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Child Targeted Shakespeare Performances: Making it Worth the While

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ENGL 382: Shakespeare

Gideon Burton

Child Targeted Performances:

Making it worth the while.

Brigham Young University's Young Company's production of Henry V was captivating. Interesting lighting, contemporary top-40 music, dance numbers, and rap-like speech made me pay attention to what was happening on the stage. However, even with the strategies used to captivate attention, it was not evident that the child audience really understood what was going on. The fact that there was a war and 'good guys and bad guys' were fighting one another was clear enough. The importance of some major intricacies, however, may have missed the mark. This begs the question: "Can younger children relate to Shakespeare's Henry V"? And even more specifically, "Are Shakespeare productions that target child audiences successful?" If the aims and goals of child targeted Shakespeare productions meet the standards that educators would have for them, then they are more worth producing and attending. To begin: what measures success? Common Core State Standards lists several requirements for third grade language arts curriculum. In reading literature, it is optimal if a child/student can "recount stories...from diverse cultures...[and] determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text" and furthermore be able to "determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text"(CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.2 and 3.4). With these standards as a guide, four key elements come to my mind for a successful learning experience. A child targeted production if

nothing else must: convey the major themes of the work through key scenes, captivate the attention of the child audience, and must create, as actor John Valdez explains, a “familiarity with Shakespeare” and his style of speech and language.

Teaching thematic lessons:

When a child is watching a performance, it becomes difficult to pull them away from the spectacle itself and present a more thematic message. In *Henry V*, a major underlying theme is desires vs. duties. Several times throughout the play, the king must abandon friendships he knew and loved for the greater good of England (as seen in the abandonment of Falstaff's friendship and the punishments of Cambridge, Scroop, Grey, and Bardolph). In BYU Young Company's production of *Henry V*, Mackenzie Larsen (who plays the title character) states what she desires in the success of a thematic interpretation:

“When we have discussions with them [the child audience] they pull themes out of the show and relate them to what is going on in their lives, and that's our main goal. We're happy if the kids even get that the show was about a war and that's all. Often they pick up on much more, and we can discuss how the characters behaved and what choices they made were good or bad.”

How then, does a production go about expressing such thematic ideas like war, death, duty, and sacrifice to such a young audience? In Act III Scene VI of *Henry V*, Henry must once again choose duty over friendship, executing Bardolph, an old friend and “soldier [who was] firm and sound of heart” (III.VI). Through the text

alone, the theme that “all offenders [must be] so cut off” despite their past friendships seems to be personified in a straightforward fashion. Though an old friend and loved one, this holder of “buxom valor” must be executed for his wrongdoing in stealing from a French church and serve as a lesson to the rest of the English Army to remain faithful to their code of honor. Mackenzie Larsen again shares that it is this scene in particular that many children in the audience “don’t quite [understand] a lot of the time”. Due to the abstract nature of the stage movements, many of the audience members “laugh when he [was] dragged off [stage]. In the way that scene like this is portrayed toward children, the thematic elements musn’t be so abstract that the audience misses the mark, but also cannot be so blatant to where it oversteps the boundaries of propriety.

Teresa Love, a professor at BYU who “for seventeen years was the artistic director of Imagine Company, a touring theatre of adult professional actors performed specifically for children” shares that thematic elements must be portrayed in a very specific way. “If something is staged well,” she claims, “then the layers of understanding will be unwrapped for a child by him or herself.” On the other hand, she adds that thematic portrayal must be “[Careful, responsible, and artful]. And never take the place of a parent.” All in all, for the child to gain the morals and messages of the play, thoughtful clarity must be executed.

Attention Captivation Strategies:

Staging, Music, & Mood

Captivating the attention of a young audience may be one of the hardest things to accomplish as it aids the rest of the tools that contribute to a successful performance. Without attention of the participants, it is impossible to teach them anything, let alone the theme, language, etc. in a Shakespearean text as described in the above paragraphs. In Miriam Gilbert's "Teaching Shakespeare Through Performance", she questions "why...the very use of performance in the classroom is something so new and available for discovery" when it is a strategy that has proven (in her experience) to work with young audiences. Watching clips on a screen and reading scenes aloud help to a certain extent, but above everything else is involvement in the performance to help develop "an interest in theater" is the greatest aid, as actor John Valdez notes.

