

Concord Academy
Student Reflections
March 2011

Will

Romeo and Juliet

The first day here has really made me so excited about what the rest of the week will bring. Our “classroom” portion of the day focused on an in-depth breakdown of Romeo And Juliet, and the various different things that made up the production. Firstly, we heard a very, very enthusiastic description of the artificiality essential to the plot of Romeo and Juliet, and helped us all understand that the play makes up for the horrible luck it gives its characters with the catharsis it gives its audience. Then, we got to have a session where we did several exercises from Cicily Berry’s oeuvre, which really helped me understand the power and thought that Shakespeare put into every syllable, every punctuation mark of his work. An exercise where we were paired up, one of us Montague and one of us Capulet, and given a scene to read while physically attempting to push one another across the room was a particular highlight. The instructor was quite engaging, whether loudly exhorting a boy playing Lord Capulet “Don’t ACT angry, BE ANGRY!” or doing one of the most fun and effective theatre warm-ups I’ve ever taken part in. After that session and a great lunch in Stratford, we came back and had another great session with a voice coach that helped us use the depth of Shakespeare’s text to understand our characters better, as well as telling us some interesting trivia. For example, In Romeo’s famous “Banished” speech, Shakespeare litters the text with “h” sounds because, according to the voice coach, the diaphragm movement to create that particular sound has a direct connection with the tear ducts. Really interesting stuff. Last but not least, we saw the show, which was a simply amazing experience. I connected with all the characters, specifically Romeo, who was played in a very nuanced and textured manner, and surprisingly, Paris. I thought it was a really interesting decision to leave him in, as he’s oft-cut, to show that he’s convinced he’s just as in love with Juliet as Romeo, and to have Romeo kill one more person. The staging was also excellent, (fire!) and we had wonderful seats. I can’t wait for the rest of the week.

Lear

Wow. King Lear may be long and complicated, but the RSC’s production of it was the most engaged I’ve ever been by the material, having encountered it a few times before. Gregory Hicks did an amazing job, from his impeccable diction to his supremely convincing physicality. For someone significantly younger and fitter than Lear, he took the role on in a really interesting and forceful manner. We again had great seats, and as good as Lear was, I was perhaps even more engaged by Edmund and Edgar, who both had incredible charisma (a couple of the females in our group were quite taken with Edmund and haven’t stopped talking about him since the show, despite the fact that he’s pretty evil. The costume changes throughout the play were really interesting if a teensy bit confusing, but I ended up getting it later on in the show. Earlier today, we met with Sam Troughton, the actor who played Romeo in Romeo and Juliet, and he clued us in on the process of taking up one of Shakespeare’s most famous male roles, and the cast bonding between him and Juliet to make their relationship work onstage, and various other miscellany about being in the RSC. Needless to say, it was a really cool experience, especially because his performance as Romeo was one of my favorites I’ve

seen in the theatre.

Hamlet & The Tempest

Today we had the pleasure of seeing two plays in the smaller Swan Theatre at the RSC. Hamlet was a real treat, as one of the longest, most ponderous and sweeping plays of Shakespeare's was effectively told in about an hour. The kid-centric nature of the performance didn't bother me at all, and it was actually very interesting how they managed to slip in the feeling of some of the play's taboo subjects (Hamlet's Oedipus complex, his physical abuse of Ophelia, and Ophelia's mental illness and suicide) without explicitly addressing them and causing the primarily young audience discomfort or confusing them. The themes were still there, but under wraps enough that the younger audience understood them without understanding why they understood them, in my opinion. Hamlet also came off pretty likeable, more so than in most other interpretations I've seen of his character. I liked The Tempest even more in this format, both because it has a smaller play to condense into an hour, and because it seemed like more fun for everyone involved. The performance of Prospero might have been the best I've seen all week, and I include the productions of King Lear and Romeo and Juliet when I say that. The comedic nature of the show worked very well, both appealing to the younger people and adults in the audience. Also, perhaps the most impressive part of the show was the puppetry, as both Ariel and Caliban were given more lifelike characterizations than by most humans who play those roles. As the only comedy we'll see here in Stratford, The Tempest stood out as being both well produced and leaving me feeling great the whole night afterwards.

Antony and Cleopatra

We started off today with a really interesting discussion about the two productions we saw at the Swan, Hamlet and The Tempest. The woman leading the discussion asked some very interesting questions about the real level of family-friendliness of the productions, and whether we would take our own children to see them. After that, we had a really cool wig and makeup demo, where a lot of my friends got dressed up as pirates or princesses, and a very nice woman used the terms "tit-shelf" and "pee-bag" seriously. After that, we got to see a more adult show at the Swan Theatre, which was nice because it works quite well for productions other than ones aimed for kids, and it's a quite intimate experience, especially when one has seats as good as we did. It was really interesting to see the versatility and depth of the actors, (one went from playing Kent in Lear to Antony, which is quite the transition, and one went from playing Regan to Cleopatra, which wasn't as big a transition.) and to see that their efforts were in no way diminished when playing to a smaller crowd in a smaller space. I'm sad to say that this was the last play I'll be seeing in Stratford, but this was a life-changing experience and I'm sure to try to see the shows when they come to America and come back to Stratford as soon as I can!

