

EXPERIENCES AT THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY (RSC)  
EDUCATION DEPARTMENT<sup>1</sup>

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ABSTRACT: The area related to education of the Royal Shakespeare Company is a sturdy one, with long-term partnerships with schools and regional theatres all over the UK. Its objective is to take Shakespeare's legacy to an ever increasing audience. Besides a great amount and variety of resources to work with the plays, RSC promotes several courses and workshops. This article aims at showing some aspects of two of these initiatives: the three-module course "RSC Certificate in Teaching Shakespeare", using the rehearsal-room approach, and "The First Encounters with Shakespeare" workshop, which dealt with *The Comedy of Errors*, both held at the Company's headquarters in Stratford-upon-Avon.

Keywords: RSC. Education. Schools. Rehearsal-room approach. "First Encounters with Shakespeare". *The Comedy of Errors*.

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## EXPERIÊNCIAS NO DEPARTAMENTO DE EDUCAÇÃO DA ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY (RSC)

RESUMO: A área voltada à educação da Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) é bastante robusta, e conta com parcerias de longa data com escolas e teatros regionais de todo o Reino Unido. A ideia é levar o legado de Shakespeare a um público cada vez mais amplo. Além de uma grande quantidade e variedade de recursos para se trabalhar com as peças shakespearianas, a RSC promove cursos e workshops diversos. O objetivo deste artigo é detalhar alguns aspectos de duas dessas iniciativas: o curso de três módulos sobre o ensino das peças do Bardo através da abordagem da sala de ensaios e “Os Primeiros Encontros com Shakespeare”, em que será detalhado um workshop sobre *A Comédia dos Erros*. Ambas as iniciativas ocorreram nas dependências da Companhia, em Stratford-Upon-Avon.

Palavras-chave: RSC. Educação. Escola. Abordagem da sala de ensaios. “Primeiros Encontros com Shakespeare”. *A comédia dos erros*.

### THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY (RSC) AND EDUCATION

It is very unlikely to visit Stratford-upon-Avon, UK, without seeing the majestic building on the banks of River Avon, which hosts the Royal Shakespeare Company, founded more than five decades ago, and probably the best well-known theatre company in the world. RSC brings Shakespeare in its DNA and in its name, in itself a tremendous responsibility. But previous to its foundation, there was another important theatre in Stratford, specialized in Shakespeare plays:

When the Royal Shakespeare Company was founded in 1961, it was not conjured out of the sky. The Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford-Upon-Avon already enjoyed a national and international presence, with its own eighty years of history, culture, values and internal arrangements. (CHAMBERS, 2004, p. 3)

It is also very unlikely for a person who visits Stratford-upon-Avon – the second town to attract tourists in the UK after London – and who likes theatre, not wanting to be part of the audience in one of the three RSC theatres in town: Royal Shakespeare Theatre, with capacity for 1,038 people, being the

main thrust (or apron) stage auditorium, where mainly Shakespeare plays are performed; Swan Theatre, which seats 426 people, also with a thrust stage, where usually works of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Restoration and today's playwrights are staged; and The Other Place (TOP), a 200-seat studio theatre, where local amateur groups can rehearse and perform, and which provides additional performance space for the work of RSC with young people and the local community (RSC-THEATRES, 2019).

But not so well known by the people who visit Stratford is the close relationship RSC is proud to have with education. Even before the Second World War, The Shakespeare Memorial Theatre had attempted some educational programs, but not "regarding them as central to its mission" (WINSTON, 2015, p. 6). The innovative work of RSC in the area of education is nowadays supported by a dedicated team, and encompasses

[...] long-term partnerships with clusters of schools and regional theatres at a national level; the provision of sustained professional development, accredited by a high-ranking UK university [at present, the University of Birmingham]; the touring into schools of edited versions of Shakespeare's plays, specifically targeted at young audiences and directed by internationally acclaimed theatre practitioners; and, in particular, the development and articulation of a particular form of pedagogy anchored within a conceptualization of the rehearsal room as a communal space for creative learning. (WINSTON, 2015, p. 1)

If a teacher decides to browse through the site of the company (RSC, 2019), s/he is certain to find under the link "education" an amazing quantity of material, such as: free resources for teachers for all Shakespeare plays (some or all of the following for each of the plays: video, images, play information, themes and teacher's packs for some of the productions of the plays in question, and all this according to students' school level); several courses for teacher professional development, among them RSC Certificate in Teaching Shakespeare; summer school, generally held in August, with a one-week duration; workshops for teachers in the school site (even international ones) (RSC-EDUCATION, 2019).

