Section 1

# Active teaching

Chapter 1

# Why use active methods to teach the plays?

## The North Face of Shakespeare

The frontispiece to the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays pictures the playwright's forehead as a shining dome. Shakespeare's editors, the actors John Heminge and Henry Condell, who chose this memorial image, were consciously making the theatrical writings of their friend into a monumental literary work. Of the thirty-six plays published in this first 'Collected Works' seven years after his death, eighteen, including *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Tempest*, had never appeared in print before and, without the enterprise of Heminge and Condell, might have been lost forever.[1] The frontispiece image, which seems implacable and authoritative in that engraving of 1623, has been widely used in our culture, often as an advertiser's Kite mark of quality. I call this image 'Shakespeare's North Face' because Shakespeare and his plays, products of some twenty-five years of hectic theatrical activity, can seem as indifferent and unscaleable now as the icy north face of the Eiger.

This stony imagery of awe-inspiring monuments and icy Alpine precipices is intended, however, to suggest what our culture has made of Shakespeare and what approaching his work is like for many people, not the actual difficulty of the plays themselves. Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences might be surprised to find, after four hundred or so years, that that most popular of their playwrights, William Shakespeare, has such an intimidating reputation. Many teachers of Shakespeare today would also claim that the plays are very accessible and just as theatrical and entertaining as those original audiences considered them to be. They also know that the language and frames of reference of the plays are not easy and that they do require the labour of close study – but, more than this, there is often a feeling from the outset that the supposed difficulty and remoteness of Shakespeare are overwhelming, as though his works are an icy rock face. It is this that intimidates or alienates many learners. Yet, as with everything else in the world, where you happen to be situated is crucial.

For some fortunate children and students today, Shakespeare's plays have been reclaimed from their reputation and history, so

that they can experience them immediately and freshly, without trepidation, for themselves. In Britain, theatre companies, especially travelling companies like Northern Broadsides, Cheek by Jowl and Théâtre de Complicité and many Theatre in Education companies,[2] as well as touring operations from the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre, have been wonderfully successful with their Shakespeare productions and accompanying Shakespeare workshops, in school, college and community venues – and many full-scale productions in theatres throughout the land, from the RSC, NT, English Shakespeare Company, Renaissance Theatre Company and Shakespeare's Globe to regional repertory theatres have left an indelible impression of energy, excitement and beauty in the minds of the children and students who have been lucky enough to have been taken to them.[3] Some recent film versions, with Shakespeare almost seeming like just another contemporary screenwriter, have been widely enjoyed by young audiences too, and always there have been inspired individual teachers, who, whatever their style of teaching, have been able to establish a lasting, positive disposition towards the plays, in their students.[4] Most importantly, there has been a shift towards the use of active approaches to teaching Shakespeare, partly because of the active and creative ('progressive') direction taken by English teaching since the 1950s and 1960s, and partly because of the increase in popularity of Drama itself as an independent subject.

Drama, as it evolved in British schools, was particularly associated with the progressive developments of the 1960s. This was a period when the subject was reinvented, with a specific commitment to many of those developments – 'reinvented' because, of course, dramatic methods of teaching literature go back at least as far as Henry Caldwell Cook and Harriet Finlay-Johnson in the early part of the twentieth century,[5] and active approaches to teaching Speech, Drama and English were widespread before and after the Second World War. In the 1950s Drama had been strengthened by Peter Slade's work, which included the provision of a theoretical grounding for the subject, in play and child development. When I started teaching in the late 1960s, my own practice was greatly affected by the excitement and educational potential of this relatively new school subject, as propounded by Slade and then by others such as Brian Way and Dorothy Heathcote. There were other powerful influences too, such as: the creative, personal and socially aware emphases in David Holbrook's books on English teaching; the old tradition of 'choral speaking', which had been revived and re-energised by the 'live poetry' movement of the late 1950s and the 1960s; and the emergence of numerous courses and

books on dramatic techniques, such as Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theatre* (1973), and on 'gaming' and (pre-computer) simulation and role playing, which were used widely in business training and in a range of subjects from English to Social Studies and Geography. Simulation and gaming, in particular, directed my attention to structural elements in plays and provided the stimulus for developing the kind of work which is described in Chapter 7.

