ and the entire cast tap-danced to ‘Keep Young and Beautiful’” (SYFLA – Spring 2014). According to the company’s writings about the production of *Two Gents*, “Establishing those societal expectations gave our young post-feminists (and our audience) insight into why Julia [and] Proteus might have behaved as they did” (SYFLA – Spring 2014).

In this exploration of sensitive topics and underproduced plays, we have a repetition of the idea that it is not necessary to “dumb down” Shakespeare in order to make him accessible to children. Through their tackling of tough subject matter, SYF has shown both that children are able to handle and understand these difficult subjects – understanding, for instance, that the production of *Two Gents* discussed above is meant to be tongue-in-cheek and should not be taken seriously – and that they can relate to and learn from these serious, “grown-up” topics. When children who have not been exposed to Shakespeare before are given the respect that goes along

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<sup>13</sup> SYF has managed to “get around” the sex in several plays, including *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (discussed below). A few of the shows that SYF has not adapted yet include *All’s Well That Ends Well* (distasteful and hard-to-avoid sex) and *Henry V*, which Julia tells me they would love to do but have to figure out how to make the part of Henry more manageable for a student actor. Still, Wyson maintains that “I really don’t think there’s a play that you can’t find something in it to make it accessible to a kid” (Wyson).

with a belief that they can understand the complexities of a challenging play, it will help them feel empowered in their exploration of Shakespeare, not overwhelmed.<sup>14</sup>

Although this logic is particularly relevant in this situation as it relates to children, I think there is an important lesson here for introducing Shakespeare to anyone. When Shakespeare is introduced, it should not be done in a patronizing way, assuming that someone will not be able to understand the language or themes of a passage or monologue. Instead, it should be shared in a way that acknowledges that the participants are smart and will be able to understand the words, themes, emotions, and characters of whatever play is being worked on.

Another way in which shows are made relatable is by setting productions in places that are familiar and/or related to what children are learning in school. This tactic helps to connect Shakespeare's plays to a more modern world and heightens the universal elements in the shows. Some examples include setting *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the flower child era of the 1960s and placing a production of *Much Ado About Nothing* in 1850s California, which is familiar to many students as it connects with the history curriculum that most California fourth-graders study (History).

Another tactic SYF employs is the use of many musical elements in its shows. Music is a universal language and can help to explain a confusing element or aspect of a show that otherwise might go over the heads of the actors (and the audience). An example of this might be the

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<sup>14</sup> SYF also argues that seeing their peers performing in lesser-known plays can actually help children in the audience become more interested in Shakespeare than they would from seeing the same few plays over and over again (Maas).

aforementioned production of *Two Gents*, where the music helped to set the overall tone of the piece and grounded the expectations of the actors and the audience in the play.

Additionally, SYF does many productions and recitals that focus entirely on highly specific characters, lines, or themes from Shakespeare's plays. For instance, a class focused on the idea of "conflict" – which included famous Shakespearean adversaries like Tybalt and Mercutio, Falstaff and Mistress Quickly, and Thersites and Ajax, – a summer intensive focusing on the line "to thine own self be true," and a week of classes surrounding the theme of "family" which focused on *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, and *Taming of the Shrew*. A common theme that SYF has returned to several times is that of "speaking truth to power" (History). This theme is empowering for the youth in the program as they learn about Shakespearean characters who have stood up to power and is also easy to connect to for children who may feel that their voice too often goes unheard in their daily lives.<sup>15</sup>

Lastly, on the barrier of relatability, I would like to discuss SYF's work abroad. This could quite easily be the subject of a thesis in its own right, but I will keep my analysis brief. Over the past several years, SYF has visited schools in Motopi, Botswana (twice), and San Miguel, Mexico. SYF has also traveled to the Sauti Kuu Foundation in Kenya, a program founded and run by Dr. Auma Obama, former President Barack Obama's sister. In each case, SYF was invited by the

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<sup>15</sup> SYF has also run a successful "10 seconds of Shakespeare" campaign, the dual goals of which were to fundraise for SYF while also supporting the belief that "Shakespeare is for everyone" (10). Participants of any age, from anywhere in the world, were invited to choose a ten second excerpt from Shakespeare's work, record themselves performing it, and share the recording to social media, with the end goal of showing that anyone can speak and perform Shakespeare's words (10). The campaign was participated in by everyone from a seven-year-old child to firefighters and LA police officers, LA's mayor, and even students in New Delhi, India (Shakespeare Youth).

respective facilitators of each school and program to introduce their students to the works of Shakespeare.

In Botswana, Baron worked with 340 grade-schoolers, many of whom spoke English as their third language. The students were introduced to theatre games and exercises and performed in a final production for the town, “The 5th [graders have] Puck’s final speech from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Gertrude’s fourth-grade class has 6 Iambic Pentameter Lines which they dramatically act out...First, Second and Third Graders have the Mirror Game, group theatre games, yoga...” (Baron, “Shakespeare in Africa #5”). The tweens, studying hard for their entrance exams to upper school, were given Prospero’s famous “Our revels now are ended” speech from *The Tempest* (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 4.1.165-180). Blaire also introduced the children to *Hamlet*, which they immediately latched onto in much the same way SYF’s American students did back home in California. Overall, the children connected quickly and easily with Shakespeare, proving what SYF would continue to discover in their work abroad: namely, that Shakespeare is relatable even across language and cultural barriers.

In Mexico, SYF worked with students ages 9-17 in an area that has many expats from Canada and the US along with native Mexican students. Because of this, SYF chose to focus on *The Tempest*. This play “inspired dialogue on how different... cultures [can] blend peacefully when they share and appreciate each other’s attributes and traditions, but when ‘incomers’ impose their beliefs and customs on the culture of origin, it becomes oppression. Again, as always, Shakespeare’s themes are universal and timeless” (Shakespeare Youth Festival: Mexico).

In Kenya, the 88 students – all children from the community – were divided into different groups based on age. For these children, too, English was often their third language, and there was some initial trepidation about approaching such an unfamiliar form of English. When the words

were translated into Luo – many of the children’s first language, – however, “the emotion of the characters exploded” (Performance). Just as in the other places SYF had visited, the students were taught theatre games and exercises, including “Stage Combat/Sword Fighting, Storyteller’s Theater, Dance, Laban Effort-Shape (in English and Luo), Improv, Trust & Team Building Games” (Typical). The SYF teachers also participated in other activities the students were doing during their time at the program, including dance parties and sports of various kinds.

For the final performance, the younger students worked on the “Seven Ages of Man” speech from *As You Like It* (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2.7.146-173) as well as a monologue from *Troilus and Cressida* focusing on the idea of time (Performance). The older students connected quickly and easily with *Hamlet*, performing different scenes in their individual groups. Just like the children in America, the story of family tensions, of stepfathers you hate and mothers you don’t agree with, resonated with the children in Kenya (Performance).

The director of one of the *Hamlet* groups, which focused on Hamlet’s famous “To Be or Not to Be” speech, had this to say about the experience,

I challenged [my group] with the task of devising a theatre piece exploring the themes and text of Hamlet’s ‘To Be or Not to Be’ soliloquy. Not one of these kids had seen a ‘western’ idea of a play before, let alone Shakespeare. However, we used their favorite movies, (one being *Avengers: Endgame*) to help us create our own vocabulary. We used their traditional chants and dance as well as Shakespeare’s text translated into Swahili as well as Luo to present their story. We talked about everything from love and friendship to suicide and depression. Sometimes three languages were being spoken at a time to get across someone’s own experiences as some kids barely spoke Swahili or English. The kids chose to make the piece light rather than dark and explore the idea of choosing life even in the

face of the lowest forms of despair. At the end, they yell to the heavens their answer to Hamlet's question: "I choose to live!" finally culminating in a chant of "TO BE OR NOT TO BE; I KNOW THE ANSWER. (Performance)

SYF has talked in detail about how important it was when running these programs to ensure that they were not adding to the long history of colonization that these communities have faced from Europeans. They did not want to imply – however unintentionally – that the works of Shakespeare were superior to the artistic output and traditions from each country they visited. As Kila Packett, SYF's stage combat expert and teaching artist, wrote in an article detailing the company's experience in Kenya,

As Westerners teaching in Africa, we knew we were treading the shark-infested waters of colonialism with the plays of a "dead white guy..."

We had a lot to learn about how we and our project were perceived... It's not enough for us to go to Africa and experience the customs. As citizens of a country that participated in the slave trade and the ensuing destabilization of the continent, we Americans have colonialist residue, which we perpetuate to this day when we see our culture as the dominant or superior one.

As educators, it was imperative that we understand the cultural heritage of the kids we were teaching so that we could create art all people could enjoy. Children performing Shakespeare in Kenya in the same way that American kids do was not our goal. To us Shakespeare is but a tool – a tool for empowerment, expression, storytelling, and a springboard to tell one's *own* story..."

To ensure that we Westerners do not colonize the artistic process, we need to pause, step back, and allow the innate creativity that has lived in the Kenyan spirit for generations to flourish. In Kenya, we needed to be open to what they had to teach us. (Packett)

In order to acknowledge and attempt to mitigate this legacy of colonialism, SYF made sure to meld the works of Shakespeare with traditional performance traditions and techniques from each country and culture. The final performances in Kenya included three languages and non-traditional staging – Hamlet and Gertrude’s “Closet Scene” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.4), for instance, was performed by a relay team of Hamlets and Gertrudes, who performed the scene first in Shakespeare’s English, and then in Luo (Performance). One of Shakespeare’s madrigals was set to the melody of a popular African song. The children used theatre and reenactment to tell their own stories, to build their confidence and creativity, and to develop their critical thinking skills. Just like the American SYF productions, movement and music – two universal languages – played a large role in the performance.

Along with all their other work, SYF’s work abroad has shown that students all over the world can connect with Shakespeare’s language, themes, and stories. As Dr. Obama put it,

Shakespeare can be done in Kiswahili, it can be done in Luo, and it can be performed in Europe. We listen to opera in Italian, in German, in many different languages, and it’s the voices, it’s the mood, it’s the sound that keeps us invested. You don’t understand the words they are singing in *La Traviata*, but you get a feeling for what’s going on and their actions. I think it’s possible to play Shakespeare in Luo and take it to Broadway. (Packett)

Packett summed up the experience nicely, “‘I choose to live’ was the battle cry of the show from a small village who taught us something valuable: The pulse of Shakespeare’s heartbeat resounds in us all” (Packett).

### 4.3 Ease of Access

One of the largest areas of interest in this category is SYF's high retention rate. Many children grow up with SYF, performing in dozens of performances and full-length plays during their time with the company. Additionally, many of the high school students will choose to stay extra hours after their own rehearsals end in order to mentor the younger students. As Baron wrote: "The children who first came to my backyard at age 5 or 6 to learn 'All the World's a Stage' are in high school or college – and return to us as teachers and mentors" (LA). Julia Eschenasy, a long-time student I was lucky enough to be able to interview, grew up with SYF, taught the younger students, traveled to Kenya to assist with the program there, and even wrote a college thesis on Shakespeare abroad. Valouria Perez, fifteen years old at the time of her interview, told me that she wished she could participate in performances long after she turned eighteen.

Especially for children, making such a welcoming environment – a place that students actively want to return to year after year – is incredibly important in overcoming the ease of access barrier. This is particularly important for students who come from less privileged backgrounds and who may not have family traditions of attending the theater – according to SYF's website, 75% of their students "receive some kind of financial assistance" (To Be). For these students, creating a safe, welcoming, and familiar environment is very important for encouraging theatre attendance even after they graduate from SYF's program. Students who attended SYF productions may one day bring their own children to shows, starting a love of theatre in the next generation.

One tactic that SYF utilizes to make the environment comfortable and welcoming to everyone involves only rehearsing a few times a week. Although this admittedly might not be possible in a professional theatre company that requires a faster production turn-around, this schedule is flexible enough that it makes participation easier for children who have a lot of other

extracurricular activities, who have to focus on their studies, or who have transportation issues. Many families who could not commit to rehearsing every night for several hours – as many more mainstream theatre companies require – *can* set aside a few days every week as “theatre days.”

Additionally, SYF’s program is open to everyone, even those who may not want to pursue acting as their career. Because there is no expectation that students in the program must be preparing for conservatory or other auditions, SYF can be a much more relaxed space than many traditional training programs. While students may or may not become professional actors, thanks to their experience with SYF they are much more likely to enjoy Shakespeare and attend theatre productions than students who did not participate in SYF.