There are also opportunities for young students (and undergraduates) to participate in the diverse amount of educational activities RSC promote (RSC-EDUCATION, under "Events and Workshops for Students"), and they may change according to the theatre season, and the demand of the teachers/schools. Among them, easily found on RSC website: interactive learning resources, which were created mainly to support the plays performed in RSC theatres, but also the plays broadcasted for schools; workshops and

events about the plays which are currently at the company's repertoire, as well as conferences and study days which cover plays and their presence in the exams which happen after compulsory basic education in the UK<sup>2</sup> (something like ENEN in Brazil). Several of these are supposed to be booked by groups/schools, whereas others can be done individually.

Substantial discounts are available at ticket prices for students from school members of the Associate Schools Programme (RSC-EDUCATION, under "Associate Schools Programme"), as well as groups of students either from schools or colleges. Also, thanks to the support of British Petroleum, students from 16 to 25 years of age can get tickets at a very low price – five pounds at the moment – but students need to enroll in the program. And for some of the plays, for some of nearby towns, RSC provides coach trips to undergraduate students with subsidized fees, which include the trip, the play and exhibitions.

Teachers, students and directors can also find whole performances online, and there are also the school broadcasts, in themselves a rich possibility of access to the plays in the current repertoire of the company for schools far from the heart of the company, Stratford (RSC EDUCATION, under "Schools' Broadcasts"). These broadcasts are free of charge, and RSC has preparation materials for the schools previous to the day of the broadcast, as well as a guide for the day of the broadcast, with suggestions for discussion topics and questions for each part of the play. Schools all over the UK only need to enroll in advance:

Schools' Broadcasts takes place at a set time and date, with schools all over the country logging in to a special website. The broadcasts start with a live introduction from our [RSC] studio and include activities for students to help them engage with the production and get the most from the experience. The play itself is broken up into three parts, rather than the usual two, with further student activities between each section and live Q&As with actors from the company. Throughout the broadcast schools can use Twitter or the special message function on the broadcast site to suggest questions for the actors. [...]. The broadcast ends with a final Q&A (RSC-EDUCATION, 2019).

The School Broadcast program is, undoubtedly, a great achievement to involve as many schools as possible all over the country, but sometimes its range is limited to the days surrounding the broadcast. RSC has had, then, a much more engaging program, called Associate Schools Program, which came to life

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<sup>2</sup> Since 1989, Shakespeare has been the only English author appearing as compulsory in the National Curriculum in the UK (NC, 2019)

to “build on” the positive results of a previous program called Learning and Performance Network (LPN).

## LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE NETWORK AND ASSOCIATE SCHOOLS PROGRAMME

Launched in 2006, initially as “Learning Network”, and becoming later “Learning and Performance Network”, the programme had the objective of connecting RSC and school communities throughout the country, especially the ones with least access to their work, and also measure, through specific research, the impact of Shakespeare work on lives and attitudes of young people and of RSC approaches. During its existence, from 2006 to 2016, LPN worked with 507 primary, secondary and special schools in the UK engaged in the process, 11 regional theatres, and 1,320 teachers, reaching an estimated 690,000 students, all of them very impressive figures (LPN, 2016)<sup>3</sup>.

To be part of the program, schools<sup>4</sup> and regional theatres were asked to commit to a three-year connection with RSC, the design of each year suffering changes, but ending with the following structure: the first year dedicated to teacher professional development; the second, to a collaborative work between the schools, their Regional Theatre and RSC; and the third, dedicated to regional performance festivals in the Regional Theatres.

In the biennium 2013-2014, LPN schools and regional theatres became venues for the RSC’s small scale touring work with “First Encounters with Shakespeare” production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, and school Broadcast series also started (“First Encounters with Shakespeare” consist of a project which culminates with performances of abridged versions of a play, created not only for young people, but also for their families, who have the opportunity of watching Shakespeare).