All these developments in English and Drama also encouraged expansion in the educational work undertaken by theatres and theatre companies – and the creation of companies specialising in Theatre in Education. But the most influential specific initiative in Britain in the last twenty years has been Rex Gibson's Shakespeare and Schools Project at the Cambridge Institute of Education. This started in the mid 1980s and was funded by the Gulbenkian Foundation. Seconded teachers worked together for a term at a time on 'Active Shakespeare' with Rex Gibson and John Salway, developing their own practice as teachers of Shakespeare and helping to generate material for the project's publications, including the twenty-seven volumes of individual plays that have appeared to date in the *Cambridge School Shakespeare*.[6] Please see 'Active Shakespeare and independent learning' (p. 17) below, on using this edition for independent work.

The Shakespeare and Schools Project provided a structure and way of working capable of reaching, resourcing, supporting, developing and, perhaps most importantly, exciting and challenging every teacher of Shakespeare in the land. It demonstrated that active methods can be adopted widely. This book hopes to add to that demonstration and, in particular, to encourage teachers of Shakespeare to develop further as teachers of Drama. There is a broad and sound basis for this. At the time when the Shakespeare and Schools Project started, practical and dramatic approaches to teaching Shakespeare were already widespread, especially through the pioneering workshops and publications of Cicely Berry, then Head of Voice at the RSC (see p. xviii above), and through workshops and education programmes taught by actors, directors and education officers from professional theatre companies of every kind – from the big national and regional companies to a host of small touring companies and Theatre in Education companies. For Drama teachers, crucial texts by theatre practitioners had appeared, and have continued to appear, especially those by Clive Barker (1977), Keith Johnstone (1979, 1999) and Augusto Boal (1979, 1992), all of which have greatly strengthened Drama teaching in all its manifestations. Every country in which

Shakespeare is taught will have a different experience of these various educational developments, but reports from other areas of the world, from the United States, Canada, Germany, Italy and Australia, for instance, indicate that similar forces are at work there.

Although all these developments plainly indicate that it is by no means true for everyone, including those who have never taken an exam on a Shakespearian text, that 'Shakespeare was boring at school', the dominant reality of contact with Shakespeare in education is probably still, for most learners, a reality of problems and barriers: the weight and authority of academic tradition, the difficulty of language, allusion and plot and the complexity of subject matter and theme. It is hard for teachers, in the context of the daily classroom round, constantly to stimulate and inspire and to imbue every hour of work with interest and involvement, yet, as we all know, once learning activities achieve a certain momentum, the teacher no longer has to struggle and fight. At this point they can resource, observe, support, develop, respond – really teach, in fact.

The main argument for practical work on Shakespeare, the subject of this book, is that it is invaluable in meeting the challenges I have been discussing, not least because it offers every individual student personal contact with the plays, in the context of the pleasure and support of social, creative activity. It also requires learners to be, and assumes they will be, responsible for the work that goes on in the classroom or workshop, and to become involved with it. Practical work is especially effective in motivating, 'empowering' and developing confidence. The point of a handbook of practical approaches, of teaching methods using drama, is to try to open up the texts as fields of play, and so of learning, so that students become, and feel, equal to the demands of that learning.[7] This chapter examines in greater detail the arguments for using active methods of teaching. Subsequent chapters deal with the principles of using practical work and drama workshops to teach the plays of Shakespeare. But first we need to look more closely at the question of reputation and how this can work as an obstacle in our culture and our educational institutions.

