

Shakespeare: Friend or foe?



Nobulali Dangazela is the founder and Managing Director of Nobulali Productions. She is a Mandela Rhodes scholar and has a Masters Degree in Dramatic Arts. She is a sought after motivational speaker, facilitator and thespian. She is a Naledi judge and a Drama For Life (DFL) lecturer, based at Wits university. She worked closely with the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) as a local artist in the Shakespeare: World Wide classroom project.



Selloane Mokuku is a Drama For Life (DFL) alumni, with a Masters Degree in Dramatic Arts. She is a ShakeXperience facilitator, Programmes and Curriculum Developer for Nobulali productions (www.shakexperience.com). She worked as an independent Consultant for various UN organisations and research institutes, and currently lectures for DFL based at Wits University.

'Now is [truly] the winter of our discontent! These are the words that come to mind when one thinks about the English set work of one's year. As it means hours and hours of awkward encounters with rather boring men in tights, monotonous thees and thous, convoluted stories about someone who killed someone's something and now seeks revenge and has returned in 2013 through reincarnation as an English teacher because, yes, one has to read ... Shakespeare!'



Roshnee Gupta and Nobulali Dangazela

The greatest complaint is that *'Shakespeare is boring and irrelevant in our lives! And that's why he sucks'*. These were the words uttered by matriculants from Nobulali's former high school in 2008. *Perhaps?* She responded. Nevertheless, their objection did not fall on deaf ears. An opportunity to make Shakespeare and other set works prescribed by the Department of Education (DOE) as well as Independent Examination Board (IEB) easy to understand came into being, and a facilitation approach called *Shakexperience*^{TM1} was birthed.

In South Africa, Shakespeare is amongst the few playwrights that English Heads of Department have to choose from. Which of Shakespeare's 37 plays get chosen depends on whether a school is English

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First Language or First Additional Language. And, although optional for First Additional Language (FAL), there are other schools, such as Prudence High School, that still dare to take the bull by the horns to become one of the two schools (amongst 56) doing Shakespeare in Soweto.

Numerous efforts have been undertaken to make Shakespeare discernible. These include The Shakespeare School's Project (1988), and, more recently, the *Maskew Miller Longman Active Shakespeare* series. As of 2008 Shakexperience™ joined the ranks and became one of these responsive efforts.

As a model, Shakexperience™ uses applied drama and theatre methodologies to facilitate teaching and learning. Pedagogically, it relies on four components:

- eXite (our way of teaching),
- eXplore (our way of learning),
- eXchange, (our way of growing); and
- eXamine (our way of improving).

Accordingly, the self (marked X) is at the centre of one's own learning. After many years of trial and error, the method finally got a nod from the *Royal Shakespeare Company* (RSC)² as we got to participate in an international initiative called *Shakespeare: A World Classroom project*, led by the RSC. The project ran from August 2011 to September 2012. This article shares a reflexive narrative of using the method during the collaboration.



Lucky Masipa and participants

The project aimed at exploring where, how, and why Shakespeare is taught around the world, with 2012 having marked 400 years since his death. The focal point of the project was put on young people's lived experiences of Shakespeare in different cultures and countries. Participating countries included China, India, United States of America, Oman, and South Africa.

Each country was represented by a team of three: a teacher, a learner and an artist. South Africa was an exception to the rule with two of each. The participating schools included Dendron Secondary School, and Ridgeway College. Dendron Secondary school is a non-fee paying school from Limpopo, and Ridgeway College is a diverse private school that

prides itself on its community based initiatives.

The exchange also allowed for a member of staff from the RSC to visit South Africa. Tracy Irish, a former RSC Education Programme Developer, shares in her travel blog, *Shakespeare: A World Classroom*, that when she got to South Africa, she was introduced to *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is a concept that she thinks Shakespeare would have loved, as it permeates his work with its 'universal human truths, and it expresses the value and strength of community, a cornerstone of theatre.'