In 2014-2015, there was a second tour First Encounter with Shakespeare production of *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, a play which encompassed the stories of *Henry IV* parts I and II and *Henry V*.

In the biennium 2015-2016, RSC produced *A Midsummer Night’s Dream: a Play for a Nation*, in collaboration with regional theatres. What made

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Department for Education, UK, in 2006 there were 8,231,055 pupils in all school types in the UK. This number went to 8,559,540 in 2016. Considering the average in these ten years, almost 10% of the students were somehow impacted by LPN (DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> For the first five years of the programme, ten “hub” schools, the ones which had direct contact with RSC, were each working with a group of up to seven “cluster” schools. Later on, many others entered the programme.

this an outstanding experience was that amateur companies played the Mechanicals (including Bottom) and primary school children, who belonged to schools participating in LPN, took on the roles of Titania's fairies.

In 2017, their adaptation of *The Tempest* went on a seven-week tour of UK schools and regional theatres, before having a final showing at The Other Place, which local Stratford schools could attend. The next tour of "First Encounters with Shakespeare" happened from 31<sup>st</sup> January to 24<sup>th</sup> March 2018, with the play *Julius Caesar*, also involving schools which now belong to the Associate Schools Programme and their partner theatres, an initiative which substituted LPN.

The results of this ten-year experience of LPN with schools have been very rich. RSC commissioned a research from the University of Warwick, in which a substantial improvement in relation to students' attitude to Shakespeare and to school in general was observed. One of the conclusions of the report, for instance, was that:

The Learning and Performance Network is [was] ground breaking because it suggests that we might need to revise conceptions of teaching effectiveness (typically involving an emphasis on teacher discourse), so as to include high levels of students' practical and physical engagement in rehearsal, practice and performance. (LPN, 2016, p. 28)

Such a successful programme could not simply be extinct, but, as RSC put it, needed to be built on. Then, the Associate Schools Programme appeared in 2016.

Building on the inheritance of the LPN, the fundamental ambition of the Associate Schools Programme remains the same: to bring about a significant change in the way young people experience, engage with, and take ownership of the work of Shakespeare. Teachers will learn to explore Shakespeare with their students in the way actors do in a rehearsal room, using dynamic, active approaches. (RSC-EDUCATION, 2019)

Nowadays, the programme has 18 lead school partners all over UK, each one aggregating from 6 to 20 associate schools, and the recruitment of schools, mainly the ones that belong to areas of socio-economic deprivation, still goes on. There are also 11 associate theatre partners involved in the programme.

## “FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH SHAKESPEARE” – AN EXPERIENCE WITH *THE COMEDY OF ERRORS*

Keeping in mind the premise that Shakespeare plays should be taken everywhere and appreciated by everybody, the project “First Encounters with Shakespeare” is part of a series of initiatives of the RSC Company to perform a Shakespeare play, sometimes in a partner school, sometimes in a partner theatre, if there is one in the school area. The play is abridged to about one hour, and there are three very important objectives which should be fulfilled with this move:

- Students should have some participation in the performance of the play, together with the actors of the company;
- School, community and the local theatre should also have an active role in the production;
- The audience of the play should be actively engaged in the production.

These are very ambitious objectives, which need good amount of previous planning. So, the company starts preparations one year before rehearsals begin. I was fortunate enough to participate in a three-day workshop, in the beginning of November 2017, to help develop, together with other six graduate students and under the leadership of a visiting theatre director, what could become a successful first encounter with *The Comedy of Errors* (SHAKESPEARE, 1968), an adaptation to be on rehearsal by the end of 2018<sup>5</sup>.

The workshop took place at a very spacious rehearsal room at The Other Place. During every one of the six-hour, three-day event, a director of the company was together to clarify any question that should appear, especially because the visiting director to lead the workshop was not part of the company, and lacked some important knowledge which surrounded the project.

The first thing done by the visiting director was to bring an abridged version of the play she had previously prepared. To guarantee a higher number of female roles – a common practice in all RSC, and consequently a more gender-balanced play, some characters’ genders were changed by her: Solinus, the Duke of Ephesus, became Solina, and Angelo, a goldsmith, became Angela. Each one of us started by reading our own copy of this adaptation, which mainly made some cuts in the plot, but which maintained

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<sup>5</sup> Three different visiting directors are called to present workshops and develop their ideas. On the last day, the suggestions for the performance are presented to the Directory of Education of the Company.