## The problem of monumentalism

Shakespeare's intimidating reputation is likely to be encountered before his texts, but reputations represent what the world thinks and when we encounter them we probably want to find out for ourselves whether or not they are justified. With great cultural and historical

monuments, this can seem presumptuous or futile: their reputations are so firmly established, their value so universally assumed and continuously reaffirmed. For those suspicious of received wisdom and tradition, iconoclasm may be tempting, but it is one thing to vandalise and quite another to mount arguments that will challenge received opinion. It is more effective and easier, perhaps, to claim revolutionary authority, moral and aesthetic, asserting that demolition of cultural monuments is a progressive duty that will benefit oppressed groups. This has sometimes been argued strongly in Britain and the United States over the last thirty or so years, and many universities have given their curriculums complete overhauls as a result of often bitter conflict. It is, of course, a feeble defence of the status quo to say 'We should go on doing this because we've always done it.' Such questions as 'What's the actual use of this?' and 'Are our students positively represented, now, in what we have chosen to teach them?' must be answered.

In the case of Shakespeare, without even entering critical debate at the level of the historical text, supporters can point to two powerful, living aspects of his reputation. The first is that his plays, in modern times, have often been read and staged, not as the inevitable property of rulers and colonisers and the powerful, but as open, contemporary, even anti-establishment texts, sometimes, in the theatre, even presented in direct opposition to oppressive regimes and cultures. The second is that the plays continue to have a strikingly healthy afterlife on film and in the theatre. The theatre, including its subsidised wing, requires commercial success, popularity, just as the cinema does. But my purpose here is to respond to the ubiquity of Shakespeare in our educational systems, and to add to the resources for teaching the plays. It is not to debate his reputation or the merits of teaching the plays, although my personal, and passionate, belief is that it is rich and worthwhile for children and students to read and study them. For powerfully articulated arguments in favour of the 'universal teaching' of Shakespeare in British schools, see Rex Gibson's chapter 'Why teach Shakespeare' (Gibson 1998b, pp. 1–6) and the National Strategies booklet *Shakespeare for all ages and stages* published by the UK government Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008). After a few paragraphs situating Shakespeare in the culture of his day, it is said of the one writer for whom there is a statutory study requirement in Britain (study of 'at least one complete play by Shakespeare' at Key Stage 3 and one at Key Stage 4, which means those between the ages of 11 and 16):

> When young people watch or read Shakespeare today, they are pulled into a world that is both alien and familiar to them. In one scene, his treatment of love, jealousy, racism, mourning or power can seem strikingly relevant; in the next moment, the audience or reader might have to engage with concepts of religion, or family, or fashion completely different from their own. Shakespeare constantly challenges and confounds us: we might be asked to laugh in a painful scene or engage with profound philosophical questions in a comic one.
>
> Watching, performing and reading the work of this extraordinary poet and playwright asks us both to challenge and celebrate our social and personal lives. Shakespeare can open up brave new worlds to young people and offer them fresh ways of dealing with familiar ones. His work can challenge our language skills and introduce us to new realms of poetic playfulness. He can extend our concepts of what fiction can do, and of what stories a drama can tell. Working with Shakespeare can be challenging but is eminently rewarding, rich and fulfilling.
>
> (*Shakespeare for all ages and stages*, p. 6, DCSF © Crown copyright, 2008)

Such as it is, the contribution of *The North Face of Shakespeare* to the critical defence of the study of Shakespeare depends less on criticism and more on experiential arguments. Once one thinks of the classroom or workshop as a kind of dramatic or theatrical laboratory, with all the participants as equal players, study of the formal aspects of Shakespearian texts, their language, narratives and characters, will generate a stream of ideas for active work. Use of these will deliver an abundance of creative, emotional and intellectual or critical insights and stimulation, to those who work with them. In the workshop or active classroom, as in the theatre, Shakespeare 'performs' supremely well.

Nevertheless, Shakespeare's monumental reputation inevitably hangs over many as they embark on study of the plays. By 'monumentalism' I mean an aura bestowed by culture and history, a feeling of immoderate respect, that can make people snobbishly subservient or cowed and resentful. Monumentalism in Shakespeare, as in the rest of the curriculum, entombs and mystifies the object of study. It can demoralise, and weaken the resolve of the learner. This book presents active teaching approaches as a way of overcoming the mental encrustation, the deadening effects, of monumentalism in Shakespeare, but it is written with general principles in mind and applies to the situation of learners wherever monumentalism positions them outside their field of study.