There is also the fact – unusual even among educational theatre programs – that SYF does not audition for its shows. After several rehearsals, where the cast play games, do exercises and get to know each other, the director will cast the production based on his or her observations. SYF justifies this choice by writing that “Our goal is to make this program available to any child who wishes to participate. We do not audition – we feel that the skills and strengths that make it possible for a child to feel successful doing this work are not necessarily revealed in an audition ... and one of our greatest joys is helping a child who is frightened by this work, and perhaps doesn’t believe he/she can do it, to be successful” (To Be). This is one of the many ways in which SYF works to make sure that every child – even the ones who are frightened – will feel comfortable in their program, thus helping to break down barriers for children who may not believe that theatre and Shakespeare are for them.

Along these same lines, as mentioned above, every actor will have a speaking role in every production. Actors may have larger or smaller roles, but no actor will ever go through a play without any lines. This can help to break down student anxiety surrounding auditioning and, as

Perez said in her interview, makes SYF feel more like a community, where no one “beat you” for a role (Perez). This, combined with SYF’s high retention rate, allows students a long time – often several years – to grow. Several people had stories to share of students who blossomed in SYF’s program, going from incredibly shy and quiet, to leading stars of the program. Many students have also had experiences similar to Perez’s, where speaking Shakespeare’s language actually helped them to overcome personal challenges: “We have kids with neurological impairments, learning disabilities, speech impediments – that all disappears when they’re speaking Shakespeare” (Los Angeles).

But even if students remain more unsure about performing, the program is still open to them. As Wyson told me, for some students it’s about performing the role of a main character. For others, it’s about performing an entire monologue by themselves. For still others, those with severe stage fright or other barriers they are working against, it’s just about going onstage, saying their lines, and trying something new. Each child is celebrated for their own personal victories.

SYF also makes it a point to provide assistance to students who need it, providing private coaching to students whose families may not be in a position to help them practice or memorize their lines at home. Wyson shared the story of a student who was incredibly dedicated to the program, but who had missed a couple of rehearsals due to an “unstable situation at home... I arranged with his mom... to have a private coaching session, and we sat [down] and we worked our way through the script, and just made sure that he constantly had that little extra support... [We make] sure that the kids that don't have the support at home are getting it either from ourselves through the private coaching sessions, or from our teens” (Wyson). Initiatives such as this allow students – even those who may be in challenging situations at home – to be involved in theatre while still getting any extra support they may need.

Throughout its history, SYF's goal of creating a safe, welcoming environment where every child can feel confident and comfortable exploring Shakespeare has remained. And, for the hundreds of children who have participated in the program that Blaire Baron started in her backyard all those years ago, the experience has, in many cases, been life-changing. As Julia Wyson told me,

One of the things that I love about working with kids and Shakespeare is the kid will never be limited by the material. As [the kids] gain... skill and confidence, there's no cap on them being able to be amazing... there's always the possibility for brilliance. That's something that gives me a great deal of joy, to think back on times when the kids really transcended themselves and gave [amazing] performances. ... We're always putting them in a position where the flying is possible, the taking off and transcending is possible. (Wyson)

As children, families, and audience members have discovered over and over again at SYF's performances, "You will be amazed at what can be done if you take the limits off of a child" (Pineda).

## 5.0 Redemption in Iambic Pentameter: Shakespeare Behind Bars

*I have been studying how I may compare*

*This prison where I live unto the world.*

– Richard II (Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 5.5.1-2)

*Shakespeare reveals our common humanity. He encourages us to think, but not dictate what to think. Using Shakespeare I created a vehicle through which convicted criminals could come to know themselves, not just for the crimes they have committed but also on the deepest level of knowing – mind, heart and soul.*

– Curt Tofteland (Herold 33-34)

In the video, Hal Cobb plays Prospero. He stands in front of a makeshift background, his silver-grey hair loose. He's holding the tiny model of a ship, the patchwork robe he's wearing a kaleidoscope of colors – creating the storm that gives *The Tempest* its name. He shouts at the men who betrayed him, angry, but remains gentle with Miranda, his daughter with whom he was stranded on this desert island a dozen years ago. Other actors float around, moving here and there. Their beige shirts and pants stick out under their costumes.

Cobb is an experienced Shakespearean performer. Over the past 25 years, he has played some of Shakespeare's most challenging and well-known characters, from Lady Macbeth to Dogberry (Production). In interviews, he's soft-spoken, with a gentle Kentucky accent. He's co-

written a book: *Prospero Behind Bars*. In 2010, he won a Pen award for “The Pursuit of Character,” an essay on Shakespeare, character, and his own life (Cobb).

Cobb is all of these things. He is also a convicted murderer. In 1984, he dropped a hairdryer in a filled bathtub, electrocuting and killing his wife and their unborn baby. For nine years, he blamed the occurrence on the family’s cat and raised the couple’s remaining daughter alone (Holman). In 1994 he confessed and was swiftly sentenced to life in prison. He’s been up for parole several times but has been deferred each time.

The Luther Lockett Correctional Complex is a sprawling medium-security men’s prison compound three miles from La Grange, Kentucky. Hal Cobb’s home for the past 26 years, it houses 1,204 men. It is not where you would expect to find Shakespeare. In 1995, however, poet, director, actor, and writer Curt Tofteland founded the Shakespeare Behind Bars (SBB) program in the prison. The company’s mission statement states the goals of the organization: “Shakespeare Behind Bars offers theatrical encounters with personal and social issues to incarcerated, post-incarcerated, and at-risk communities, allowing them to develop life skills that will ensure their successful integration into society” (Mission). The first year, the eleven inmate participants – including Hal Cobb in the first year of his sentence – performed “An Evening of Scenes from Shakespeare” (Production). Most participants, as would continue to be the norm, had no prior experience with Shakespeare, theatre, or acting.

The summer after its founding, SBB performed its first full-length production, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Production). Since then, SBB’s Kentucky chapter has produced one full-length production every year. The rehearsal process usually begins in the fall and performances take place the following spring. Every year, a few performances are held specifically for other inmates. Other performances are held for the general public, who must go through extensive

security checks before being allowed into the prison chapel, turned into a makeshift stage for the performances. In 2003, SBB's production of *The Tempest* was the first of many shows to tour to other correctional institutes in Kentucky to bring the works of Shakespeare to the inmates there.

Also in 2003, SBB and Tofteland were approached by Philomath films, a documentary film company. The resulting film, also called *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, documented the nine-month rehearsal and performance process of SBB's production of *The Tempest*, in which Hal Cobb played Prospero. It shows the day-to-day of rehearsals, interspersed with interviews with many of the actors and Tofteland. The film was selected for the Sundance Film Festival, where it won eleven awards and was nominated for a Grand Jury award. Barring an actual attendance at rehearsals, the documentary provides one of the best windows into the SBB program.

In 2008, after more than ten years of running SBB's programming in Luther Lockett, Tofteland passed his role as facilitator to Matt Wallace and left Luther Lockett to set up other SBB programs in Michigan and Kentucky (Tofteland retains his roles as founder and producing director). One such project was the Journeymen program. This program is specifically for incarcerated individuals ages 18-21 and focuses on rehearsing and performing scenes and monologues from Shakespeare. The Journeymen are mentored both by SBB facilitators and by alumni of the adult SBB program. There are now Journeymen programs in both Michigan and Kentucky.

Each of these programs is facilitated with the same mission and values of the original program in Luther Lockett, and each "explores text, themes, and issues from Shakespeare's plays

through discussion, reflection, exercises, and performance” (Audubon) in order to develop a circle of trust among the facilitators and participants.<sup>16</sup>

Today, SBB’s vision statement and core values sum up the goals of the organization:

Shakespeare Behind Bars was founded on the belief that all human beings are born inherently good. Although some convicted criminals have committed heinous crimes against other human beings, the inherent goodness still lives deep within them and can be called forth by immersing participants in the safety of a circle-of-trust and the creative process.

Within the circle-of-trust, Shakespeare Behind Bars seeks to transform inmate offenders from who they were when they committed their crimes, to who they are in the present moment, to who they wish to become... (Mission)

SBB fulfills these goals – many of which will be explored in more detail in the rest of this chapter – through the more than a dozen programs it runs in multiple prisons and other correctional facilities across three states (Michigan, Kentucky, and Illinois). At Luther Luckett alone, “since its inception in 1995, over 110 inmates have completed at least one year in the program, and 70+

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<sup>16</sup> While every SBB program utilizes Shakespeare, the original program in Luther Luckett seems to be the only one that performs full-length productions. This is also the program that has received the most prior scholarship, and consequently the one which has the most information available. Because of this, I will primarily be focusing on the Luther Luckett program in this chapter.

members are currently back in society” (Luther).<sup>17</sup> And the program has certainly been successful in its goals. According to SBB’s website, the national recidivism rate is 76.6%. SBB’s is 6% (Mission).<sup>18</sup>

When SBB was founded in 1995, it was the first program of its kind in North America. Today, there are many Shakespeare in Prison programs, reaching incarcerated individuals all over the world, many of whom may never have had the opportunity to experience Shakespeare and theatre before. When starting this project, I knew that SBB, as one of the oldest and most well-known of these Shakespeare in Prison programs, would have invaluable insight into how Shakespeare can be made more accessible for all.

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<sup>17</sup> Around 20-30 people participate in the program every year, however many incarcerated individuals return to the program year after year, explaining why the total number of participants is lower than might otherwise be expected.

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that “What this doesn’t show is the offender profile of participants in the programme, who tend to be prisoners serving longer sentences for more ‘serious’ crimes. Recidivism rates for the more serious violent crimes such as murder and manslaughter are generally extremely low, certainly when compared to drug and property offences. When SBB cites recidivism rates for its participants versus those in the state of Kentucky or the United States, it does not control for these distinctions, and furthermore only includes figures for participants who have fully completed at least one SBB programme” (Pensalfini 150). Even with these asterisks, I do believe that these numbers are impressive, and worthy of note.

## 5.1 Language

In our interview Curt Tofteland speaks slowly and it is clear that he is considering his words carefully – reasonable for someone who is a poet when not working at SBB. The speeches, interviews, and talks I have seen and listened to as part of my research on SBB prepare me for a man who is serious, perhaps a little intimidating, and deeply dedicated to his craft. I am not disappointed. Tofteland’s white-blond hair is pulled back into a ponytail, and he gives the overall impression of serious intensity. “A professional director and Equity actor,” Tofteland grew up in North Dakota before spending “20 years as Producing Artistic Director of Kentucky Shakespeare Festival” (Brownlee).<sup>19</sup> For many of these years, he was the primary facilitator of SBB’s programming as well.

When I ask Tofteland about what common questions he receives about SBB, he considers for a moment, then tells me that many inmates wonder what Shakespeare has to do with them.

A lot of [inmates] haven't had any contact at all with Shakespeare. Yeah, maybe if they finished middle or high school they might have had a class in it or something, but there's not a lot of general information about Shakespeare. They think of him as a highbrow, [who] writes a language that's very dense and difficult to understand and doesn't really have much to do with their situation or their life. (Tofteland)

Tofteland and his fellow SBB facilitators work with inmates who received a variety of educational experiences. Some have a third-grade education. Some have PhDs. Many never

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<sup>19</sup> SBB was founded as a sub-program of the Kentucky Shakespeare Festival, but amicably split to form its own company in 2010 (About).

finished high school. Some have learning disabilities. Many, no matter what educational level they achieved, share the belief that Shakespeare is too difficult, or unrelated to their experiences. As Tofteland puts it, many inmates suffer from “‘Shakesfear’ which is always related to ‘I can’t understand what he's talking about’” (Tofteland).

This, I think, shows how widespread the idea is in our society that Shakespeare is too difficult for the average person, not something that just anyone can understand and enjoy. Even for those individuals who have never read a Shakespeare play and who do not have much experience with Shakespeare or the arts, there is already the idea that Shakespeare is unenjoyable. These are not people who tried Shakespeare, realized they did not like it, and moved on. On the contrary, these are individuals who never had the opportunity to experience Shakespeare at all but who still absorbed the societal idea that Shakespeare is difficult, dense, and “highbrow.”

When people believe that Shakespeare is too difficult to understand, their interest in a Shakespeare production or program will necessarily be low. In order to overcome this barrier, Tofteland tells me: “We talk about the power of language and the complexity of language. ... When you help to teach them a way into the language... then they begin to understand how to unpack it. Then, of course, the interest level rises” (Tofteland).

This “unpacking” involves several different steps. Tofteland often introduces Shakespeare to a group by having each participant work on the same monologue. One of his go-to monologues is Hamlet’s speech to the players (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.2.1-46). This monologue functions as an excellent introduction both to Shakespeare and to the art of acting as a whole. Tofteland’s other go-to monologue is from *Richard II*: “I have been studying how I may compare/This prison where I live unto the world...” (Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 5.5.1-67). This monologue is, of course, highly relatable, as inmates who participate in SBB are generally able to relate to the thoughts and feelings

of a man locked inside a prison cell. In Luther Luckett, “The participants will then work on several other speeches from the play chosen for that season, before moving on to casting themselves in and then rehearsing that season’s production” (Pensalfini 25).