Shakespeare's early modern English language. This is considered fundamental by RSC, so that children<sup>6</sup> have ownership of the Bard's plays. Despite serious criticism against it (e.g. OLIVE, 2011), which argues RSC does not have any ownership over Shakespeare's work, so that it can be given, the concept is very dear to the Company, and several times it was emphasized during these three days. Winston (2015) explains the company's main target, when talking about ownership:

When the Company talks of helping young people gain ownership of Shakespeare, common usage suggests that it wants them feel and appreciate the power of Shakespeare's language by themselves rather than simply be told or made to feel that they *should* appreciate it. And while it is true, of course, that nobody owns Shakespeare, the RSC does at least have a substantial history of exploring, producing, examining and performing Shakespeare, and has developed a set of rehearsal room practices to do so. It does, therefore, have some established *authority* when it talks about making Shakespeare accessible to a wider public. (WINSTON, 2015, p. 112-113)

The reading of this adapted text, with each one of us responsible for the part of at least one character, lasted 68 minutes, and this was according to what was expected for such an adaptation. I really got impressed by the real dramatic reading of the graduate student participants, all of them British, and which I considered as a result of their trajectory as students here in the UK, which states that, from the beginning years of education, students should be taught to appreciate rhymes and poems, and recite them by heart (this appears in the program of study of the first year in English, and throughout all the National Curriculum) (NC, 2019).

Afterwards, we started to tackle the first objective of "First Encounters", which was to bring students' participation to the performance, together with the RSC actors. Several suggestions were tested throughout the days, some of them brought by the visiting director, others by us. Several props<sup>7</sup> were brought to the rehearsal room and used, and some scenes were rehearsed several times, which gave us all a feeling that was a "real" rehearsal.

- ✓ Aegeon's long speech, in Act I, Scene i (when explaining to the Duke what had brought him, a Syracusan, to Ephesus, to avoid a

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<sup>6</sup> Any student under 18 years of age. The primary focus, however, is on children from primary and secondary schools, from 7 to 14 years of age.

<sup>7</sup> A prop is an object, usually small, used by actors while performing a scene in a play or a film.



death sentence issued to any Syracusian born who went there), would be performed by the schools, who would receive basic guidelines on what to do. One possibility was a real actor speaking Aegeon's lines, while the school created, for example, a puppet show of his epic adventure. Schools could also use instruments (for the storm), supporting a supposedly great visual spectacle. Schools could/should interact with the regional theatres, which would help students with the rehearsals. To decide which school would have its show chosen (from the group of schools they belonged to), a possibility would be to have these shows performed a certain time before the real presentations with RSC, in the regional theatre, and on this occasion, choose which one would be performed "for real", on the usual two RSC daily performances (one in the morning, and another in the evening). An interesting decision was the name change of Ephesus: it would be either the name of the city/town where the performance would happen, or what the partners in the project would decide (maybe a region, not necessarily a city/town).

✓ The character of the jailor, in Act I, Scene i, with one line ("I will, my lord") would be performed by a child. The jailor comes back in Act V, Scene i, but with no lines this time.

✓ There would be a "hitting assistant": at the end of Act I, when Antipholus of Syracuse beats Dromio of Ephesus, a child would hand some objects (props), familiar to the students, collected in the schools and put in a box (there could be 5 or 6 different boxes) for Antipholus to beat Dromio with (or throw at him). These objects (teddy bears, pieces of clothing, rubber toys, etc.) would be unknown to the actors, which would add an element of surprise to the scene.

✓ Balthazar, a merchant, in Act III, scene i, could be a child, but he has a good amount of lines to be memorized. If a child were or not to perform Balthazar should be decided later on.

✓ The last scene of Act V, in which the two pairs of twins are confronted, would be played by four different youths. Up to that moment, there would be 2 RSC actors working each one as a pair: one being Antipholus of Ephesus and Antipholus of Syracuse, and another being Dromio of Ephesus and Dromio of Syracuse. This would require, by the children, extensive rehearsal, and the help of the partner theatre actors would be more than welcome.