The Propeller theatre company located out of the United Kingdom specializes in what they call "pocket" versions of Shakespeare's works. Likewise targeting a younger audience, they strive "to find a more engaging way of expressing Shakespeare [while] more completely explor[ing] the relationship between text and performance". Trimming down the text to a mere sixty minutes assists Propeller to keep audiences with shorter attention spans engaged in what's happening on stage. Additionally, Nick Chesterfield, General Manager of the theatre company explains that "we use music (both old and modern) and anything else that helps us to tell the story, while remaining utterly faithful to the text. [Furthermore], we don't get hung up on a period or concept." Chesterfield finds that their approach to the show successfully "resonates with [the] young people" to which the shows are aimed, while they are simultaneously "enjoyed just as much by and adult audience". In the opinion of Propeller, the most important thing to do is to remain faithful to the text. Reviewed by The Daily Telegraph as "the way to get your kids to fall in love with

Shakespeare”, Propeller walks a way with positive marks in Shakespeare adaptation.

While some companies may find methods like Propeller’s successful, others may not. Strategies taken toward making a performance more captivating vary from performance to performance and audience to audience. Even so, while specific strategies may vary, it is most important that all strategies applied to a performance are meaningful. Teresa Love, BYU Professor again explains that it is pivotal to know the audience that a production is performing for. Using cheap tricks to captivate and audience will make them watch, but perhaps wont help them to remember the more important elements of the show. In order to use these tricks in the best ways possible she says,

“Unsophisticated theatre for children always contains, for example, a race through the audience because the practitioners have seen that kids respond to the excitement of that theatrical trick. And the kid’s will respond, no doubt. It’s kind of like “junk food” staging; tastes good in the moment but doesn’t give any long lasting nutrition. But if the race through the audience makes sense for the characters and the story and is used to help the kids understand something new, well then the children will just be transported! They won’t be able to stop talking about the whole production, not just that one ‘funny part’”.

BYU Young Production’s Henry V production implemented several methods they thought worked for their targeted audience. John Valdez, who played Bardolph explained how the musical aspects “helped to pull people, especially kids, into the show”, aiding the captivity of the audience's attention while deepening the meaning of the play and making it more relatable.

“If someone who isn't familiar with Shakespeare or theatre in general hears an Imagine Dragons song they like in a show, they might pay more attention or understand what's going on better.” Some lines from the Imagine Dragons song mentioned are as follows:

“It's time to begin, isn't it?

I get a little bit bigger but then I'll admit

I'm just the same as I was

Now don't you understand?

(That) I'm never changing who I am”

This song is artfully and tastefully used during the prologue of Act II. In the Young Company's version of the script, during a moment where Henry is reflecting on his past relationships with Falstaff and the rest of his gang:

“Henry:

I'd set from London, when I was made 'ware

Of the traitors who plan to have me killed.

This treachery reminds me of my own. . .

When I became King I had so many new responsibilities, people who were dependent on me, people I was beholden to. I saw less and less of my best friends—Nym, Bardolph, Pistol and his wife, Mistress Quickly and the Boy. And Falstaff. “

Adding this particular song to this flashback-esque scene establishes both the playfulness of the scene and the attitude of the speaker. It speaks that Henry hopes to remain a faithful friend while taking on responsibilities as well as the resistance to changing his current lifestyle.

Audience Involvement:

One thing that BYU's production did that few others do is set the stage from the very moments an audience member enters the auditorium. Doing this establishes that a child audience is their target (making them feel special) while additionally creating a more whimsical atmosphere. First, you are handed a program. Inside the program are the director's notes and cast member biographies as usual. As you flip further into the program, a coloring book like section of the company's poster design is presented as well as an autograph section for the actor's in the company. As crayons are not handed out at the beginning and one usually waits until the end of the show to approach an actor, this invites the targeted audience to return to the program *after* the performance has already taken place. While some are flipping through the program, others are looking for a place to sit. During this performance, the cast members are walking around the room, interacting with audience members and inviting children to come sit on the floor directly in front of the stage. Conversing with audience members allows the children to connect with the actors from the start. Something that both the Young Company and Propeller Company had in common was the involvement of the audience *after* the curtain was closed. Gilbert mentions in her article that a pivotal way to produce understanding of the intricacies of a

Shakespeare plot is discussion before *and* after a performance which “should produce argument[s] about the scene itself plus close attention to...images” used within that they can relate to their own understanding. By holding question and answer sessions after the performance, it allows the child audience to ask for clarification or demonstrate what they learned from the play. Nick Chesterfield from Propeller adds that a Q&A is helpful after *any* performance “not so much that we can see if they understood, [but also] so that [the company] can open up the performance and the process to their immediate response”. Discussing the performance after the fact can similarly, add another level of audience captivation that helps to better convey the themes of the performance.