Another way SBB works to help participants connect with Shakespeare’s language is through exploring the musicality and storytelling aspect of Shakespeare’s words. Tofteland tells me that he strives to show the participants how Shakespeare is “thought given voice” (Tofteland), in much the same way their favorite hip-hop or country songs are. Although Shakespeare’s language is very different from modern-day country or hip-hop, the impulse to communicate, to tell a story, to explore the human condition, is the same. The goal, as Tofteland puts it, is “to help them find their way into a contemporary understanding of what it is that Shakespeare’s attempting to do” (Tofteland).

Additionally, Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter is extremely beneficial when comparing Shakespeare to music. Although the language may be unfamiliar, the rhythm of the words is the same and connects with many participants’ favorite songs. As can also be seen with Flute Theatre and the Shakespeare Youth Festival, music often works well for connecting Shakespeare’s words with participants’ modern lives across a wide range of ages and lived experiences.

Once the literal meaning of the language is understood, the SBB facilitator will then push the actors “to take a line or a moment deeper into themselves rather than letting it rest on the surface of their emotional capacity” (Davis 38). In other words, focusing not only on having a surface level understanding of the words they are saying, but also on digging deeper and seeing where the words fit into their bodies and connect with their lives:

As the actors approach the text, they question in what center of their being does each word or combination of words live? Brain (cognitive center), heart (emotional center), soul

(spiritual center), or metaphysical (transcendental center)? We request that each ensemble member have the courage to allow the words of the playwright to enter their collective centers of being to reveal the elegant truths that reside within. If a moment of truth is not achieved, the actors seek the truth in the next present moment. (Tofteland, "Shakespeare")

This idea of truth-telling is very important to SBB's program, and we will return to it throughout this chapter.

Along with the above strategies, at SBB "Much of the [rehearsal] process is spent sitting down with the scripts [and] figuring out... 'Ok, so what are you saying there?' ... One of the remarks that many of our audience members give is 'It was so clear! I could understand every word!' That's because the actors could understand every word" (Wallace). The effectiveness of this process is helped by the fact that, similar to SYF, SBB has an advantage that many other organizations do not have when introducing Shakespeare's language. Namely, the actors and facilitators can spend several months dissecting every facet of the language and do not have to worry about meeting the deadlines of a professional theatre company. Although many organizations may not have this luxury, I do think it is important to note that, where possible, simply giving individuals a longer amount of time to interact with and understand Shakespeare's words may be very beneficial in overcoming the barrier of language. Of course, this will require participant interest to be kept up over an extended period, but, if this is done, it makes logical sense that the longer one is given to work on understanding Shakespeare the more successful one will be and the easier it will be next time.

The end result of these strategies is not only a thorough understanding of Shakespeare's words, but also a large growth in confidence for those who participate in SBB's programs. According to Tofteland, many of SBB's participants have been told by their schools, their parents,

and society that they are stupid. However, over the course of the SBB program, the inmates learn that this is not true: they can figure things out, they can learn and understand Shakespeare. This newfound confidence, in turn, causes a positive feedback loop as participants look for more opportunities for further learning, dialogue and discussion (Tofteland and Bonnie). Participants struggle with the language, as everyone does, but the very process of coming across a confusing line and working through it until it's understood – of realizing that they *can* figure things out and learn to understand it – “strengthens reading skills, speaking skills, and self-confidence” (Shailor 221).

Especially for SBB, the two barriers of Language and Relatability seem to be very closely combined. Using Shakespeare's characters, themes, and stories to relate to your own life is one of the most important tenets of the SBB program, and this search for personal connection works hand in hand with the tactics listed above to make the language easier to understand and less intimidating. As Matt Wallace sums it up, the first question is: “‘What are you saying?’ and the next step is, ‘How does that relate to you?’” (Wallace). In the next section, we will explore how this process works in more detail.

## **5.2 Relatability**

In his work, Tofteland is often asked why he uses Shakespeare. Why not a more modern playwright, someone who lived in a world more like that of the inmates with whom he works? Given the complexity of Shakespeare's language, why add another layer of difficulty? As Matt Wallace puts it, the answer is “the themes, the issues that we're dealing with. Shakespeare's not casual. It's life or death stakes. These guys have gone through traumatic events, they've been part

of some horrific events and a lot of [these events] correlate to Shakespeare, so right away they can relate unlike any other actors can” (Wallace).

During our interview, Tofteland gives me a more detailed explanation of his choice to use Shakespeare when working with inmate participants:

I use Shakespeare because he is a... playwright who... gives language to trauma. Most individuals in prison are individuals who have suffered trauma, and... then foisted trauma on others, which is what brought them to prison. Trauma cannot be healed until the individual who suffered it can speak about it and talk about it in their own language. And oftentimes trauma is so abominable that the individual doesn't have language for it. And so what I... do is find a Shakespearean speech where the trauma might be similar and Shakespeare's given language to it. So when the individual memorizes the language and unpacks the language and understands how this character is talking about their trauma, it gives them a technique. It gives them a way of thinking and approaching their own trauma... And then you can move to healing. (Tofteland)

Using Shakespeare's language and a character from one of his plays, participants can explore some element of their past, themselves, or their worldview that they would not be able to explore otherwise. The use of Shakespeare's characters gives them the necessary emotional distance to explore these issues, and themselves, without becoming overwhelmed. As Tofteland sums it up: “I use the collected works of William Shakespeare because he articulately and elegantly expresses the trauma/shame that I have suffered” (TEDxEast).

That is the why. The how, as might be imagined, is a bit more complicated. Before rehearsals begin, each SBB participant will read through the script and submit their preferences for which roles they would like to play. These should be roles that speak to them on a personal

level, although inmates may not always know why each role appeals to them while they read. If no one else requests the role they are most interested in, that inmate gets the part. If two or more people want the same role, they will sit down and discuss why each person wants to play that role, what they hope to get out of it, why they felt a connection with it, etc. The SBB participants will then discuss as a group until a mutual agreement has been reached as to who will play each role (Wallace). As one of the SBB participants put it: “You try to get roles that relate to your life and mimic what you were going through... [A part that explores] something that you might have been afraid to face but you can face through this role” (Prichard).<sup>20</sup>

Some of Shakespeare’s characters connect with the prisoners’ specific trauma/shame in fairly expected ways. After all, “Shakespeare’s stories of murder and mayhem mirror many of the prisoner’s lives” (NEWSCLIP – WAVE 3 TV). This is true both for the inmates playing each role, and, often, for the other SBB participants as well, who explore their own trauma/shame through watching others rehearse. “[While rehearsing] the Emilia/Desdemona scene [from *Othello*], one of the guys from the back of the room said ‘God dammit! She’s just like my mother.’ His father beat and mistreated his mother and he, as a child, couldn’t stop it, and would get beaten himself if he tried to intervene. Throughout it all, his mother blamed herself. The play then gave them the aesthetic distance to explore – the victim dies because she never stood up for herself” (Pensalfini 142).

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<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that Tofteland and the other SBB facilitators make it very clear that the work they do is art that happens to have therapeutic benefits, not therapy that takes the form of art. Create great art, the idea seems to be, and the therapeutic benefits will naturally follow (Pensalfini 30).

In the SBB documentary, an inmate known as Red (Marcell Herriford), plays the role of Miranda. For much of the documentary, Red struggles to connect to the role – common among the male inmates who play female roles in an all-male prison, a place where femininity is generally looked down upon. However, while rehearsing the scene early in the play where Prospero is telling Miranda that he is the banished Duke of Milan, Red’s attention was caught by the lines:

PROSPERO:

Twelve years since Miranda, twelve years since,  
Thy father was the Duke of Milan and  
A prince of power.

MIRANDA: Sir, are not you my father? (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.2.66-70)

These lines reminded Red of his own childhood, during which he would often ask his mother who his father was but she would never answer, feeling that he was too young to know. This is, Tofteland points out in the clip, almost exactly what Prospero has told Miranda in the past when she’s asked about her history: “Not yet” (Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.2.45). It was only after Red’s mother died that his grandmother finally told him who his father was. Red was 15. The same age Miranda is in the play. It is suddenly clear to Tofteland, to Red, why this role picked him (Rogerson 32:06-34:00).

Other connections between Shakespeare’s characters and the trauma/shame of the SBB actors who portray them are less obvious. One story that SBB has shared is that of a participant who played the messenger in *Macbeth*, the character who must tell Lady Macduff that she and her children are going to be killed (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 4.2). Performing this role and seeing how being the bearer of this news affected someone caused the actor to have a revelation about how his actions may have impacted the victims and those who had to deliver the news of his crimes

(Wallace). Similarly, SBB once had a participant who had a lot of trouble with authority and who decided he was going to play the officer role in a production because of this. It was a fairly small role, but it allowed him to step into the shoes of a law enforcement official and understand what their experiences may have been like (Prichard). Although in these cases the experiences of the characters did not mirror the experiences of the incarcerated individuals who portrayed them, tackling these characters allowed the inmates to explore how their past actions may have impacted or been perceived by others.

Along these same lines, Tofteland is a firm believer in the idea that empathy is taught, not born, and that playing a role in a Shakespearean production can be very beneficial in teaching it:

Here is something that is profoundly true about the work that I do: Monsters are not born, they're made. And so my journey is that a child is born completely innocent, but they're not born into innocent backgrounds, innocent homes, they're born into really tough places. But that's the way they think the world functions because that's what they bear witness to, that's what they become. ... Empathy is not born in you, it's taught. ... It is that journey towards becoming empathic that humanizes. (Conversation With Curt Tofteland)

Sometimes playing a part, experiencing life from someone else's point of view, can help to develop empathy in an individual who was never given the opportunity to learn these skills before.

Along with this, SBB uses Shakespeare's plays, with their wide range of emotions and experiences, as a sort of training ground for their participants, helping them to develop a broader emotional intelligence:

The men of SBB literally act out rage, love, shame, euphoria, madness, pride, and fear, sometimes all in one play. These are essential human experiences, and to explore them in a creative setting is to get at them in a controlled way. It's a test environment for emotion:

An inmate can experience the full extent of a violent sentiment without the risk of actually harming someone. It's a safe way to learn about his own humanity, which is something any violent offender sorely needs to do, for his own sake and the sake of those around him. (Brownlee)

On a similar note, Hal Cobb, playing the role of Leonato in SBB's production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, wrote the following:

Inmate actors, in the hypo-machismo environment of prison, often have a difficult time identifying emotions beyond anger... or its other extreme, happiness. Angry or happy, those are the options. Men and boys (particularly the ones who end up behind bars) are often never encouraged to learn to identify any other emotions much less understand them. ... A role like Leonato, with an emotional range from ecstatic joy to depths of despair, is a challenge for any actor – for an amateur inmate with an automatic default to anger, even more so. [SBB] allows inmates to explore unfamiliar emotions in the guise of character. (Herold 93)<sup>21</sup>

Exploring the emotions of Shakespeare's characters gives inmates who have learned to repress and ignore their emotions the opportunity to reconnect and rediscover these feelings in a safe and healthy environment. And, through the fostering of empathy, emotion, and personal growth, it is hoped that inmates will be given the tools they need to transform from "who they

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<sup>21</sup> This is remarkably similar to the Shakespeare Youth Festival, which also leans into Shakespeare's large emotions as a way of helping their students connect with his pieces. Connections can also be drawn with Flute Theatre, which is very focused on using Shakespeare's big emotions to help their autistic participants become more comfortable identifying and expressing feelings.

were when they committed their crimes to who they are in the present moment to who they wish to become in the future” (Pensalfini 24).

This process, of course, is not easy. Throughout the rehearsal period, the inmates and facilitators spend a great deal of time exploring the emotions of the characters, as well as the connections between each character and the individual who will be portraying them. Often, connections will slowly appear that the inmates themselves may have been unaware of going into the role. Through conversations and exploration, the inmates slowly discover the answer to the question: why did this piece pick you? As author Niels Herold put it: “In most cases, the role that ‘chose’ the inmate actor reveals that inmate to himself, sometimes in extraordinary and unexpected ways” (Herold 73).

Perhaps unsurprisingly given all of the above, SBB participants seem to connect with and enjoy Shakespeare’s tragedies over his comedies. “Because of the grit that’s contained in his histories and tragedies... the guys gravitate much more towards the more introspective and darker characters – like *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *Richard II*, those kinds of monologues; they prefer the darker exploration of the interior life of the characters” (Tofteland and Bonnie).

