A Chapter of **Teaching Shakespeare through Performance** by Emily Rainbow Davis

Teaching vs Directing

For decades now, The Folger Shakespeare Library has played a tremendously important role in changing how Shakespeare is taught in this country and beyond. Through the education department's efforts, more and more teachers have come to understand the benefits of working on Shakespeare through Performance. Every year, there seem to be more teachers who want to integrate theatrical exploration with the text. This is fantastic news – it means Shakespeare teaching gets more vibrant every day.

However, I have noticed, in my many trips around this brave new world, a point of confusion about what teaching performance means. I think the fundamental confusion is the difference between Directing Shakespeare and Teaching Shakespeare. Here's how I see the difference:

- Directing Shakespeare is usually what your principal-wants you to do for your spring recital: Directing Shakespeare is what's required when you want a polished piece of work to show off to your trustees. Directing is for the parents.
- Teaching, on the other hand, is for the students. It happens from the bottom up instead of coming from the top. It allows students to learn how to think creatively and critically. Creating space for them to make their own decisions allows them to invest more thoroughly, to claim more authority and to make choices.

Teaching Shakespeare means giving the students the skills and tools they need to embrace the words on the page, to tackle difficult text and know they did it themselves. In a lot of ways, Shakespeare Teaching at its best, is a relinquishing of control.

This is very difficult for a lot of teachers and directors especially when they're expected to deliver a polished product of a performance. Many teachers will abandon the teaching portion altogether in that scenario and tell themselves that having students memorize a chunk of iambic pentameter will be sufficiently educationally meaningful. And it might be a bit. Many an adult can still recite a chunk of text he had to learn as a child. But, the skills of engaging with all of the work, of making decisions about it, understanding it inside and out from one's own self are not only richer and more meaningful but will also apply to many other things.

A student who played Desdemona in her school play may always remember Desdemona's lines but a student who staged, edited, made informed artistic decisions about AND played Desdemona will have much richer memories. These memories and skills will help her appreciate seeing other work in the future and perhaps carry over into other realms of life. The best education has a student centered process at the center.

*

Making this distinction between Teaching and Directing is a little bit sticky, simply because of the great variety of both. (For example, my own directing style isn't particularly directive and I've known many teachers who teach like directors.) But in order to clarify these tracks of purpose, it is helpful to delineate these two jobs.

Teaching Shakespeare is about creating contexts and structure and situations that allow students to engage with Shakespeare's words, to discover the play, to take hold of it and make it their own. Directing Shakespeare is about getting the students to fit into a particular idea about the play, outside of themselves.

Now, I do not deny that a great deal of learning can come from being directed. One can learn how to take direction and receive feedback, for example, which tend to be useful skills in life. Directing students to do what you want them to do is a top-down model.

Much of the Shakespeare education I see here in New York ends up being Directing rather than Teaching. This means I hear a lot of, "What? I can't hear you. Speak Up! Go slower! Be more angry when you say that!" Which means that what we're really teaching here is simply how to follow directions, or at best, projection. It's not really Shakespeare that's being taught.

Teaching Shakespeare means creating a context for students to discover their own way through the words, for engaging with the words and makes them their own.

There might come a point in your process when Teaching becomes Directing and that's perfectly alright. I find, though, that it's helpful to acknowledge what you're doing. To even be transparent with your students and say, "I was teaching before and now I will be directing."

If you want to make this transition at the end of your process – that is, you want to start directing your students because you need to make a good impression on your principal or the school board or whatever – here are some tips for negotiating that:

1) Be clear that that's what's happening – otherwise your students will be confused about your sudden change in personality
2) Learn about directing. It's not as simple as making everyone face front and be louder. There are many things that rookie directors try that they think will

work and simply don't. Giving line readings, for example. That's when you way to an actor, "Say it like this" and then you demonstrate. It's tempting to do this but it almost never has the desired effect. And actors HATE it. Even student actors. My top recommendation is Jon Jory's Tips – Ideas for Directors, followed by Katie Mitchell's The Director's Craft or Ann Bogart's A Director Prepares.

3) Consider the timing of your direction. There are things you can suggest to an actor a week away from performance that you can't tell them the day before. The day before is the time to say, "It's great! Just go louder and (faster or slower) and if something falls on stage – pick it up!"

Often, when I have been brought into a classroom, teachers have expected me to play a directing role. They'll ask me to tell the students what they're doing wrong. They'll want me to give them notes. I can absolutely do this and often do. But it's a delicate operation. Even in my own directing work – I choose carefully what I say to an actor and when. The day before a performance, it's too late to tell them that their character choices need to change. It's too late to give them most of the suggestions you might have.

Directing sometimes means not saying something – it sometimes means planting a seed that will develop into something interesting. I see it as giving them something to play with.

On a personal level, I have no interest or desire in having students fulfill my vision of a play. I save that for my own process and my own company. When I teach, I want to uncover my students' vision of a play. That's what teaching means to me.

I am not generally directive, even as a director with professionals. But I understand the value of being directive. I understand why it happens. For a lot of people in charge of a group of students, it feels like it's the only way. I see lots of teachers telling their students exactly what they need to do – and then getting frustrated at the students inability to execute an order.

The thing to consider is how many elements are at play in the Jenga puzzle of performance. It's not like telling students to capitalize proper nouns and correcting them every time they forget. Not every one can do what you imagine every time. Some can take only so much information at once. A lot of students I've met have trouble moving and speaking at the same time. They're not willfully refusing to take your direction – they just can only process so much at once.

I have found that teachers tend to get anxious and start directing students when they get worried about how another adult is going to judge them. "Will they think I don't know that that name is usually pronounced HERmia? These kids are calling her HerMIa. I know the Folger suggests letting the kids find their own pronunciation but I'm going to look like a fool!" I have been in this situation myself. My direct supervisor at one arts organization I worked for, one which brought in Folger

Education programs ironically, leaned over to me during one student rehearsal she was observing and declared, “Her name is pronounced HERmia.” Mmm. Is it?

One of the pitfalls of Shakespeare Education is its long history. There has, historically, been quite a bit of posturing and exclusion in the way Shakespeare has previously been taught. There’s a long history of, “It must be done THIS way, spoken THIS way and only the most elite are allowed to get their hands on it.” One of the reasons I am such a fan of the Folger’s educational leadership in the field is that beating heart of their philosophy that Shakespeare is for everyone.

Part of the reason we turn over the work of discovery to the students is that they make it their own. I could tell students what to do all day long but it would only ever be MY Shakespeare. When I let them discover it, they make it theirs. My favorite example of this is from when I was working with a class of Spanish speaking 6th graders on A Midsummer Night’s Dream. The group working on the fairies looked at the text for the lullaby and understood it was a song. But they were unfamiliar with the word “lullaby” so in their scene, the fairies joyfully sang the word the way they saw it – with a soft y sound where the two ls stood. I can, to this day, sing you the “lulla, lulla, lullaby” as “LooYa, LooYa, LooYaBeeee!” If I’d come along and corrected them, said, “No, no, no, it’s pronounced lullaby. It’s a song to help people go to sleep,” there would have been no jubilant LooYaBee and that would have been a great loss as far as I’m concerned.

But when we start to worry about what others think, if we start to worry that our principals or board or parents will decide we don’t know what we’re doing, that’s when we think, “I better quit with this letting them discover the play stuff and start telling them what to do.” That’s when we’re most likely to start Directing and that’s when the shouting starts.

And then Shakespeare gets a lot less fun for all of us. And there are no LooYaBees.