Mackenzie Larson from the Young Company’s production of Henry V mentioned another major theme in play is “being a hero and standing for something”. One of the child audience members from the troupe’s “very first workshops” shared an experience about “how he had once stood up for [another child] when he was getting bullied”. Similarly, Henry stands up for what is right in the face hardship. In Act 1 Scene 2 after the discovery of the betrayal of Scroop, Cambridge, and Grey for “conspir[acy] against the royal person”...instead of sparing the life of his former friends he admonishes that the “kingdom's safety must so tender[ly]” be considered above friendships. Initiating a discussion with the audience and involving their attention, allows specific scenes and themes to be applied even to a young audience member's own life experiences.

Language: Line Delivery and Scripting

Finally, a Shakespeare performance that is directed toward child audiences must help create an easy access to and a familiarity with Shakespearean language. If a child cannot understand the speech coming from the lips of a character how are they supposed to relate with them and what they are saying? Nick Chesterfield of Propeller's goal is to "perform Shakespeare's plays with as much speed & clarity" as possible, allowing the works to stand on their own without "dumbing them down". He adds, "They are, after all, great and universal stories". This company's method lies not in the modernizing of text but the "trim [ming]" thereof. For something as timeless as Shakespeare, "the text really can't be separated from the performance of it" (Love). In order to ensure optimization of understanding to the audience without sacrificing the authenticity of the original text, "the performers and designers need to use all their powers of communication to help the audience know what the heck is going on". "Treat[ing] [Shakespeare] like a foreign language [and implementing the] visuals and movements [to] illustrate the meanings" conveys the text to the child audience "without treating [them] like they are clueless" (Love).

One character in particular in the Young Company's production made the language both playful and accessible to the juvenile audiences. Matt Fife, who played the character of Fluellen, spoke with rap-like rhythms in his speech to add a modern, youthful flow to the original words of Shakespeare. Bob Zazlow, author of "Rap-Notes: Shakespeare's Greatest Hits (Vol.1)", wrote "ten-minute summaries

of Hamlet, Romeo & Juliet, Macbeth, King Lear and A Midsummer Night's Dream in rap and rhyme." In his focus group experience he noted excitedly, "almost every high-school student I've sent my raps to has loved them. Students from [ages] 12 to 23 have told me they love the raps. More importantly, they tell me the songs have opened up them up to reading the glorious original plays." Making language more attainable introduces a new doorway into Shakespeare that young audience members may have not seen before.

Adapting text happens not only in the way the actor delivers the lines but in how the script is edited and adapted for the stage and target audience. Again, examining Bardolph's execution scene in Act III scene VI, Young Company's production simplifies the text so much so that a character is excluded: Gower. Without Gower, a lot of judgment on Bardolph's character is excluded, making Bardolph's execution less focused on his personal attributes of being a "counterfeit rascal", "a bawd" and "a catpurse". Some may say that excluding this character doesn't give enough depth to Bardolph's sentence. However Sarah Flinders, cast member, explains that having less people on stage "made the experience more personal for the children because there were fewer [characters] to watch [and keep track of]." As Susan C. Biondo-Hench explains in her article *Shakespeare Troupe: An Adventure in Words, Fluid Text, and Comedy*, that "the words are the most important part. Not the characters, not the play, not the scene". By trimming down unnecessary parts of the script, and "[defining] words and double-[checking] glosses,...pushing for clarity" becomes the ultimate goal. However, doing this sometimes means sacrificing the original form of the text. Cutting the text in some cases adds clarity, but also may lose that Shakespearean mood. Hench states that the iambic pentameter is important in "working to make...collective meaning", but

that beauty can also be found in the individual words..." floating to the surface in patterns that began to make their own meanings, meaning that were parallel to, intertwined with, and metaphoric for a larger whole."

It is still a debatable topic: Is Children's theater worth the time? The answer: not always. However, if theater companies keep the goals discussed in mind, their audiences are more likely to leave with a greater appreciation of Shakespeare and theater as an educational tool in general. Sarah Flinders, cast member of the Young Company's production, recalls being "able to follow many full length Shakespeare performances from age eight because I was introduced early on to theater in general". However, this is not necessarily the case for every child. By making a more complicated text like Henry V more relatable, interactive, familiar and thematically clear, "children who are ready for the next level of understanding may perceive it if it's clearly provided for them in the language of the theatre through text, design, and performance" (Love). In Teresa Love's words, "this is another reason why theater is such a potent learning experience".

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