Theatre practitioner Tim Prentki maintains that applied drama and theatre processes enable participants to (re)discover their innate capabilities for play, for

imagining, for creating, and for relating to others by exploring the self in the other and the other in the self.³ Thus the experience enabled the participating schools to have positive and, at times, challenging discoveries about their circumstances. Through both international and local visits, it also enabled them to meet other young people from other countries and communities, with Shakespeare being the common denominator. They soon found that, although RSC research shows that half the world's children read Shakespeare, many complaints such as 'boring and irrelevant' were rife.

The young people shared the idea that perhaps it is how Shakespeare is taught that led them to engage or disengage with his work. The RSC argues, in their *Stand up for Shakespeare* manifesto for schools, that learners get most out of Shakespeare when they:

- Do it on their feet!
- See it live!
- Start it earlier!

In a similar manner through Shakexperience™, we endeavour to eXite learners to engage with Shakespeare by introducing exercises that acknowledge and make use of contemporary examples of people who display similar traits to the characters created by the bard.

Before the learners and teachers left for the UK, we offered them an interactive introductory workshop to *Othello*. During this workshop we invited the learners and teachers to play (eXplore) with us because Shakespeare wrote plays to be performed and not novels to be read. We note that play is 'an activity executed within limits of space and time, accompanied by feeling...and the consciousness that it is different from ordinary life'⁴. We therefore negotiate the intended learning outcomes with the learners and like the RSC, co-create meaning and Shakespeare's text through a shared space.

When we arrived in one of the participating schools (Dendron), there was an anxiety about the space in which we would conduct a Shakespeare workshop. We are quickly reminded about Peter Brook's notion of an 'empty space', and how it rejects the need for traditional theatre spaces.⁵ We marvel at a school hall being transformed into a village where witches meet to fore-shadow the downfall of Macbeth.

At Ridegeway College, we witnessed how a school field and administration block turned into a great site specific space for a moving out door performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The performance culminated in a banquet shared by the actors and the audience as the theatre's fourth wall gave way to reasoned imagination. In the process we shared (eXchange) our experiences on the text, the author and relevance of the play in South Africa today, and in a subliminal way continue the dialogue that Educationalist Paulo Freire advocated for in any learning environment⁶.



Lucky Masipa and participants



Mualusi Ravele and participants

The programme, which was sponsored by the British Council, led to great outcomes for all involved. Lucky Masipa, from Dendron Secondary School, went on (with the support of her teacher Marvellous Jore) to establish 'Willy Shakers'. Although

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we tried to put forward some concerns with the said name, the group of grade 8-12 found it rather befitting as they insisted they were "shaking off the myth that Shakespeare is boring". They are using theatre techniques to learn about English, History, and Geography presented in Shakespeare's plays. Jore adds that it came as a pleasant surprise to know that English has outshone all the other subjects in the 2012 matric results, with a record breaking 23 distinctions.

He argues that it is because: *I am making use of the techniques I learnt through the project, and I am encouraged to be creative in my teaching, learn with my students, but at the same time adhere to curriculum requirements'.*

Jore also posits that there are not enough debates in schools to engage Shakespeare in post-apartheid South Africa, a move which we believe can go a long way in shaping the Shakespeare discourse. Nelson Mandela's official biographer, Anthony Sampson, shares that *'if the Robben Islanders had a common culture and text, it was not the Bible or the Koran, but Shakespeare.'*

Perhaps it is not about whether Shakespeare is a friend or a foe, but it is about a search for creative means through which Shakespeare could be made relevant and not boring to our contemporary context.

In South Africa today, theatre can play a significant role in encouraging conversations about our plight, and we believe Shakespeare is as relevant to us, as he was to the English in Elizabethan times. And from the look of things so do learners who avoid reading Shakespeare but rather have a *Shakespreantial* way of:

Doing Shakespeare on their feet!

NOTES

- 1 www.shakexperience.com
 - 2 <http://www.rsc.org.uk/>
 - 3 Prentki, 2009
 - 4 Huzinga, 1955
 - 5 Brook, 1968
 - 6 Freire, 1971
- Photos: Steward Hemsley (2012/13)

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