Whether participants are working on a comedy, a tragedy, or a history play, the most important part of the SBB program remains a search for truth. Again and again in interviews and articles, SBB participants and facilitators hit home how important this aspect of the program is. As Hal Cobb said in an interview, “It’s all about finding the truth in the text, finding the truth in the character, finding the truth in yourself” (Chideya).

Through connecting Shakespeare’s characters to their own lives, the inmates search for truth both in performance and in their day-to-day lives. As Tofteland puts it: “I invite them to tell the deepest truth, and in telling the deepest truth of the character, they get in touch with their own

truth” (Pensalfini 24). This process challenges the prisoners, many of whom have never been given the chance to simply tell their truth before. As inmate James Prichard said: “It’s not about coming in there and acting, it’s about reading the play, breaking down the text, and telling your truth through that character. I’ve been putting on a mask my whole life and it was nice to take one off and show the real me by playing a character” (Prichard).

At the end of the day, many people would, perhaps, imagine that Shakespeare would be inaccessible to prisoners, out of date and out of touch with the experiences of those who have been convicted of violent crimes. Throughout its history, however, SBB has shown that this is not the case and that Shakespeare’s characters and themes are, in fact, extremely related to the lives of incarcerated individuals. Since its founding, and through the complete works of William Shakespeare, “SBB has been helping men face themselves as they look through the safety of another’s eyes” (Shakespeare Behind Bars, and David N. Harding).

### **5.3 Ease of Access**

The first few points in the “Ease of Access” category are, perhaps, fairly obvious, but should – I believe – be acknowledged, nevertheless. To put it very bluntly, SBB participants, many of whom are serving lengthy prison sentences, have very little opportunity to experience Shakespeare or theatre as a whole.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, as was discussed in previous sections, inmates

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<sup>22</sup> Indeed, one of the large criticisms that SBB often receives is that the prisoners – many of whom have committed terrible crimes – do not “deserve” to participate in Shakespeare, theatre, or the arts. While this viewpoint is surely understandable for those who have been hurt by the prisoners, SBB facilitator Matt Wallace points out that

often have many preconceived notions about Shakespeare, theatre, and the arts that may dissuade them from joining SBB. Given all of this, the “Ease of Access” barrier is thus very high within a prison. And, if SBB does not do this work, there may be very few, or even no, other opportunities for inmates to access theatre inside the prison.

Also related to the “Ease of Access” barrier is the problem of literacy. As was mentioned above, many SBB participants did not finish school and may struggle with reading. Many have never been exposed to Shakespeare before. Given these challenges, it makes sense that SBB’s first two core values would surround fostering a love of learning and developing literacy skills within the populations they serve.<sup>23</sup>

In order to overcome this barrier of literacy, time is again perhaps the most important factor. Because SBB’s schedule allows inmates several months of rehearsal time, even actors who struggle with reading comprehension have the time they need to tackle the script at their own pace. This gives participants – even those who may be less confident in their reading skills – the time they need to fully understand the words and their part without feeling like they are slowing down the process.

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“No one is disputing that they have done heinous, horrible things. That’s a fact. But what do we do with them? Because statistics show that most incarcerated inmates are going to get out at some point. They’re going to be our neighbors. If we treat them like animals, that’s how they’re going to behave. If you work on these human beings when they’re inside, they can give back to the community” (Brownlee).

<sup>23</sup> These core values are “1. develop a lifelong passion for learning, especially those participants who are at high risk of not completing or continuing their education; and 2. develop literacy skills (reading, writing, and oral communication), including those participants who are classified as learning disabled and/or developmentally challenged” (Mission).

Additionally, for many people an interest in education is fostered through the belief that the knowledge they are gaining will be somehow beneficial to them in the future. Because SBB's program is so focused on helping the prisoners understand and unpack their own lives and lived experiences through the characters, plots, and themes of Shakespeare, it makes sense that even someone who has had negative experiences with education would become more invested in the program as they strive to understand themselves better through Shakespeare's works.

This experience – of reliving and exploring your past in order to understand your present and better prepare for your future – can be difficult. Often, hard topics come to light in SBB sessions, as participants relive and explore their trauma and discuss the crimes they have committed. “If the discoveries get too dark,” however, “the actors know when to pull back into the safety-net their collaboration affords them” (Herold 87).

This “safety-net” is created through building a “circle of trust:” a safe space of mutual trust and security that is the key to all the work that SBB does. The importance of this circle cannot be overstated: as was mentioned in section two, in order for people to participate in theatre it is necessary for them to feel safe, welcomed, and accepted for who they are in the theatre space. For incarcerated individuals – who may never have had safety and stability in their lives even before coming to prison – the building of this safe and welcoming environment is even more important. Indeed, SBB believes that laying the foundations of the circle of trust is necessary before anything else can be attempted. Because of this, I will be exploring this idea of a circle of trust in some length.

While a circle of trust is never fully formed – it is always being strengthened – Tofteland had this to say about how a circle is originally created:

Creating the circle has to do with creating a safe place and creating a place of trust. [This] is extremely difficult in a prison where there isn't much trust and there isn't much safety. [So to overcome this,] one of the first activities that we do is we come up with a list of what our core values are going to be...

Each individual in the circle gets to write down what their number-one core value is and then we go around the circle and each person says what that core value is and talks about why that core value is important to them. And then the circle comes to agreement that, that may not be my core value, but I see it's important to you so therefore it'll be one of our core values. And so now we have our modus operandi: we have fifteen or twenty core values that whenever we encounter a problem or a challenge we can say “well, on our core value list, what core values address that issue?” And we talk about it from that standpoint, so everybody feels like they have a contribution, that they were heard. That's important because in prison it's a rather voiceless place to be. Their voice is taken away from them, their rights are taken away, they're told what to do, when to get up, all of the rules are there, [there's] not a lot of external freedom...

We approach [the work] from values that we share and the realization that we're actually more alike than we are different. And that's how the process begins. It's step by step building out from there. (Tofteland)

Along with the core values, inmates who join SBB and become part of the circle of trust agree to several key agreements. Six of the most important ones are:

1. No fixing. Participants acknowledge that they are not there to fix themselves or others, and will not offer advice or a solution to others' problems. Instead, they will offer

examples from their own lives that may illustrate and help to explore the problem at hand.

2. Be present.
3. Listen. Participants agree to listen without judgment, and without “filtering what we are hearing through our own prejudices, dogmas, concepts, formulas, or theories” (Curt Tofteland).
4. See. Participants agree to see reality for what it is and not what they wish it was. They also agree to see “the divinity in the selfish human being” (Curt Tofteland).
5. Speaking from “I”. Participants do not speak from “we” or “us.” Instead, they always speak from “I.”
6. Freedom from being wrong. We admit that we may be wrong and that we may need to relearn everything. “Wisdom lives in what we drop, not in what we pick up” (Curt Tofteland).

At the end of the day, then, SBB will have six key agreements, which are the same from circle to circle, and a list of core values that will change from circle to circle.

The process of finding people to build this circle is complicated. At SBB, new interested inmates are heavily vetted to ensure they are in the program for “the right reasons” (Wallace). It’s not enough to simply want to be an actor; the inmate must also want to do the tough introspective work that goes along with it. Along with this, the interested inmate must have one year of clear conduct and must find a current member of SBB who is willing to sponsor them. These new members then spend a year as apprentices, learning the ropes and playing smaller roles, before becoming junior members, and finally, after another year, senior members, who are ready to form their own circles of trust should they choose to do so, either in other prisons or, perhaps, outside

prison walls. In general, the participants who have been in the program for years teach and guide the newer members. “[The prisoners] have collected decades of instruction from Tofteland and crew, and they pass it down to each other like a kind of oral history” (Brownlee). Most importantly, whether a circle of trust is just starting out or has been established for years, “The power is in volunteer[ing]. [The prisoners] choosing to do the program rather than being forced to do the program” (Tofteland and Bonnie).

SBB believes that a circle of trust can help to break the cycle of violence that many inmates are caught up in, as members of the circle face the violence in their own pasts, the violent acts they have committed, and are then, hopefully, able to move forward (Mission). This spirit of volunteering continues within the circle of trust as well, as participants are encouraged to share their experiences in their own time. This is helpful for newer members of the circle, who may be less comfortable sharing the details of their lives and stories. As they watch more experienced members of the circle speak out, they learn that they are not shunned for sharing, but accepted. “In the safety... of the circle, other men [and] women, have articulated, in a safe way, and the ones that haven’t revealed that yet go ‘Woah, they’re not rejected, they’re not condemned, they’re not judged, they’re not booted out, there’s empathy, *empathy* comes forward’ and then it’s safe for them to share their [story]” (Conversation with Curt Tofteland).

To prison inmates, trust is not taken lightly. Many inmates had their trust broken in their childhood due to abuse, neglect, and other trauma, and then broke the trust of others when they committed their crimes (TEDxEast). Their choice to share, to trust the other members of the SBB circle, thus marks a large moment of growth in their personal and emotional development.

Through the circle of trust, participants find family, forgiveness, and safety. Again and again, similar statements have been shared:

These men truly care for one another as family (a sentiment many of them laid claim to). ... For many of them, this environment is the safest they ever know. In the SBB circle, they are home... At the beginning of every rehearsal [time is set aside] to share around the circle what they've been going through and what needs to be handled. For example, when... two of the men lost close family members, they turned to the SBB circle for support. [SBB] is often the only place these men feel safe to express themselves, the only place they aren't constantly being watched and judged. (Davis 29-39)

“This is the safest place for them in the prison,” Matt Wallace has said. “I saw that the moment we had one of our guys’ [sister] suddenly pass away. And he couldn’t let that emotion out. This was the first place he was able to even shed a tear about it” (Brownlee). As a longtime SBB participant summed it up: “This is the safest place in the world” (Rose).<sup>24</sup>

Wardens and other observers at the prisons where SBB works have noticed changes in the prisoners who take part in the program:

The older prisoners in Tofteland’s group (those in their 30s and up) seized the opportunity to stabilize their lives. Cast members have to work to keep a clear conduct record so they can remain in the show. They began to take responsibility for safety inside the prison, relying less on the predictable top-down power dynamics they’d known their whole sentence. ‘They started seeing in themselves that they could make a difference. They took more ownership, they tried to prevent problems,’ [former warden Mary] Berghuis says.

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<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting how similar this sentiment is to things that were mentioned in relation to both Flute Theatre and the Shakespeare Youth Festival. In all three cases, creating a safe and welcoming space is very important in helping the communities they serve better interact with Shakespeare.

‘When you have that many people living close together, you have criminal activity, but they worked hard to change that environment.’ (Brownlee)

Much of this change in behavior can be credited to SBB and the safety and acceptance that many participants find – perhaps for the first time – within the circle of trust.

Another important tenant of SBB is the fact that the SBB facilitator is in the circle of trust as a participant and an equal. As Tofteland put it: “When you come to the circle and sit in the circle, you're not there to fix anybody, you're not there to offer any advice, you're there to fix yourself” (Tofteland). Because of this sense of equality among participants, “I think that the word that... best describes what I think I do is... facilitating, facilitation. I try to facilitate something, some forward momentum, not only for them but for myself. Because I don't come in with all the answers. I come in with lots of questions, and a lot of times I get more questions than answers, and that's a good thing. I learn every time I'm here” (Rogerson 1:02:19-1:02:46). Although we may each have done different things, SBB believes that everyone has something they feel shame over, something they can work to overcome within a circle of safety.

This focus on facilitation, discovery, and equality, has impacted how SBB runs in a few ways. For one thing, it leads to an understanding that the facilitator and the other inmates will reserve judgment when a participant shares about their past experiences or the crimes they have committed. As Wallace put it: “Society has already judged them. It's going to do no good if I come in here and judge them for what they've done” (Rose). This is not meant to excuse the crimes of the participants – indeed, one of the tenants of the SBB program is learning to take responsibility for your crimes and actions. Instead, it is meant to reinforce the sense of safety and trust that participants experience in the circle, thus allowing them to continue to share their experiences – and hopefully continue along the path of self-realization and growth – more freely. Along with

this, the lack of judgment also shows the importance of equality – no matter who we are, we all have things we have done that we are ashamed of, things we regret, and things we need to take responsibility for, the facilitator as well as the inmates.

Additionally, the focus on facilitation and equality has helped to ensure that SBB is a very participant-led program. The facilitator is there to help, to assist, and to ask questions, but the prisoners do much of the work of casting, directing, character and script work, and working through any problems that might arise. As Niels Herold put it: “Curt Tofteland’s decision early on to let SBB inmates cast themselves accords with the program’s design everywhere else to empower its participants, allowing them to craft the narrative of the play’s production rather than ‘act out’ the master concept of an auteur director or professional dramaturge” (Herold 69). In general, SBB facilitators are unwilling “to impose a single, subjugating vision on the production (preferring to leave the important choices for [their] actors to work out)” (Davis 32). This collaborative spirit and self-direction could be seen quite clearly throughout the *Shakespeare Behind Bars* documentary (including in the very first scene), where cast members were often shown giving each other blocking and direction notes, and would pull each other aside outside of rehearsal to work on lines, memorization, and character development (Rogerson 0.18-1.38) Along with empowerment for the SBB participants, this self-direction also allows them to practice skills such as communication, leadership, and conflict resolution in a safe and supportive environment, all skills they will need upon their release from prison.