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Regarding the second objective of "First Encounters", namely, to propose to the school, the community and the local theatre an active role in the

production, also several possibilities were suggested, besides the school providing some student-actors for the production and coming up with a new name for the city of “Ephesus”:

- ✓ The school would supply the production with signs for places which appear in the play: Welcome to (the name chosen to substitute the name of Ephesus), The Centaur, The Phoenix, The Tiger, The Porcupine.
- ✓ The school would create the chain (one chain for each performance), a very important object for the development of the plot. There could be a contest to choose the chain for the production, and all the others could appear in a display, in exhibition at the theatre before the performance.
- ✓ Songs could be chosen by the schools as soundtrack for some of the scenes, since there is not any song in the play itself. The school could come up with 3 possibilities of songs for each of the following scenes: the arrival in “Ephesus” (Act I, Scene i), love at first sight between Antipholus of Syracuse and Luciana (Act III, Scene ii), the conversations between Adriana and Luciana (Act II, Scene i and Act IV, Scene ii), party at The Porcupine (Act III, Scene i, Act IV, Scene i) and the family reunion (end of Act V).
- ✓ Synopsis of the play, to be used in the programs, could be elaborated by the schools. The programs, as well as the posters to advertise the plays could also be provided with the help of the partner theatres (RSC could indicate the elements which needed to appear in the programs, since it already has a template). The “Student Ambassadors” could also help in this task, since they are students chosen exactly to promote and champion works connected with Shakespeare and RSC.<sup>8</sup>

The third objective of “First Encounters” has to do with the audience: how to actually engage it in the production? This involves not just the students, but friends and family members too, some of whom are watching a (Shakespeare) play for the first time. Some suggestions for this participation were:

- ✓ Each person would receive a label at the entrance, with the words “The Messenger” and a space for them to write a name for them

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<sup>8</sup> There are already around one hundred “Student Ambassadors” throughout UK. Every academic year RSC recruits students.

to “become” messengers in the play. They would glue the label on the front of their clothes to be transformed in one of the *dramatis personae*. They would also keep the back paper part of the label so that at the end, they could knead this piece of paper and throw it in the direction of the stage to make believe it was snow<sup>9</sup>.

✓ Make the members of the audience learn some lines and enunciate them during the play. The lines could be learned with the help of an actor during the 20 minute pre-show. The lines belong to the character of the Messenger (Act V, Scene i). They could appear in the program of the play, and would be rehearsed by everybody in the audience, who would deliver them in chorus, after specific cues:

(Trumpet sound): *O, mistress, mistress, shift and save yourself!*

*My master and his man are both broke loose [...]*

(Cry within): *Hark, hark! I hear him, mistress – fly, be gone.*

✓ The audience could participate in the pre-show exhibition of the different chains created by the students, and ask questions to the actors in the pre-show and the post-show<sup>10</sup>.

The visiting director emphasized the importance of a precise casting, so that this engagement among all the involved can happen: different accents, genders, ethnic backgrounds. She also mentioned how mindful the actors should be, mainly when addressing the audience in the moments of the pre-show, with the introduction of the production, the rehearsal of the part of the Messenger and any question which could come, as well as in the post-show, when questions would be directed to them by the audience. She also pointed out the possibility of the teachers working some questions with the students, which could be asked at these moments, so that the actors can get minimally prepared for them beforehand.

RSC seeks, with these projects, a truly remarkable experience to all those involved. According to the words of the RSC director, “It has to feel it is a national partnership. All people should have the same quality experiences, even so different ones. There must be trust, support and respect to the local artists, but, at the same time, guarantee of quality, since it is an RSC

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<sup>9</sup> The visiting director established that the season for the play should be winter. Also, because Nell, Dromio of Ephesus’ wife, is described in the play with very unpleasant words, she would be substituted by a snow (wo)man (she has no lines, and is just described by Dromio of Syracuse).

