

Shakespeare for Kids

A Study Guide

About our Play

The Hampstead Stage Company welcomes you and your students to our production of *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare* or simply: *Shakespeare for Kids*. This play is the first in our series and focuses on the early part of his life and works.

Our production is student-centered. Rather than approaching Shakespeare as one of the world's greatest dramatists of all time that is removed from us in history, Shakespeare himself is presented to the students in an easily recognizable manner.

In our play, Shakespeare is in the early part of his life. He is the typical young man: defiant and procrastinating. Your students will travel along with him on his journey of discovery, coming of age, and responsibility.

While Shakespeare himself is presented through a child's eyes; his dramas are not. The beautiful poetic language, the swish and clanking of swords, and the high drama are all there for your students to enjoy. We hope you will too. This guide should help.

SETTING THE STAGE

The Life

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford upon Avon in the central part of England in 1564. He died in 1616, four years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. There are not too many facts known about him but we do know that Shakespeare was drawn to London, the capital city and cultural center of England, for many of the same reasons playwrights and actors today are drawn to New York and Hollywood.

The theatre of Shakespeare's day was even more important than it is today. There was no television, no radio, no movies, no Ipods, no video games and no electricity. People who wanted entertainment went to the theatre. Not only did Shakespeare write some of the world's greatest dramas, 37 of them, he was also a poet and an actor.

People who knew Shakespeare said that he was an honorable gentleman, who loved a good time but who was also quite serious. The plays he wrote—tragedies, histories and comedies—are still performed today and are translated into every language. Shakespeare is such a popular playwright because he wrote beautiful words about common themes. He wrote about people in love and people who are angry and about people who want to get even. He wrote about ghosts and witches and great sword

battles and relationships between people. And he wrote about funny things that made audiences laugh.

The Geography

The New World was just becoming known in Shakespeare's day. That is why his plays are set in Europe; this was the world that Shakespeare and his audiences knew. Shakespeare lived and wrote in England, so he wrote a great deal about his own country. But he also wrote about other countries too. *Henry V* is about a famous battle between England and France; *Hamlet* is about a Danish prince and is set in Denmark; *Romeo and Juliet* takes place in Italy.

The Plays in our Production

We find that in addition to this study guide, the best companion to our production are the plays themselves. Please encourage your students to read Shakespeare's plays prior to or following our performance. Here are a couple of websites that are great resources for his plays and information on his life: www.shakespeare-online.com , www.absoluteshakespeare.com. Here is a brief synopsis of each play presented in *Shakespeare for Kids*.

Henry V is a history that tells how young Prince Hal defeats the overconfident French at the Battle of Agincourt to become the king of both England and France.

Hamlet is a tragedy about a young prince, whose father has been murdered by his uncle. His father's ghost calls out to him and calls on Hamlet to avenge his death. But Hamlet doesn't know if the ghost is telling the truth or not, so he sets a trap. And the trap convinces him that the ghost was right. Hamlet knows that he must defeat his evil uncle to avenge his father's wrongful death.

Romeo and Juliet is one of Shakespeare's earliest and most famous tragedies. It is a story about a young man and woman who are very much in love but whose families do not approve of their relationship. Romeo and Juliet's families are prejudiced against one another and they will not allow the young lovers to marry because of this hatred.

VOCABULARY

tragedy In addition to knowing that this means "a sad story with a sad ending," you may wish to help them understand that in Shakespeare's day, tragedy also involved the loss of a king or prince and that meant the change of government. This is no longer true. In this country, when President John Kennedy was assassinated, it was a sad and terrible thing. But it did not mean a change of government and a change in the way we live or even the language we speak.

theatre/ playhouse Students should understand the difference between attending a live performance and watching something on television.

playwright Students should understand that playwrights still create very fine dramas for the stage and also for movies and television.

pounds In this context, we mean English money.

villains Students should be able to name some contemporary villains. Shakespeare really enjoyed his villains in the plays and he gave them some great parts. He used them as foils to his good characters and showed the dark troublesome thoughts of evil people.

apparition A ghost.

kept the watch Keeping the watch meant guarding the castle at night.

adieu French for good-bye.

slanders Lies spoken against someone.

malefactions Evil deeds.

brooding A long-faced, feeling-sorry stare.

revenge Getting even.

Our purpose in presenting this play is to instruct as well as to entertain. This performance is filled with information about Shakespeare and his writing. After the performance we suggest a guided discussion along the following lines.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

SHAKESPEARE'S LIFE

How many years ago did Shakespeare live?

Where was Shakespeare born and where did he write most of his plays?

How was life different 400 years ago? How was it the same? Can you recognize some of the "types" of people found in Shakespeare's plays?

What did Shakespeare's father want him to be when he grew up?

THE THEATRE

Is there a difference between playing to a live audience and making a movie? What is it?

What does a playwright do? Are there still playwrights? (*Students should understand that there are many fine dramatic writers today working on stage and for television and for movies.*)

THE FEELINGS OF THE PLAYERS AND THE ACTION OF THE PLAYS

Why are Romeo and Juliet having trouble in their romance?

Who killed Hamlet's father? Why?

What is revenge? Is it a good thing?

What do you think Hamlet should have done?

Who was *Henry V*?

LANGUAGE

Apart from all else, Shakespeare's beautiful sense of language should be emphasized. Here are some examples of his words that have fallen into everyday usage.

Hamlet

flaming youth
in my mind's eye
the primrose path
it smells to heaven
the dog will have his day
method in his madness
brevity is the soul of wit
more matter and less art
neither a borrower nor a lender be
the whips and scorns of time

Romeo and Juliet

what's in a name?
the public haunt of men
a fool's paradise

Other Shakespearian Plays

it was Greek to me
hearts of gold

tell the truth and shame the devil
with fear and trembling
as good luck would have it
my own flesh and blood
we are such stuff as dreams are made on
a dish fit for the gods
the dogs of war
the crack of doom
a sorry sight
to die by inches
out of the question
a spotless reputation

FOLLOW UP ACTIVITIES

The costumes of Elizabethan England are as lovely as they are elaborate. Students could make or design fashion from this period.

Romeo and Juliet is the basis for the modern musical, West Side Story. Watching an adaptation might prove interesting.

Student might enjoy committing some of the passages to memory.

Plays are meant to be performed. Writing sessions could be given to show students how to write simple plays.

This play should open up expressions on emotion. Art and language should be encouraged for the expression of those feelings.

Create a time line of events in and around the period when Shakespeare wrote. This should help students become aware of historical context.

Hamlet's father appears to him as a ghost. Write a short story about a ghost who appears and tells you something you must do.