Tofteland sums up the reasons for SBB’s choice to have a participant-led program quite nicely: “As a young artist, I was drawn to doing work for marginalized communities. As I grew into a mature artist, I was drawn to doing artistic work *with* marginalized communities. The change of the preposition ‘for’ to the preposition ‘with’ has made all the difference” (TEDxEast). This is,

I believe, an important lesson that every theatre practitioner should remember. When working on Shakespeare, allowing participants the opportunity for self-direction, to make their own choices and discoveries, is empowering and allows everyone to learn and grow together.<sup>25</sup>

Prison theatre practitioner Jonathon Shailor sums SBB and other prison theatre programs up nicely:

Prison theater programs are places of refuge where the imaginations, hopes, and humanity of the incarcerated can be more fully expressed. In this context, the transformation of identity becomes a real possibility, as inmates rehearse new realities, develop new skills, and explore a wide range of roles in a context of discipline, commitment, and teamwork. ... In this communal setting, they have the opportunity to practice their eventual re-entry into society. And in their performances – many of them before public audiences – they enact powerful and moving rituals of reintegration. (Shailor 24-25)

At the end of the day, SBB's work is quite simple. As Tofteland put it, the inmates "examine the road that leads the character to commit murder. And in examining that road, they examine their own road" (NEWSCLIP – CBS The Early Show). Through the safety of a circle of trust, and through the words of Shakespeare, SBB helps prison inmates find safety, forgiveness, and, finally, empathy.

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<sup>25</sup> While SBB's process of creation may seem unusual to us today, in reality it is actually much closer to how productions would have been created in Shakespeare's time, when there were no specialized directors and the actors were responsible for directing both themselves and each other. Performances thus became much more of a collaborative process, including the artistic interpretations of several people instead of the overarching vision of one director.

## 6.0 Monologues from the Trees: Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks

*And this our life, exempt from public haunt,*

*Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,*

*Sermons in stones, and good in everything.*

– As You Like It (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2.1.15-17)

*When you touch Shakespeare, you touch the world.*

– Lisa “Riz” Risley, dramaturg for PSIP’s production of *Hamlet*

(Risley)

There’s a dodgeball tournament taking place in Arsenal Park. People shout, excited, cheering on the teams. The pop music blaring from the speakers can be heard across the park. Fifty feet away, there’s a performance taking place. A little girl, her hair in braids, pauses on her bike, stopping to watch the show. Other children run in and out of the audience, going to the nearby playground, grabbing food from their parent’s picnic basket, running away again. A few people have brought their dogs to the show. One man has brought his pot-bellied pig. He sits on the outskirts of the audience, petting the pig and watching. And, in the middle of all of this, there is Shakespeare – *Henry V* to be precise.

This is Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks (PSIP), based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a company that, since 2005, has been working “to bring accessible, high quality, free Shakespeare to Pittsburgh Citizens; and to encourage the enjoyment and preservation of our natural public places and parks” (About Pittsburgh). In 2005, founder and artistic director Jennifer Tober “was...

inspired [to found the company] by the natural amphitheater at the bottom of the sledding hill” in one of the largest parks in Pittsburgh (About Pittsburgh). The first production, *As You Like It*, took place in November of 2005 – the production that introduced me, age five at the time, to Shakespeare. Every year since then, PSIP has performed an outdoor Shakespeare production in parks and other green spaces around the Pittsburgh area. The production tours to a different park each weekend in September, reaching different areas of the city and serving different audiences.

PSIP does not use a stage, instead using the natural lighting, performance space, and set that the parks provide. Performances are slightly adapted for each new park, and every performance, no matter the location, is free of charge.

Along with these annual productions, PSIP also produces the Bring Your Own Bard (BYOB) and Week of Will programs. BYOB, started in 2009, is an opportunity for both professional actors and members of the general public to try their hand at performing Shakespearean scenes and monologues in a safe, judgment-free environment. This program is discussed in more detail in the “Ease of Access” section below. The Week of Will, founded by PSIP in 2015, is a weeklong celebration of William Shakespeare taking place in late April, around Shakespeare’s birthday.

Back in the park, even with all of the distractions – with the pot-bellied pig, the dodgeball music, the motorcycle that drives past halfway through the performance, and more – the audience is invested in the production of *Henry V*. They laugh at the jokes, turn to watch the actors entering through the audience, and are clearly listening during Henry’s famous Crispin’s Day speech. Children sit in the front, leaning against their parents. While many run in and out, some watch the full production, fascinated. Somehow, as happens so often in PSIP’s productions, the distractions have been overcome. As the director of one of PSIP’s productions said about her experience

attending a show: “I... know that for [those] 90 minutes, they were completely and utterly there” (Alexandratos). Throughout the rest of this chapter, we will discover how PSIP ensures its audiences – no matter their backgrounds, ages, and lived experiences – will be “utterly there” while the story is being told.

## 6.1 Language

Jennifer Tober has short hair, a bright smile, and a strong love of Shakespeare and his words. Her children wander in and out during our interview, saying hello. Tober, a successful actor and director, lived and worked in New York City for several years before moving to Pittsburgh. When I ask her about the barrier of language she tells me that “I think it's just the way that Shakespeare is presented. I mean, a lot of us had to read it in school, and it was pretty boring. ... I think it *needs* to be performed; it needs to be seen and heard, and it needs to be physicalized too. Shakespeare's plays are very physical. ... *All* of them: they're full of fighting, and running, and jumping, and chasing people, and the comedies are full of slapstick and rolling around on the floor” (Tober).

According to Tober, this physicality and the liveliness inherent in the stories is something that many people don't immediately associate with Shakespeare. There is still a common idea, she tells me, that Shakespeare is posh and academic.

In order to overcome this perception, PSIP works very hard to make its shows as physical as possible. This serves both to keep audiences engaged and to help make the language more accessible. Since so much of communication is based around body language and physicality, even if an audience member doesn't understand the words they may still be able to follow the plot of a

performance through the actor's movements. As Allie Wagner, an actor with PSIP and a Shakespeare buff, told me in an interview: "You can do whatever is within your power to try to mine out that language and use your technique and use your understanding of it to tell... the story... [but] there [still] needs to be enough movement, there needs to be enough show behind the show..." (Wagner).

This idea of emphasizing the physicality of a piece is aided by the fact that performances take place outside. Because there are no lights, no microphones, and no stage, actors must be big and loud to overcome the noises and distractions that are part of performing outdoors. As Tober has said, "In the city parks, we use only the park as our set, and we tell the story in a very physical way that makes the story immediately clear to the audience. Our emphasis is on the words, and on the unique collaborative relationship among the actors, the language, and the audience" (About Pittsburgh).

The physicality and interest inherent in each play is heightened by the cuts made to the script before production starts. Elena Alexandratos, the jovial director of PSIP's recent all-female production of *Julius Caesar*, told me that she,

was really judicious about cutting the play. ... [A]s it is, [*Julius Caesar*] is a two-and-a-half-hour play. I'm not gonna sit in the park on a hot August day for two hours... I will sit through 90 minutes of a play. So... we cut the play and made it more modern. It's all Shakespeare's language, but we took out some things [where] it's like, "I don't know where Scythia is, I don't care where Scythia is." (Alexandratos)

Alan Irvine, a PSIP director and board member, agrees:

[When I'm cutting the script] my starting point is always, "What's the story?" concepts are nice, but [the] story is what keeps ninety percent of the people in the seats... and without

that, you're lost. I always think of it as kind of the performer's version of the Hippocratic Oath: First tell a good story, because if you don't do that you lose people. ... And then, at every point, when you're making cuts, when you're coming up with concepts, it always comes back to, "Well, how does this work with the story? Does it help the story I'm trying to tell, or does it interfere?" (Irvine)

Along with the cuts made to the script and the physicality of the actual play, PSIP has developed several strategies for pre-show entertainment that makes the story more accessible to all. For the past several years, Irvine, who is also a professional storyteller, has done "pre-show storytelling: the quick version [of the] story, so [a] short, humorous, five-minute run-through of the basic story of the play" (Irvine). Although this seems quite simple, it can be very effective in allowing audience members who are completely unfamiliar with a play to be a bit more confident about attending – and understanding – the performance.

Additionally, PSIP has recently started creating handouts for families, which contain – among other things – word searches, coloring pages, and a hand-drawn cartoon summary of whatever play is being produced, with the cast of the production drawn as the characters. This is very effective in drawing in children – among others – and helping them to understand what is happening onstage.

Although PSIP's productions are not geared towards children in particular, one of the most remarkable things about PSIP is how much younger members of the audience seem to connect with the performances and the language. This is a topic we will be touching on throughout this chapter, however, I found a comment Wagner made during our interview quite insightful:

If you have something [like Shakespeare] that's not speaking directly to [the kids, then] they're like "Oh, what's going on here?" [If something's]... "not for them..." kids

really like that, because they're like, "Oh, I get pandered to all the time." Everybody on TV is... talking directly [to them,] and asking [them] a question and waiting for the response... Shakespeare doesn't give a sh\*t, you know what I mean? You can come if you want to, you can leave if you want to, and I think that that's something that the little people are like, "This is a grown-up world that I've found myself in... This is kind of cool." And... it forces them to pay attention. ... [And then] there's a layer of buy-in for them... because when you're little you always want to do something that's a little more mature. (Wagner)

Although people often think that Shakespeare's language is too difficult for children, it may be the very fact that the language is unfamiliar that draws so many children in. As Tober tells me: "People... will come up to us... and be like, 'Oh, my kids really liked it!' Or kids will come up and be like, 'I understood it! And I understood that [your character was] trying to trick that character!' Or sometimes... kids will talk back [to the characters during the show], and that's my *favorite*, when that stuff happens" (Tober). Although I cannot remember my first experience at PSIP, I do remember being fascinated – and proud of myself – when I was able to understand the language while reading my first Shakespeare play at roughly the age of eleven, and it makes sense that other children would have a similar experience with PSIP productions.

The end result of all of these strategies is an audience that understands the story that is being shared, and who is highly invested in the action taking place. As Tober has said: "People will come up to us sometimes and say, 'Did you guys change the words?'... We're like, 'No, we're just really... good at making it [accessible]'" (Tober).

When all is said and done, PSIP has a very simple answer to overcoming the barrier of language. As Alexandratos told me:

Make it real. With any theatre [that's] important, but with poetic speech... [it's even more necessary.] How do you make it accessible, and how do you make people in the audience go "I understand that! I know that!" ... That's what you want. You want the audience to recognize and to go on the journey with you... That's the goal when you're doing Shakespeare or any classical piece, is to make it real, make it understandable, and make it attainable...

Know your script backwards and forwards, and make it make sense. Don't treat it preciously, make it make sense. And if it doesn't make sense, cut the sh\*t out of it... Just speak the speech, that's all. (Alexandratos)

## 6.2 Relatability

In the aforementioned production of *Henry V*, King Henry receives a gift from his political enemy, the Dauphin of France. When the box is opened, Henry is informed that he has received "Tennis balls, my liege" (Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 1.2.268-269). In the PSIP production, Henry took the tennis balls, examined them, and then, while speaking his next monologue, chucked them lazily into the audience, making eye contact and tossing the balls directly to laughing audience members. Later in the show, during the St. Crispin's Day speech, he spoke directly to the audience again, at one point even pulling an audience member to their feet and embracing them while talking about the famous band of brothers. As Irvine, the director of *Henry V*, told me during our interview:

I started from the key point, which is the St. Crispin's Day speech, and the idea: "Okay, rather than the audience being an audience *watching* Henry, let him deliver it right *to* the audience." And not as in, "I'm delivering it to an imaginary audience that is sitting where

the physical audience is, an imaginary army that's in the same place,” but actually to the audience members; the audience is your army... And then to enhance that, [I put] other members of the cast in the audience... and their charge was, “Can you get other audience members... to cheer, and to really enter into that moment?” ...

