

# How to Produce a Shakespeare Play

Why not make the most of your Shakespeare Reader and produce it as a play? Plays should be acted, not just read. Shakespeare Readers can be a lot of fun if you take the parts of the characters, showing them in action as Shakespeare intended. You can produce the play in groups in the classroom for the other students or on a stage for a bigger audience.

Your play can be as simple or as sophisticated as you want it to be. Some modern plays need lots of scenery, costumes, lighting effects and so on. But it does not have to be like this. As you know, in Shakespeare's time, plays were usually acted on a stage in the afternoons. When the writer wanted the audience to understand where and when something was happening, he described the scene, and expected the audience members to use their imagination. The description helped people to see the scene in their minds and picture more clearly what was happening on the stage. Many of the scenes in *Macbeth* take place at night, so Shakespeare gives us words and phrases that describe the darkness for us. For example:

**Fleance:** *I did not hear the clock. It's very dark. There is no moon tonight.*

**Banquo:** *The stars are covered. There are no lights in Heaven.*

*The night is dark, black, like my thoughts.*

## How do you produce a play?

First you need a *producer*. The producer organizes everything that happens on the stage. You may not have a real stage, of course. Perhaps you are acting in a classroom. That's fine. But any production needs preparation. You will also need a *director* (this person can also be the producer), who directs the action of the play and tells the actors how to act.

Here are some useful suggestions to help you produce your play.

- 1 Everyone must read the play carefully.
- 2 You must be sure you understand the *plot* – the story of the play.
- 3 Discuss the characters with other students and with your teacher. What do they look like? What do they do? What kind of people are they?

## Backstage

Students who do not want to act can help backstage. For example, a *stage manager* can help the producer. The stage manager makes sure that everything is on stage before the play begins. Is a chair needed? Or a table? It is important that these things are always in the same place for every rehearsal.

*Props* (or properties) are important too. Anything that an actor uses or reacts to is a prop. Macbeth's daggers are props and so is Hamlet's skull. The three small chests in *The Merchant of Venice* are props. The stage manager must make sure that they are in the right place when Portia's suitors make their choices. The person in charge of all these things is sometimes simply called *Props*.

If you work in props, you can make interesting things like crowns and masks. You can use lots of different materials, such as gold or silver paper, or cardboard. Sweets such as fruit gums make good jewels!

### The prompter or 'prompt'

Actors try to learn their words as correctly as possible. But they may forget them. Then someone called a *prompter* or '*prompt*' has to help them. Being a prompter is not easy. This student must follow every word in the play as it happens. It is very important, for example, that an actor gets the last words of a speech right. Another actor is waiting to hear these words. They are his or her *cue* – or signal – to speak. If an actor does not get his or her correct cue, he or she may not speak at all! There will be a horrible silence.

If any actor seems unsure of his or her words, the prompter must be ready to prompt the actor by telling him or her the next few words of the play. Then the actor can continue.

### Deciding on the cast

Every play has a *cast* of characters, also called *roles* or *parts*. The producer and director must choose people who fit each part. For example, the actor playing the part of Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* must be very confident, with a loud voice. Helena and Hermia are both pretty, but the actress chosen to play Helena must be much taller than Hermia.

Actors must have good memories. They have to learn their part by heart, without looking at the text or *script*. They must speak clearly and with meaning. Of course, not all students feel they can learn long speeches. But every play has non-speaking parts – for example, soldiers, courtiers or servants. People with these parts are important because they must act and react to what is happening on stage. It is also possible to change the number of people who play these non-speaking parts. This is a good way to deal with the problem of having many students in a play with only a small cast of main characters.

When Shakespeare wrote his plays, women did not act on the stage. You may have seen the film *Shakespeare in Love*, in which a young woman pretends to be a boy. She is in love with Shakespeare, so she dresses as a boy and tries to act in his play, *Romeo and Juliet*. In Shakespeare's time, boys took all the women's parts. However, sometimes these boys dressed as women had to dress as boys as part of the plot! For example, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia and Nerissa pretend to be a young lawyer and his clerk. Jessica, Shylock's daughter, puts on boy's clothes when she runs away from her father's house.