<sup>10</sup> The whole show is composed of a pre-show and a post-show of about 15 minutes each, when the audience can participate interacting directly with the actors, asking them questions, for example. The performance of the play happens between these two moments. The whole event lasts no more than 90 minutes.

production and quality is expected.” For me, at least, it was indeed a remarkable experience!<sup>11</sup>

## RSC CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING SHAKESPEARE

As previously mentioned, one of the courses/workshops offered by RSC to teachers is the Certificate in Teaching Shakespeare. To be able to get it, a teacher needs to go through three levels: the Foundation Course (3 days; 6 hours a day), for the ones not yet familiar with the rehearsal-based approaches used by RSC; the Intermediate Course (3 days; 6 hours a day), if s/he has already had some recent experience with rehearsal-room approaches in teaching (which could be gotten through the Foundation Course or another RSC, Globe Theatre or any other theatre organization), and the Certification Course (3 days). At the end of the Intermediate Course the teacher has to complete a short task when back in school, and at the end of the Certification Course, s/he is required to present a piece of action research to demonstrate the impact of this type of approach in their classrooms. All stages are held in Stratford-upon-Avon. (RSC-EDUCATION, 2019)

The rehearsal-based approaches, or the rehearsal room pedagogy, used by RSC follow, as the name suggests, the artistic practices of the rehearsal room:

[...] processes of playful, collaborative inquiry into the language and the meaning of the text; relationships based by the principle of co-operative learning, whether defined in terms of an ‘ensemble’ or, more recently, as a ‘company’; young people making personal connections with the text through considered, interpretive choices; and with active, physical involvement, making and doing, at the heart of the process, organized in such a way as to feed into reflection and understanding. (WINSTON, 2015, p. 75)

The teachers, most of whom lack this type of expertise to deal with drama, certainly need a helping hand from a real theatre company. That is what is proposed by RSC in their workshops – “courses” seem not exactly appropriate, these being more teacher/instructor-centred. Stredder (2009) makes his point when he reinforces “the truly participatory form [of a workshop] and those

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<sup>11</sup> I’ve learned, later on, that ours was not the director who ended up getting the role of director of “First Encounters” 2018-2019, *The Comedy of Errors*. Project 2018-2019 deals with *The Merchant of Venice*.

taking part should be equally involved and active throughout” (p. 13). It applies to a theatrical production as well as to a classroom, where the terms “learner/student-centred” and “text-centred” become key aspects of the pedagogy – the text treated here “as a script, a score for performance, a huge store of words to be taken out and used, a field for play and experiment”(STREDDER, 2009, p.15).

Following these lines, Gibson (2016) and Banks (2013) also emphasize the importance of such an active approach for engaging students, since Shakespeare himself wrote the plays to be performed, actively staged before an audience.

#### AN EXPERIENCE AT THE FOUNDATION COURSE

A really active involvement happened in the Foundation Workshop I participated in the beginning of November, 2017, at the RSC. Together with 26 other teachers, most of whom from the UK (just one American, three Koreans and I were foreigners), we could experience in two days<sup>12</sup>how truly active this pedagogy is.

The first part of the workshop happened in two consecutive days: the first was devoted to activities dealing with the play *Twelfth Night*, which was playing on the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, and on the second day, activities centred around the play *Julius Caesar*, because there was soon going to be a school broadcast of the play, and the Education Department thought working with the teachers around it would be useful in the way of preparation.

But to start creating the environment of a real rehearsal room, the first part of the first of these two days was devoted to some games to build up the perspective of group work, which is fundamental to a company: the idea is that a group of actors (our students), and their director (we, the teachers) are going to work together with a common purpose, which is to bring the play to life. Among these games, or activities, there were the ones which made us contact one another physically, through hand shake, eye contact, and also doing these things but supposing we belonged to different social strata (which is emphasized in *Twelfth Night*). Then we went on working about the characters, and one of the interesting activities was the division into groups to produce something like a freeze frame, as a family photograph with the characters of the play. We had already received a short description of each

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<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately I did not participate in the last meeting of the Foundation “Course”, which happened in January 2018, and when the teachers would report the results of the actions in their classrooms.

character, to help us better perform, and the other groups needed to guess which character performed by each of us was in the frame, explaining the reason for the guess. Very interesting points emerged regarding mainly the principal characters. Something very important was that, after each activity there were some questions which were meant to make us reflect about what was happening (“Why use these exercises to introduce the story?” or, “What are the differences between reading a cast list and doing an activity like this [the photo frame]?”)<sup>13</sup>. When working with the plot, some scenes were selected, and we were asked to perform what was going on. One of the activities related to this was to bring *Twelfth Night* alive in 20 minutes: we were again divided in some groups, who received summaries of some key scenes (including short dialogues) and had to act them to the other groups (there was a narrator, in this case, to make things possible in such a short amount of time).