The audience is always there: through all the war stuff they are there as the army. When we're in court, they're the courtiers – the king is never alone, he's always surrounded by people... The audience is sitting there, it's the courtroom, all these courtiers [are] here, so we're going to make them part of the scene. [And it pulls] people in, it's like, “Oh, this is a story that's unfolding, it's not some musty play that's out there.” (Irvine)

This sort of audience interaction is common during PSIP productions, as is the choice to utilize what the parks provide in order to tell the stories in a more dynamic and unique way. During *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the audience got up and moved several times during the performance, traveling deeper into the woods from scene to scene. In *The Tempest*, Caliban hid in the audience while trying to avoid Prospero, snatching things from people's picnic baskets and blankets. In *Julius Caesar*, Mark Antony's famous “Friends, Romans, countrymen” speech (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 3.2.82-117) was performed from a tree. Because PSIP stages its performances in the round, and there is no designated space left clear as aisles for actor entrances and exits, actors will always weave their way through the blankets and chairs whenever they enter a scene.

PSIP's philosophy is that, since they are outside anyway, it makes sense to lean into the unique opportunities being in nature provides. As Irvine put it: “Shakespeare in the Park's best shows are when we have directors who really think through, ‘What can we do outdoors that you can't do indoors?’ Otherwise, why not just do it indoors where it's a much better place to perform

in, acoustics are better, the seats are better, there's air conditioning, [etc.]. One of the things you can't do indoors is...go into the audience and interact with them, particularly in a standard theater, with lights and things like that” (Irvine). These moments of audience interaction are much-loved by the audiences, who tend to enjoy being part of the action.

Another tactic PSIP often utilizes to make the shows more relatable is to include smaller details or jokes in their shows that are familiar to a Pittsburgh audience, and which help to break down some of the remoteness of a story written 400 years ago. In an article about PSIP’s production of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, it was noted that “Audiences should look out for references to their hometown in this version of *Two Gents*, as there are Pittsburgh touches throughout. The actors have worked hard to give people a reference point of understanding the dense language of Shakespeare, and Beikert [the director] believes through a touchstone like ‘yinz’ infiltrating Verona, audiences will more easily find access points within the play” (Pittsburgh Shakespeare). Although these are very small additions to the script, PSIP has found that the simple use of a familiar slang term or a joke only familiar to locals can go a long way in making a production feel more relevant and relatable.

Along with the above, several people I interviewed at PSIP brought up the relatability of Shakespeare’s themes and the largeness of his emotions – an idea that was repeated across every company I studied. As Tober put it:

[The plays are] like soap operas, they're not subtle... There's [always] a *giant* crisis: some father is disowning his daughter, or somebody is getting banished from the kingdom, or somebody is taking somebody else's land away, or somebody's gonna track somebody else down and kill them... So much of it is just so emotional, so heightened, and I think that in moments of crisis Shakespeare is *really* apropos and applicable... Everybody can relate

to... losing a loved one, or not being able to express yourself in the way that you want, or families fighting, or parents and children being separated. These are themes that are universal and timeless, and I think we can all relate to that longing, or sorrow, or ambition.

(Tober)

Alexandratos had similar thoughts:

I was... in [a theatre program where] we took *Romeo and Juliet* to... a “high-risk” school. ... They were our best audience. When Papa Capulet backhands Juliet and looks at her and he says, “If you don't do what I ask you to do you can drop dead. I don't care,” the audience of these “high-risk teenagers” were like,

“Did he really write that?” and I was like,

“Yup.”

“So sh\*t like that was happening 400 years ago?”

“Yup.”

... It's the human condition. (Alexandratos)

This is, of course, remarkably similar to what other companies shared about their participants' connection with Shakespeare's themes and emotions. This is, of course, encouraging – when many different theatre companies in different places serving different populations are able to successfully utilize Shakespeare's emotions to draw audiences and participants into the plays, it seems likely that this will work for the majority of other people too – good news for anyone attempting to make Shakespeare more accessible.

Lastly, PSIP also reminded me of something important – something that is, perhaps, fairly obvious but which can often be lost in the complexities of Shakespeare's language and characters.

Although Shakespeare is often convoluted and complex, the basic plot points are not difficult to understand or relate to. As Alexandratos told me,

What's the story of *Julius Caesar*? If I didn't have the beautiful speech of Shakespeare, how do I tell the story? What's the story about? It's about power. It's about who gets power. Caesar has power, but he wasn't always the one in charge, so he got the power. And did he use [the power] or did he abuse the power? Cassius wants power. Cassius wants power in the worst way possible, and is sort of like the guy that goes, "I'm just gonna take a machete and just cut the whole thing [down]." And Brutus looks at [that], and he goes "Yeah, but we have to be honest [with] what we're doing." So I boiled it down [to the basics.] (Alexandratos)

In our modern world, everyone can understand a story surrounding power: who gets power, who abuses power, and how power is used. At its most simple, this is exactly what *Julius Caesar* is. The same can be said for many of Shakespeare's other plays: *Hamlet* is about death, depression, and family, *Romeo and Juliet* is about love and hatred. Although these depictions are overly simplistic, it may be helpful to remind someone who feels intimidated by Shakespeare that the plays – at their most basic – are not rocket science, understandable by only a few. As Alexandratos put it, each play is about "the human condition" (Alexandratos) – something that every human being is qualified to understand.

Combined, the above elements help to ensure that the stories being told do not feel distant – something happening to other people while the audience sits outside looking in. Instead, the audience is part of the production – they are the court, the soldiers, the island spirits, experiencing the emotions of the story with the characters. This sense of involvement – and of fun – is something that PSIP prides itself on, and which they utilize in every show. As Tober puts it: "We use

everything that is available to us to tell the story. The environment is a big part of this and the audience does not just watch in a removed way, but participate and become part of the show, just like the trees and the grounds and the sky and everything around us” (PSIP Continues).

### 6.3 Ease of Access

Among the theatre companies I studied, PSIP is unique in the fact that their performances are always completely free. This, of course, helps to ease a large barrier related to ease of access, namely that of expense. As was mentioned in section two, theatre tickets are expensive. Many people either cannot afford these high prices or choose not to attend the theatre due to the belief that they could do something more enjoyable for less money. PSIP’s choice to offer *free* Shakespeare allows many people who would/could not attend the theatre otherwise the opportunity to participate. When I asked PSIP actor Christine McGrath what the company does well to engage the general public with the works of Shakespeare, she immediately told me that:

It's free... That's something that attracts everyone everywhere. I love free things, [and] most other people do [too]. When I tell people I'm in a Shakespeare play they're like, “Oh that's nice.” [But when] I'm like “Yeah, and it's free” they're like “Oh! Where is it?” So that free part is really getting people going... That's a big way to connect with the community. (McGrath)

The importance of doing free theatre was repeated in nearly every interview I conducted with members of PSIP. This idea, and the sense of community that the process of performing free, outdoor theatre creates, was echoed by Tober:

You're... eliminating the barrier for ticket price, [and] you're creating community because people who might not normally be together in the audience are together – and on stage too. And I feel like any art organization that does that is really serving not just an arts mission, but also a community mission. And I think that's really important because I think that by and large the reason we create art is to strengthen community. [It]... creates community when people come out and celebrate art and learn. (Tober)

PSIP's choice to move their production from city park to city park also allows the company to reach a new audience population with every performance, thus helping to reach those who may have trouble accessing a more traditional theatre space due to disability or reliance on public transportation. Although for many brick-and-mortar theatre companies it may not be possible to move productions from place to place, for those who can make it work this certainly makes performances more accessible to a wider audience base.

Additionally, while most PSIP audience members go to the park specifically to see the show, some of the audience will generally be made up of people who simply happened to be in the park while a performance was taking place, were drawn to see what was happening, and decided to stay. Elena told me that, during a production she attended, “we had three boys with their shirts off [who were]... biking, and then all of a sudden you see them come around and stop so that they can watch” (Alexandratos). These drop-in audience members are welcome to watch as much as they would like before continuing on their way.

The open nature of PSIP's productions helps to make the relative cost of attending a performance quite low. When there is no ticket price to be paid and no expectation that audience members will stick around for the full show if they do not want to, members of the public have neither the worry of wasting time nor money by stopping to watch a performance.

Going along with all of the above, another way in which PSIP works to break down the ease of access barrier is through the relaxed environment surrounding their productions. At PSIP performances, it is not necessary to get dressed up, as many people do for the traditional theatre. Additionally, participants are welcome to bring a picnic – indeed, PSIP’s slogan is “Bring a blanket, a loved one, and a thermos” (About Pittsburgh). As was discussed in section two, there is often a perception that theatre is an “event” – something that is done on special occasions but which is too costly to do often. Without the necessity of dressing up, and with the prospect of food, PSIP becomes less of an “event” and more of a fun afternoon activity that is open to all. As PSIP director Charles “Chuck” Beikert told me:

I think the major obstacle for folks who think Shakespeare is a challenge is the fact that they haven't gone to see a play at leisure. PSIP really provides a fantastic opportunity for people to do exactly that. There are no tickets to buy, there is no dress code, there are no seats to find or armrests over which to fight. You bring your favorite lawn chair or a blanket. You bring snacks. You dress in your most comfortable duds and you serve a couple of hours in the park. It's heaven. Someone falls in love, someone has their heart broken, someone gets angry and there's a fight, someone (or a bunch of people sometimes!) dies a horrible death but, hey, it's not YOU! Then, in a matter of only a little while, it's wrapped up and before you know it you've understood everything that just happened. (Beikert)

There is also no need for childcare, as many PSIP productions take place very close to playgrounds. This allows parents to introduce their children to Shakespeare without having to worry about the kids disrupting the performance. If children become bored, they can easily go to the playground, checking back in with the performance whenever they wish to do so. As Tober told me: “Families, and kids especially, can self-edit, they can [say,] ‘I need to take a [minute],’

and then come back” (Tober). This opens productions up to a large segment of the population – families with young children – that might otherwise never attend the theatre.

All of the above elements mean that attending a PSIP performance is a fairly low-risk investment. The shows are relatively short, do not cost anything, and are welcoming to children, dogs, and – occasionally – pot-bellied pigs. Because performances move around the city, the show will – for many people – essentially come to them. And, if nothing else, it is an excuse to have a nice picnic in the park.

For PSIP, all these strategies add up to loyal – and invested – audiences, many of whom will return year after year for the shows. When I asked McGrath what surprised her about PSIP she told me that she was struck by:

How many audience members went to more than one show. I talked to some audience members after like, the third time I saw them at a performance. I’m like, “You were just here!” and they’re like, “Oh, we just love it! Everything about being in the park, being outside, it’s free.’ Getting that exposure to culture in the middle of a park, in the middle of the city, is extremely important to the audience members. ... Even if this [is] their very first Shakespeare play, those audience members will come back. (McGrath)

Especially for a company in a relatively smaller city like Pittsburgh, this amount of community buy-in is essential and strongly implies that PSIP is doing something right.

Moving away from PSIP’s mainstage performances, I would like to discuss the BYOB program briefly. BYOB is “For those who really want to read Shakespeare out loud and not worry about feeling foolish. BYOB is Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks’ informal scene night in which professional actors and non-actors alike take a crack at their favorite Shakespeare pieces in a light-

hearted evening of fun” (Warm). Alan Irvine, who along with his many other roles at PSIP has been the primary organizer of BYOB for several years, tells me more about the program:

[BYOB] is designed to be an informal night. Sometimes we do have actors... who come, but it's not designed to highlight good acting, it is “let's play with the text.” Anyone can come, anyone can listen, [and] the invitation is always just come and listen. ... But my mind is always... [on] this [idea:]... “Let's break down those barriers by showing, yeah you can get up and do Shakespeare, you don't have to have an MFA from a big-name university, anyone can do it.” Some people can do it better than others, but an impeccable Patrick Stewart grade performance is not a prerequisite. So I always [start] the evening by telling people, “We're just here to have fun with the text. Shakespeare's there to be accessible, and to play with.”

I generally come with a lot of text prepared, and occasionally people will come with something that they want to read. We start with that, and [I've] designed the evening to start to facilitate more interaction. I usually start with something myself, just to kind of break the ice, [and] usually there are some regulars who come all the time and I know they're there to perform, so [then] we'll [have] some scenes and monologues with them, but start building... to at least one or two big scenes at the end that will get, if not all the audience, big chunks of them up just to come and play.

[And I always make it] clear the invitation's there: if you want to come up [you can, but] you don't have to. Of course some people, you can see *kind* of want to, but need that push, or they get volunteered by their friends or family members at the table... and so we'll jump in on the side of the people pressuring them. [We'll] say, “Yeah, all right, come on up. But you can drag your son up too since he volunteered you for this.”

It's [really about], "Let's come up and play with [the] text," and [letting people know that] anyone can do this." (Irvine)

This idea – of creating a space where members of the public can try interacting with and performing Shakespeare's words for themselves – helps to strengthen PSIP's goal of showing that Shakespeare and theatre are for everyone. As Tober put it: "Theater is not just something rich people can go to... You can do theater and you can enjoy theater anywhere at any time" (LaRocque).