In modern films, actors such as Robin Williams and Dustin Hoffman have taken women's parts. Women sometimes take male parts in opera or in pantomime. So do not worry if you have more boys than girls, or girls than boys. Girls can play boys' parts, and boys can play girls' parts! It will certainly be a challenge!

### The first rehearsals

Once you have decided on your cast, you can begin the rehearsals. The producer must tell the cast where to stand and how to move about the stage. The actors learn these movements and, at the same time, they begin to learn their words too. So, in early rehearsals, they can hold their scripts in their hands.

The *stage directions* in square brackets [ ] can help the producer and the actors. They tell the actor how to speak and move. If a character has an important speech, the audience must be able to both see and hear him or her. So actors must speak clearly and quite slowly – unless they are angry or in an action scene.

The other actors must listen to the words carefully and not stand in front of the actor who is speaking. Then the audience will also listen to the actor who is speaking. But remember that the actors must talk to each other, not to the audience. We usually look at the person we are speaking to.

In some of Shakespeare's tragedies, such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, there may sometimes be only one character on the stage so he or she is not speaking to other actors. He or she is 'thinking aloud' and trying to sort out his or her own feelings. These speeches are called *soliloquies*. During soliloquies the actor can look at the audience. He or she wants to know what they think.

When you are acting, movement is very important. Young people move about quickly. Older people, like Old Gobbo or Romeo and Juliet's parents, move more slowly. Sometimes, props can be used to show a character's age. For example, an older character could carry a walking stick; a younger character could carry a toy. But remember, unless you are in an action scene (for example, you are dancing or fighting as you speak), it is important not to move too much when you are speaking. If you do, the audience will be looking at you, not listening to you.

*Group scenes*, for example fights and dances where a lot of actors are moving at the same time, must be organized very carefully. The producer/director must not let actors do as they like each time they perform the play because this can look unorganized. The group scene needs to take place around the main characters' actions or dialogues, making sure that the audience can see them. Perhaps the characters in the non-speaking parts can work in pairs. That is easy if they are dancing. But fights must be managed carefully too. The actors must learn to make the same movements at every rehearsal.

The actors should learn to allow the audience to react to them. A good example of this is the play acted by Bottom and his friends for Duke Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The craftsmen are very bad actors and so their 'tragedy' is very funny. The people watching the craftsmen make rude comments about their acting. They laugh when they should sigh. They are reacting to the action.

A good tip for actors: if you say something funny, the audience will laugh. That always gives an actor a good feeling. Then you need to wait a few seconds before speaking again, so that the audience is ready to listen.

### The dress rehearsals

When the actors can speak their parts without reading from the scripts and everyone knows their directions, it is time for a *dress rehearsal*. This means rehearsing the play wearing costumes you will wear in the actual performance.

But what should the actors wear and do they need costumes at all? It all depends on the type of production. Modern performances of Shakespeare's plays often have actors dressed in modern clothes. For example, both Romeo and Juliet could simply wear jeans and T-shirts. The young Montagues and Capulets could wear small scarves of two different colours to show which family they belong to.

But actors usually like dressing up and it makes the play more fun to perform. So kings and queens can wear crowns and Juliet, Ophelia and Portia can wear scarves, jewels or flowers on their heads. At Shylock's trial, Portia, dressed as a young lawyer, and Nerissa, her clerk, could have undergraduates' caps. Pieces of cloth can make cloaks for older or more important characters. Macbeth – when he is fighting – and Hamlet's father might wear helmets.

But remember – never wear something you find uncomfortable. It may interfere with your acting!

### Special effects

Before you carry out the final performance, you might want to think about any other special effects you might need – for example, lighting or sound effects. Like everything else in your play, these can be very simple or quite sophisticated, depending on the type of performance. You might simply need to have a CD playing the sound of a storm, or a light shining on the actor when he or she is doing a soliloquy. Or you might want different lighting and sound effects for each scene in the play.

### **The performance**

It is now time to perform your play to an audience. The producer will need to think about where everyone will be sitting and make sure that there is enough seating. The backstage people will need to make sure that all the props and costumes are ready. The director needs to feel confident that the actors have learnt their parts well and are ready for the performance.

Producing a play is hard work. The actors must be like a good team – everyone knows what to do and everyone works together.

Then ... simply enjoy yourselves and at the end of the play, you will hear every actor's favourite sound – the sound of the audience's applause!