

## Shaking up Shakespeare in the Classroom by Matthew Ribnick

I cannot begin to imagine the difficulties teachers encounter in teaching Shakespeare. Massive workloads and time constraints make it near impossible to do justice to the man and his work. I have, however, met many teachers over the last year who are extremely passionate about Shakespeare and some of the tips I have included were gleaned from conversations with them. So what follows are tips to make Shakespeare more exciting and more accessible:

- With the popularity of rap and hip-hop among teenagers at an all time high, and the fact that Shakespeare was a master of rhythm – why not get groups of learners to rap or do a hip-hop performance of a Shakespearean monologue. You have to set the boundaries though – they can in no way deviate from the text and the true meaning of the piece must still be conveyed.
- I always use the example of the film *Titanic* being a simple variation of *Romeo and Juliet* set on a ship. Using a similar plot structure to the Shakespearean text you are dealing with, using the same themes (love, jealousy, blinding ambition etc.) allow the students to write a modern day screenplay. You might be surprised at the creative genius of some of your students.
- Some students are just natural performers while others may be good with specific accents. Use of different accents or energy's for certain characters can really liven up a reading of Shakespeare. Encourage the students to have fun with the text in this way. Try Hamlet with a 'Rasta man' accent or Mercutio with an 'aussie' accent for example. Some people say that if you are struggling with a piece of Shakespeare, you should read it using a modern day Irish accent as that resembles the accent that the general population in Elizabethan London spoke with. I'm not so sure how true that is but I can testify to the fact that it works.
- Give students the job of casting a Shakespearean play using modern day celebrities. Using *Romeo and Juliet* for example: someone might choose Josh Hartnett to play the role of Romeo and Megan McKenzie to play the role of Juliet. They might then cast Heath Ledger as Benvolio and Collin Farrel as Tybalt. Each student should cast the play as they envision the parts being played – try get them to provide a picture portfolio (magazine clippings etc) to show their ideal complete cast.
- Stage a mock fight with the students using words from a Shakespearean fight scene to confront each other. This will require them learning the words to make it more intense. The fight between Macbeth and Macduff at the end of *Macbeth* is perfect for this – but there are quite a number of good ones in many of his other plays.
- Get the students to describe someone in the school that they have a crush on using only 400 words. This is to demonstrate the difficulty men like Shakespeare had in a world without pictures or motion pictures – hence the brilliant use of words.

*If you would like to discuss other ideas with Matthew or invite him to your school as a guest speaker on Shakespeare, he may be contacted on 011 793 2412.*