During our interview, Irvine summarized PSIP's response to the Ease of Access barrier nicely:

Just being out in the park immediately frees you from being in a theater where you have to dress correctly and there's a certain way of acting or behaving yourself... Plus... the fact that we're free, [and] the fact that we work to really make plays accessible [by] cutting the length down, trying to keep it between an hour and a half and two hours, [which gets] around the idea of, "Oh, this is something long to be endured." ... You can bring your kids because if they get bored they're not disrupting a whole audience, you'll just take them over to the playgrounds. And you're not out a hundred dollars in tickets because you didn't pay anything for tickets. ... Our mission of being in the parks, of being free to people, overcomes a number of those barriers right [away]. (Irvine)

PSIP, through its work, brings Shakespeare and theatre to the community in a way that few other Pittsburgh theatre companies do – free, outdoor, and open to all. When Shakespeare is presented well – in a way that is accessible and relatable, and which cuts through the anxiety and the difficulty of the language – the results can be magical. As Beikert put it: "Shakespeare has a wonderful side effect. You walk away from it feeling pretty smart because you thought it was

going to be inaccessible and it wasn't. It's like increasing your IQ and your self-confidence at the same time” (Beikert).

In the next chapter, I will be detailing the Shakespeare Exploration Project. This project was my way of testing out which of the strategies I have detailed so far for overcoming the barriers of language, relatability, and ease of access – for “increasing your IQ and your self-confidence” through the works of Shakespeare – work well, and which do not.

## 7.0 What Do You Know about Shakespeare: The Shakespeare Exploration Project

*We know what we are but*

*know not what we may be.*

– Hamlet (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 4.5.48.49)

*I no that he rote Hamlet.*

– Child, written on whiteboard during the Shakespeare Exploration  
Project

The idea for the Shakespeare Exploration Project was born from a class project in the fall of 2019, the goal of which was to lay out a plan for producing a show or other theatrical event. During this project, I came up with the idea of a table that would introduce members of the public to the works of Shakespeare in parks, libraries, and other public spaces. Over the next two years, this idea was adapted, updated, and fleshed out into the Shakespeare Exploration Project, which ran before Pittsburgh Shakespeare in the Parks' (PSIP) productions of *Hamlet* every weekend in September 2021.

The goal of the original project was to raise awareness, accessibility, and interest in the works of Shakespeare through an interactive exploration of his text and works. The general idea was that a table, set up in a public space, would be able to reach a wide variety of people, many of whom would never dream of stepping into a normal theatre. This goal carried through to the final product and was strengthened and supported by the knowledge gained from the four theatre companies detailed in chapters three through six above.

## 7.1 Method

Because PSIP performs in several different parks around the city of Pittsburgh every year, the Shakespeare Exploration Project also moved from location to location, thus allowing me to reach many different communities. No matter the location, the table was set up approximately an hour and fifteen minutes before curtain, and was taken down roughly five minutes before curtain. This timing was decided on so as to attract PSIP audiences as they arrived for the show as well as other people who happened to be walking through the park, while being taken down early enough so as not to interfere with the performance.<sup>26</sup> For most of the performances, the table was set up roughly twenty feet from the performance space, giving people an opportunity to stop by the table without being right on top of the stage. I was always at the table, along with either one or two assistants. These assistants were invaluable in helping to set up the table, take it down, and interact with the public.

During implementation, the Shakespeare Exploration Project went through roughly two phases. The first phase focused quite closely on the original idea for the project, developed in the fall of 2019 – and thus included printed scripts and monologues from a variety of Shakespeare’s plays which participants were encouraged to interact with in whatever way they were comfortable. Some props and costume pieces were included, as well as full versions of each of the plays sides had been drawn from.

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<sup>26</sup> The idea of having the table set up after the performance concluded was discussed briefly, but was quickly dismissed due to the belief that after an hour and a half in the park most audience members would be more interested in getting back to their homes or next activities versus interacting with the table.

During the first day of the project, it quickly became clear that many people were too self-conscious to act, direct, or design a scene or monologue; this discomfort was likely exacerbated by being in a public place where other people were constantly walking by. Additionally, it was quickly determined that it would be necessary to have more eye-catching materials, as well as clearer signage advertising the event and letting participants know what to expect should they choose to approach the table.

Because of these early experiences, several changes were made for the remaining weeks of the project. For example, while the scenes and monologues were still displayed on the table, a much smaller emphasis was placed on them. Additionally, many more eye-catching props and costume pieces were acquired, such as a toy sword, a skull bowl, and a large sign with the words “Evil laugh (hee hee hee)” written on it. These were included with the goal of drawing attention to the table and were quite successful in doing so. Indeed, many people throughout the project told me they had originally approached the table wondering if I was selling things, or simply curious to see what was going on. I quickly learned that having eye-catching objects – and a lot of them! – is a necessity for doing this work.

Also included on the table were several books for people of all ages about Shakespeare. These ranged from No Fear Shakespeare, to a manga version of *Macbeth* (which was quite popular), to a picture book based on a poem from *A Winter’s Tale*. Along with these, I included prizes that could be given out if people stopped by the table and participated. These included stickers, bookmarks, candy, and – what was particularly popular – Shakespeare insult band-aids. Other miscellaneous items were included as well, such as Shakespeare Mad Libs, a 6-foot illustrated timeline of Shakespeare’s plays which was attached to the edge of the table, a “Shakespeare in Translation” page which included several definitions of common Shakespeare

phrases such as “thee/thou,” “prithee,” etc. and a handout which allowed you to discover what insult Shakespeare would have called you based on the letters of your name.

Along with the above, a large double-sided dry erase easel was added to help draw attention to the table. On one side was written, “The Shakespeare Exploration Project,” and “What Do You Know About Shakespeare?” on the other. This was an easy way for participants to share their knowledge, while also reading and learning from what others had written before them.

Several of the items referenced in this section will be discussed in more detail below. The rest of this chapter will discuss which parts of this project were successful, which were not successful, areas for further study, and conclusions.

## **7.2 What Worked**

Speaking technically, the project was quite successful. As was intended, the table and associated materials were easy to set up, take down, and move from place to place. The most cumbersome element was the table itself, but even this could be carried by one person. Additionally, because the project was designed to be flexible, it would have been easy to include a greater or smaller number of props, costume pieces, books, handouts, etc. depending on the number of people who were available to help.

Along these same lines, the entire project was very inexpensive. While a few of the items at the table were purchased (candy, insult band-aids, and a few posters and other items for decoration, as well as a few costumes and props purchased secondhand), most things were not. Books were borrowed from the local library, handouts, masks, bookmarks, and coloring pages were printed out from free online sources, and the vast majority of the props and costume pieces

were either items found in my home or borrowed from a theatre company which I am connected with. The largest expenses were buying the table itself and the cost of paying one or two people to assist at the table every day.

On a similar note, another success was the fact that it was quite easy to find people who were interested in spending a few hours on a weekend assisting with this project. Especially on a college campus – filled as they often are with theatre majors, English majors, and Shakespeare nerds – many people were interested and willing to take part.

Lastly, this project provided a good networking opportunity. One man who approached the table, after talking for several minutes, told me he was a teacher at a local high school and that he might be interested in bringing a similar project to his students. Additionally, several people who approached the table asked if I would also be doing the project in other places.

Moving now from the technical elements to the more intellectual side, one strategy which was very successful in getting members of the public engaged in the work was the list of things people knew about Shakespeare. This list was, for many people, an intriguing “hook” drawing them to the table. Our eyes are naturally drawn to words, and many people would slow down to read what was written on the board. Once they had slowed down, it was easier to call out to them and ask if they knew anything about Shakespeare they’d like to add. Additionally, the list also had the added benefit of allowing me to imply that anyone who stopped at the table would be doing me a favor by helping to add to this list I was trying to compile. The idea that I was asking them for a favor may have made more people stop than would have done so otherwise.

Moreover, because adding to the list was a fairly low investment – it doesn’t take too long, and you don’t have to start a conversation if you don’t want to – many people may have felt more comfortable adding to the list than they would have felt approaching the table directly. As an

example of this, I noticed when people were walking in pairs or small groups it was common for one person to approach the table while the other person or people – perhaps shy, or simply less interested in engaging – would hang back. Several times, while talking to the person who had approached the table, I would notice another member of their group reading the whiteboard and quietly adding their own facts. To me, this points to the importance of having several different ways for participants to engage when running a project such as this one. Not everyone will want to engage in the same way, and everyone should have a chance to engage in whatever way they are most comfortable with.

Going along with this, there were several moments when a group would not stop at the table but I would hear one person reading something from the board out loud to the people they were with as they walked by. Although this is a very low level of engagement, it should still be viewed as a success – after all, even if these people do not stop by the table, there is a good chance they are now thinking about some facet of Shakespeare and his works. And, as the unofficial motto of the project stated: “Any engagement is good!”

Another detail of the list I think was quite successful was, remarkably, accidental. The first day this list was included, I asked the other people working at the table with me to write down a fact they knew about Shakespeare so there would be a few things on the list already when people stopped by. One person, unprompted, wrote “He’s dead,” for their fact. This was, of course, meant to be a humorous answer; however, it was unintentionally effective in helping to break down barriers and anxiety members of the public might have faced when adding things to the list. Going forward, when I wanted to encourage participants to add their own facts, I would often use the example of “He’s dead” to show people that, no matter how “silly” their answer, they should still feel free to engage. Because many people were, I believe, concerned about their facts being wrong,

or didn't think their fact was "good enough" to add, this example fact helped to break the ice and made them less self-conscious about sharing their own knowledge.

Lastly, this list of facts – which naturally changed every day of the project – had the added benefit of allowing me to learn new things about Shakespeare along with the participants. This goes along with the idea, espoused most clearly by the Shakespeare Youth Festival and Shakespeare Behind Bars, that one of the most effective ways to teach someone else about Shakespeare is to make it clear that you do not have all the answers; instead, everyone is learning together. This, in turn, helps to break down the belief that Shakespeare is something which some people inherently understand and other people simply do not – there's always something new to learn, even for those who may be quite familiar with his works.

Surprisingly, this list also opened up another related avenue of exploration. Often, when asked what they knew about Shakespeare, people would respond, "Oh, I don't know any facts about Shakespeare, but..." They would then go on to share an anecdote of an experience they'd had with Shakespeare's work in the past. This would also happen, unprompted, when people approached the table – they would ask what was going on, hear the word "Shakespeare," and share their own stories of involvement with Shakespeare. A few examples of this phenomenon included a woman, who, while adding the quote "Beware the Ides of March" to the list, shared that she had heard this quote as a child and, although she didn't know what it meant, it had given her a fear of the month of March. In a similar vein, an older man told me that his favorite play was *Romeo and Juliet*, which he'd seen at the age of seventeen and loved, "possibly because of the hormones." Another man, when asked if he had a favorite Shakespeare play, shared that his favorite was

*Othello*, which he'd read years before in college and was now using to bond with his daughter who was reading the play in her own college class.<sup>27</sup>

These experiences and many more showed me that many people are remarkably excited to talk about Shakespeare and are eager to share their thoughts and experiences. Along with this, I

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<sup>27</sup> Perhaps my favorite example of these unprompted reflections on one's personal experiences with Shakespeare came from someone who was working at the table with me. In a slow moment, she shared that she and her friends had written a musical based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in middle school. With her permission, I've included an excerpt here:

FRANNY: Guys, I can't believe we've been cast to play the *wall*. This play is going to stink.

QUINN: Nick, can you ask Ms. Hippolyta if we can play something else?...

NICK: Guys! This could be our breakthrough! ... This role is giving us the chance to give the audience something more! To give them a real insight into the life of a poor, unfortunate wall!

SARA: How?

NICK: By playing the character with depth! By showing its true feelings! By – by – SINGING ABOUT IT!

*(Lights off. Loud scrambling and whispered conversations are heard. When the lights come back on, they are in... WALL COSTUME!)*

NICK: [Singing]

Y'KNOW IT'S PRETTY DARN

HARD, BEING A WALL

WE JUST SIT HERE EVERYDAY

AND ARE REALLY, REALLY

TALL.

IF YOU WALKED ON US YOU'D

PROBABLY FALL.

YES, IT'S PRETTY DARN

HARD, BEING A WALL. (Wolfe)

learned Shakespeare is memorable – many middle-aged or elderly people told me, with great detail and enthusiasm, about the experiences they’d had with Shakespeare in high school. And when, in the course of conversation, I asked people what their favorite Shakespeare play was, most people had an answer ready. This helps to support the belief, discussed by most theatre companies I interviewed, that Shakespeare’s stories are still present in our lives today – many people, even those who claimed to know nothing about Shakespeare, had a favorite play, or an experience with Shakespeare they still remembered.