The greatest value of teaching Shakespeare actively is that it allows all the students participating to be included and to be successful. All those subject to the power of the classical curriculum should, I believe, through their education, reach a personal sense of equilibrium, a kind of ease, with that power. Students should feel secure in their own achievement[8] whatever its level. Systems of education often bring about exactly the opposite effect, leaving many humiliated by their encounter with cultural power, rather than proud of their own experience of using that power. Students who have been Hamlet, who have made, in a workshop, their own experience of 'To be, or not to be', will not be intimidated by the cultural power assigned to the play, whatever uses are made of it in the educational system, nor will they feel excluded if they have themselves moved into their own relationship of equilibrium with the play and its power – just as any Greek, standing in the theatre at Epidaurus, regardless of their personal knowledge or ignorance of their ancient culture, should feel a sense of equanimity before that massive cultural monument. And, like those native Greeks, our native citizens should not be told that access to their cultural tradition is restricted and that some are best to leave it well alone, so: 'To the monument!'

## The teacher repositioned: 'Shakespeare shared'

The first question for the teacher[9] is how to draw learners into the field of study. It is easy, traditional even, for us as teachers to contribute further to the process of exclusion. At worst, our own success, enthusiasm and expertise become part of that exclusion, part of the cultural monument, yet it is not our brief to hide our skill, to leave students to their own devices or to fail to lead. We need to lead from within the learning group (we *are* within it, in the sense that it operates through a kind of collaborative, symbolic production) – just as parents are very obviously within the learning group when participating in their child's acquisition of skills and knowledge; the pedagogical significance of the phrase *in loco parentis* is much overlooked. Teachers, like parents, are constantly mediating the world, acting like storytellers to introduce new material and ideas, and remaining forever on the look-out for ways of cultivating independent exploration in their students, but to present our 'teaching narratives' we have to move over, repositioning ourselves as tellers and involving the listeners in the telling of the tale.

When this happens, ownership becomes shared and it moves to the centre of the learning activity. This is obvious in the play-learning of young children. I was taking my daughter to see *A Midsummer Night's*

*Dream*. How should we prepare for an experience which, first of all, I wanted her to enjoy? I would not risk turning it into 'a story out of my head', nor would I, as an introduction, read her the versions by Charles and Mary Lamb or even Bernard Miles. My basic principle would be a basic teaching principle: facilitating ownership. Certainly this means involvement, active learning, participation, but with the aim of learners making the material their own, 'owning' it. She would need to make the characters of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* her own, as well as the story and some of the language. Her bedroom was full of soft toys. 'Who's to be the powerful Duke Theseus of Athens?' I began. 'Who's to be Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, the famous tribe of warrior women?' As I told her about each character, she selected whom she thought to be an appropriate player – from teddy bears, Snoopy, Jemima Puddleduck, Mr Punch, a monkey, dolls. I had written names on self-adhesive labels, which she stuck on the toys, and as each was identified we discussed where in the room they should go (Where would the wood near Athens actually be?) and to which group they might belong. Lysander's dowager aunt doesn't appear in the play but she has a house seven leagues from Athens, and to get to it when they elope, Lysander and Hermia must cross the wood outside the town. This characterising and locating, with the child moving the toys around as the story unfolds, is proprietorial: the child creates the scene, the people and the narrative. At the same time, without slowing down this process (and thereby taking it back from the child), I brought in fragments of original language, especially magical forest language[10] – 'Ill met by moonlight …', 'I know a bank …', 'You spotted snakes with double tongue …', 'What thou seest when thou dost wake …', 'Thou art transformed …'.

At another time, when we went to see Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, we used a familiar, traditional device (the toy theatre) in the same sort of way. We made cut-out characters, coloured them with felt pens, stuck on large expressive faces, wrote names on them and moved them through the ballet on a cardboard-box stage.[11]

These preparatory readings are 'productions of the text', rather than responses to it. They are about making meanings with the text, an active process which is personal but not private. It is less 'my view' or 'my response' and more of a process like theatre production, taking up the text, experimenting with it, improvising imagery and meaning from whatever materials and resources are to hand. In workshops this becomes a group process, and for it to function well, it must not be exclusive, with a few in the limelight and the rest observing – like those