Besides all these activities, there was always a very important connection to Shakespeare’s language: the use of the iambic pentameter, and the explorations around the unique rhythm of the English language. This rich language was present in some key speeches we worked with, in which punctuation (we read and walked, and turned 90 degrees on a comma and 180 degrees on a full stop; this gave us a good idea of the emotional state of the characters), use of pronouns (which were emphasized, whether first or third person), the first and last words of each verse which received more attention. All this having in mind the thrust (or apron) stage used at Shakespeare’s time, as we tried to use all the space around us as much as possible, without leaving gaps. The reflections after the activities were related to the challenges of working on a stage like that. Also, props were brought so that we could make choices all the time about which item would better convey the idea we wanted for each of the activities. It was really amazing for me to realize how simple things (chalices, pieces of clothing, musical instruments, for instance) can transform the perception of a whole speech, or even a whole scene.

To crown this first day, we watched *Twelfth Night* at the RSC in the evening, and each one of us was asked to concentrate attention on one of the main characters, about whom we started the discussion on the second day. Needless to say, our perception was much more accurate, and as some of us were sitting together, we could discuss some aspects we had previously experienced during the day.

The second day was devoted to *Julius Caesar*, which was going to be broadcasted to schools within some weeks, and teachers could use some of

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<sup>13</sup> We received a small (and beautiful) notebook to write down our reflections. After some of the activities, we were given some time to do this.

the activities to enhance their students' interest in the play. Again, the idea of belonging to a company was emphasized in the beginning, as it had happened on the first day, and the work was concentrated in the plot and themes of the play, having some of the activities of day one been adapted to *Caesar*<sup>14</sup>. We had, for example, to create in groups “freezes” or images related to the plot in a very limited amount of time: a victory, a celebration, a storm, a supernatural visit, a conspiracy, an assassination, a funeral, a battle, a parting. Impressive was how it made us “feel” the play alive, again very distant from reading a summary, for example. We also had to act out what we believed were the main themes of the play, so that other groups could guess and we could all discuss our choices.

These two intensive days of “rehearsals”, studies and working together as a real company – with inclusion, cooperation, and the notion of no right or wrong in the interpretation, if based on the text – were also very important to highlight several aspects of the plays we worked with, much differently from what a “mere” reading would do. I believe, as well as my colleagues, from all our enthusiastic reports, the plays were really brought to life in a true work of a team.

## FINAL REMARKS

For several well-known reasons, teaching Shakespeare, mainly to non-native English speakers, is not an easy task. But the plays are such a rich material – rich in terms of language and content – that they must not be neglected in our English classrooms. The idea of bringing them to life through active methods, aiming at making students engaged among themselves – as if in a company – and with the texts or scripts of the plays is a fully creative act, and this has always been so necessary to the complete development of a human being.

Creative approaches are active, physically or intellectually. They require students to engage fully with the moment they are exploring, to analyze based on the evidence of their actual experience and to make informed critical responses to the play. They can enable and deepen a student's insight and

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<sup>14</sup> Several of the activities of the workshops are well-developed by Winston (2015). In chapter 4, he details the “RSC Toolkit for Teachers”, the Company published in 2010, mainly with secondary schools English teachers in mind, and describes the activities he was able to observe and film in 2013, in a LPN workshop RSC promoted for teachers and theatre practitioners. Very useful workshop activities can also be found in Stredder (2009) and Thomson and Turchi (2016).

his/her analysis of any given moment or character. [...] They offer us an opportunity to engage students with a range of different learning styles and can be adapted for all abilities. (BANKS, 2013, p. 5)

This article is meant to report some experiences of mine in this area, and also to endorse RSC initiatives – and belief – in active teaching the Bard. There, it is aimed at British teachers and students, but it is important to point out that these initiatives can surely be brought to other spheres. Teachers here in Brazil could promote “First Encounters with Shakespeare”, transposing to our country, to our realities, these encounters with the Bard. A lot of effort would surely be necessary, teachers would need training, material and will, but surely the results would be worth all the effort: after all, is Shakespeare not responsible for “the invention of the Human”?

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