Another specific tactic that worked quite well for fostering engagement was the focus on Shakespeare’s insults. These appealed to all ages, effectively encouraged members of the public to approach the table, and promoted conversations about Shakespeare’s language. Unlike most of Shakespeare’s writing, the fact that Shakespeare’s insults are written in unfamiliar language is not intimidating. In fact, the heightened language is what makes the insults entertaining. This, then, became an excellent, non-threatening way into the language for the average member of the public.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, another successful tactic was having a wide variety of items available at the table for people to interact with. This promoted engagement for people with a variety of different interests while also being quite eye-catching, drawing people to the table and allowing them to stay for as long or as short of a time as they wished. Most people would stop by the table and talk for a few minutes before moving on. Some would stay for longer, engaging in a few different

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<sup>28</sup> One particularly memorable interaction surrounding the Shakespearian insults involved a middle-aged man, who, after figuring out his insult name, enthusiastically read it aloud to his husband, announcing he was a “roguish strumpet.” His husband snorted good naturedly, said “You wish,” and the first man blew a raspberry at him in retaliation.

activities available at the table. A few people stayed for quite a long time, getting into detailed conversations about Shakespeare, his work, and their own experiences. This, I believe, helped people to overcome the barrier of buy-in necessary to approach the table itself. Because people were able to interact and engage on whatever level they were comfortable with, there was less anxiety and more willingness to approach the table than there might have been otherwise.

Last but not least, the public's response to the project was excellent. People were quite supportive of the project, believing it was a good idea, had a lot of potential, and focused on an important topic. This helps to support the belief that other similar initiatives in the future might be met with general support.

### **7.3 What Didn't Work**

Of course, even given the many successes of the project, there were strategies for engagement that were not as successful. One of the largest tactics that did not work was the original goal of getting people to act/direct/design a piece of Shakespeare's text. In general, people were too shy and/or self-conscious to try any of these activities; because of this, as detailed above, the table quickly pivoted to encourage engagement in ways people were more open to. I do believe it would be possible to foster this sort of engagement, however it might have to be presented in a slightly different way, or to a slightly different audience.

As an example, this focus on performing, directing, and designing pieces of text might have worked better with a younger audience base. In my past experience with the company, PSIP productions generally have a fair number of children in the audience. *Hamlet*, however, had few audience members under the age of 18. This is, most likely, due to the subject matter and the play

chosen. Given that many of our participants at the table were families with young children,<sup>29</sup> I would be curious to see how much more participation we might have gotten had the play attracted more children and families. Indeed, one of our busiest days with the project occurred when we set up in front of the playground at one of the parks' entrances.

As a broad generalization, during the project this pattern appeared: the younger the participant, the more open they were to engaging with the table. Kids had few inhibitions about acting silly – they were open to trying new things and had fun putting on costumes and playing with props. College students tended to be much more self-conscious than children, but would often approach the table out of curiosity and were often somewhat willing to be peer pressured into participating by their friends. In my experience, older adults without children were the least willing to act silly and were somewhat more hesitant to approach the table.

Another problem we faced was that it was common for people to glance at the table and look interested as they walked by, but eventually choose not to engage. This, I believe, points to the idea that people are generally somewhat hesitant to approach a table and to talk to strangers, especially when they do not know precisely what they may be getting into if they stop. There is a certain amount of buy-in required for someone to stop at a table and for some people the “risks” of stopping – taking time, possibly being stuck in an awkward conversation with strangers, possibly having someone attempt to sell you something, etc. – outweighed the possible benefits.

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<sup>29</sup> Due, most likely, to the way in which the table was decorated. I believe many families were attracted by the colorful props and costumes displayed at the table, while several older adults told me they had almost not stopped by, seeing these same objects and believing the table was meant exclusively for children.

Of course, this will always be something of a problem with tabling work; however, there are ways to lessen this barrier.

One such strategy was the “targeting” of specific individuals for participation. This involved mentally “sorting” possible participants into three categories: people who would glance at the table while walking but did not show any other interest in participating, people who seemed interested in the table but would need a little encouragement to approach, and those who would approach the table without any encouragement. The people in the first category were, in the case of the project, lost causes. They did not want to participate and asking them to do so only made them walk faster. The people in the third category would approach the table no matter what. It was the people in the second category who could be most successfully “targeted” for participation. Members of this group wanted to participate, but needed, essentially, permission to engage. This could be achieved by asking them a question about Shakespeare, or – often most successfully – asking them if they knew any facts about Shakespeare they’d like to add to the list we were compiling on the whiteboard. This invited participants into the table and the project in a relaxed, low-stress way, while also creating the possibility for a longer conversation.

Additionally, another helpful strategy for overcoming the barrier of buy-in was to have very clear signage. This had the double benefit of informing people of what they could expect should they choose to interact – thus helping to break down some of the unwillingness to approach the unknown – while also requiring people passing by to slow down in order to read and process the words. Many people, perhaps too shy to approach the table itself and to start conversations with us, would read the question written on the whiteboard as they walked by and would slow down to add their own facts. They could then be approached, and a longer conversation started.

Conversely, something else which was, perhaps not so much of a problem as an interesting phenomenon, was how many people, when asked if they knew anything about Shakespeare, would say they knew nothing. I believe this supports the idea that many of the barriers people often face with Shakespeare are mental barriers. Most people likely know *something* about Shakespeare – even if what they know is something as simple as “he’s dead.” Many people, I believe, are simply too shy to share what they know, afraid of being wrong, or worried they’ll be viewed as stupid for not knowing a “better” fact.<sup>30</sup> In order to raise engagement levels, it is necessary to reassure people that it’s OK to be wrong and that, just as several of the theatre companies I studied shared, we are all learning together. Additionally, as mentioned above, being able to share the example fact of “He’s dead,” was very beneficial in helping many people feel more comfortable sharing what they knew.

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<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that this phenomenon is primarily seen with adults. Young children, generally speaking, are much more willing to share anything they know, without worrying about getting something wrong. This idea was shown clearly when two young girls (approximately ages four and seven) approached the table. After asking what was going on, the conversation went something like this:

Lauren: Have you ever heard of a man named William Shakespeare?

Older girl: Um... I think maybe?

Lauren: Well, do you think you know anything about him? It’s OK if not.

Older girl, enthusiastic: We know he was a Shakespearean actor!

This girl was clearly excited to share her knowledge with me and was proud of what she knew, even though she wasn’t completely sure if she’d even heard of Shakespeare before. The goal, then, is to help every adult be as enthusiastic and confident as this little girl already was.

## 7.4 Areas for Further Study

Given everything I have detailed above, there are several key questions I believe could benefit from further study. The goal of the Shakespeare Exploration Project was to raise engagement, in whatever way was most successful. Detailed above are some tactics I found either particularly successful or unsuccessful over the course of this research, however, any future project using a similar format will discover more strategies that work well and more that do not. I believe this project could be run many times in slightly different ways before all the possibilities for learning were exhausted.

As for more specific questions for further study, there are several. To begin with, I am curious to know if there is a way to allow people to feel more comfortable acting/directing/designing a piece of Shakespeare's text. What strategies can be used to break down the barriers of confidence, stage fright, and self-consciousness that stand between people and an engagement with the work in this way? How long does it take to break down these barriers?

In a similar vein, how would the project have changed if the audience was more specific? For instance, what would the results have been had the table been set up somewhere like the children's room of a library, a nursing home, or a college campus? My theory, as stated above, is that this project will be the most effective when set up in a location with many children, however further study would be required to determine if this assumption is correct.

Similarly, how would the project change if the table was set up in a location completely unconnected with Shakespeare – libraries, street corners, etc.? Given PSIP's involvement in the project, the table had, to a certain extent, a "captive audience" – people who, since they were there to see *Hamlet*, were already at least somewhat interested in Shakespeare. What would the results be if the table was set up somewhere where the majority of participants were *not* guaranteed to

have a connection with, or interest in, Shakespeare? How might this have changed the level of participation, as well as what sorts of activities participants chose to engage in?

Additionally, my own experiences at the table seemed to point to the barrier of language as particularly prevalent for members of the public who were attempting to interact with Shakespeare, as several participants shared their anxiety about understanding the words in the upcoming performance of *Hamlet*. Given the high level of interest participants had in sharing their own experiences with Shakespeare, I find it likely that a research project focused specifically on asking members of the public why they struggle to interact with Shakespeare would have a great deal of success. More study devoted to asking people what barriers they face and where their anxiety surrounding Shakespeare stems from would be a fascinating research subject and would have the added benefit of being helpful from an academic standpoint, ensuring future researchers will not have to rely on chat boards, miscellaneous blog posts, and other such sources to determine common barriers.

Lastly, from a more sociological standpoint, trying to gauge engagement levels across different neighborhoods could be informative. Because the project moved from place to place following the PSIP productions, I had the opportunity to observe participants in several locations. However, since the shows were only performed 2-4 times in each location, this was not long enough to form any solid conclusions on audience behavior aside from the discoveries related to participation levels based on age detailed above. Further study could be made of average participation levels based on not only age, but on race, gender, socioeconomic status, and more. What groups are most open to an engagement with Shakespeare? What groups need the most encouragement? What tactics for engagement work well across several different groups? What tactics work for one group, but not another? The answers to these questions would be invaluable

for breaking down the barriers people often face when interacting with Shakespeare and theatre as a whole.

## **7.5 Conclusions**

Several key conclusions can be drawn from my experiences with the Shakespeare Exploration Project. First, it is clear this kind of grassroots project has a great deal of potential: there is good support from the community, as well as a willingness from members of the public to participate and share their own experiences with Shakespeare.

Secondly, the project can successfully reach participants who may be unlikely to attend the traditional theatre, as the amount of buy-in necessary to stop by a table is much less than what is required to attend a full theatrical production. Additionally, because the table can easily be taken down and moved from place to place, it would be quite simple to reach different populations and communities by setting the table up in different locations.

Finally, and perhaps most simply, my research has shown that, if a table is set up in a busy location with a large number of eye-catching objects and activities which will appeal to a wide variety of people, it is highly likely that the goal of raising awareness about Shakespeare will be successful. I would encourage any interested researcher to attempt a similar project in their town or community.

## 8.0 Conclusion

*[Exit, pursued by a bear]*

– The Winter’s Tale (Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, 3.3.63-64)

Through my research, I identified three key barriers that members of the public often face when interacting with Shakespeare: Language, Relatability, and Ease of Access. The isolation of these three barriers as particularly important was supported by the interviews conducted with the four theatre companies studied. Several other conclusions, learned over the course of interviews and research, prove themselves to be pertinent when one considers ways in which Shakespeare can be made more accessible for all.

First, there is the fact that, while Shakespeare’s language is often viewed as intimidating, the rhythm inherent in the iambic pentameter has proven to be remarkably effective for connecting with Shakespeare’s words. One example of this is how Flute Theatre uses the heartbeat rhythm of the iambic pentameter to help autistic individuals find a state of calm. Another is the fact that both SYF and SBB connect the iambic pentameter with modern-day music, helping Shakespeare to feel more approachable. This shows that, if it is presented correctly, iambic pentameter can be a useful tool for engagement, instead of something frightening that makes people shy away from approaching Shakespeare.

Another general conclusion was that leaning into the large emotions of Shakespeare’s characters and stories is helpful when introducing new people to Shakespeare. As every theatre company studied discussed in one way or another, although the words we speak may have changed in the past 400 years, our emotions have not. Exploring the emotions that Shakespeare’s characters

are feeling and connecting these emotions with things participants may have felt or experienced in their own lives can do much to overcome the barrier of relatability, helping to show how Shakespeare's stories are still real and present even centuries after his death.

Last but not least, something mentioned by several theatre companies was the importance of creating a space of safety and mutual trust, within which participants can more fully explore, create, and learn. If people feel comfortable they will be more willing to try new things and go out of their comfort zones, knowing that they will be supported even if they fail or make mistakes. Through my research, I have learned that having a welcoming, accepting theatre space can go far in making the works of Shakespeare – and theatre as a whole – much less intimidating.

My goal with this research project and this thesis has been to find several ways in which the barriers that commonly surround Shakespeare – the walls that keep far too many people away from his life-changing words and works – can be overcome. These barriers are undoubtedly large, the stakes – for Shakespeare lovers and those who make their career in the theatre – are high. But the barriers are not insurmountable. As the four theatre companies I studied proved over and over again, with the correct strategies, knowledge, and encouragement, even the complex barriers of language, relatability, and ease of access can be overcome. I hope that the knowledge collected and contained in this thesis may be helpful to you, whoever you are, as you work to break down these barriers for people in your own communities.

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