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Katalina

The program was truly an eye-opening experience for me. It broke down all of my pre-conceived notions that Shakespeare was impossible to understand and inaccessible. The clarity and ease with which we learned about Shakespeare made his plays exhilarating to explore as opposed to daunting and scary. Now, I know not only love and respect Shakespeare but feel the confidence to approach his plays without the guidance of someone else.

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Jack

So before Stratford, I had never actually seen a Shakespeare play. I was never really a theater person, but I have always appreciated the work of Shakespeare. Not to say that I was in love with Shakespeare or instantly infatuated with his work, but steadily and surely as I read more and more of his plays through various English classes, I liked him more and more. I think *Macbeth* was the first play where I really started to get into his work, mostly because I found myself able to understand his language. So I started to appreciate Shakespeare more and more. Especially since I was taking Latin, we started reading *Caesar* and learning all about Roman History, I became more familiar with Roman authors and works, and realize how well Shakespeare incorporated those into his writing. Suddenly I started picking up more and more on the nuances of his writing, which I realize now, are some of his most impressive feats.

My favorite part of the Shakespeare trip was actually seeing the plays for the first time. I had read most of them, and we had discussed them in English classes, so I was pretty aware of the plot and such. But the best part of the trip for me was that the plays kept getting better and better. I really liked *Romeo and Juliet*, but then it was fun to see *King Lear* for the first time on stage because we had just discussed it in an english class a couple months ago. And at the end, *Antony and Cleopatra* was my favorite play of them all. It was also really interesting to see all of the characters played by the same actors. For example it was fun to see an actress play Regan as well as Cleopatra, or an actor play Kent as well as Mark Antony. And after the play it was great to talk about the design choices that the director used and why he made some decisions. It was also enlightening to be able to talk to the actors, about how they chose to play their roles, and how they prepared for their roles.

Thanks for such a great opportunity,

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James

Today we had a lecture on *Romeo and Juliet*. Wow. I didn't realize a lecture could be so engaging! Not only did it make me very excited to see the show later, it pointed out details of the play I had never thought about before. It also made seeing the production that much more exciting because it helped to get me thinking about the play. Then, of course, seeing the play was awesome! *Romeo and Juliet* felt alive! The actors were amazing! Ah, such a good first day!

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Evan

I had always considered *Romeo and Juliet* my least favorite Shakespeare play. Overdone, often misused or misquoted, and certainly, in my opinion, not as deep and meaty as say *Othello* or *Macbeth*. So when it was the first show we went to see during our stay in Stratford, I sat down in my seat thinking that the theatre for that week would start at the low point and improve from there.

The play kicked off with a very well choreographed fight scene. I was immediately hooked. I had seen *Romeo and Juliet* before, even with a small skirmish during this part, but none in which the movements were so elaborate or the stakes were so high. And at the climax of the fight, when the tension began to peak, a large jet of fire erupted from the stage. I'm not British, but, only from knowledge of Harry Potter do I assume the correct translation of what I said is, 'Bloody Hell!' I was hooked for the rest of the show. And the post-show discussion was almost as fun, especially when we got our own intimate Q&A with Romeo himself. I have hopes that my school will repeat the trip next year!

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Claire

For me this trip provided the opportunity to experience Shakespeare at a far more academic level than ever before. I remember watching the fight scene in *Romeo and Juliet* when, out of nowhere, a stream of fire burst up from the floor. In that moment I realized that however well I might know these plays, I was going to experience these works in creative ways I had never before imagined. Additionally, as I watched *Anthony and Cleopatra* for the very first time -- my first time encountering the text as well -- I was struck by how relevant the issues portrayed in the text were today, in the 21st century. The choice between duty and love rang through each line. As a reflection to the piece one of the leaders asked our group whether we would choose duty or love and whether we would move to a foreign country for love. The discussion sparked debate, our class splitting down the middle on both questions, and such a discussion showed how relevant Shakespeare is. I have always loved his works but it wasn't until I saw his plays in Stratford, began to discuss the themes throughout his works and considered the choices of period vs. modern costuming that I saw how relevant his works truly are.

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Andrew

Before I went to England I had never left the States. In fact, I had never left the coast. Visiting another country was an eye-opening experience. A short trip across the pond led to an ocean of experience. While in England I became addicted to tea, saw some of the greatest theater in the world, and worked on my English accent. I'll never forget that production of *Romeo and Juliet*. I expected a drab performance of a tried and tested crowd-pleaser, but instead was blown away. It opened with a fight sequence that was so well choreographed I could have cried. They had a fire pit. Who's crazy enough to put a fire pit in a Shakespeare play? The English.

But the theatre wasn't the only good thing on that tour. Anne Hathaway's cottage was beautiful. I couldn't stop taking pictures of the flowers. Come to think of it I couldn't stop taking pictures of Stratford in general. The food was delicious. I think I went to Moo-Moo's more often than I ate lunch. Which was delicious. The houses were wonderful. They were clean and tidy, breakfast was delicious, and it was nice to come home to a nice warm bed after a long day of Shakespeare. The only part of the trip I didn't enjoy was the plane flight back, because I knew no trip I could ever go on would be that brilliant.

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Nora

We just saw the young people's production of *Hamlet* in the Swan Theatre. It was quite the show! Well, I guess any hour and a half production of *Hamlet* is bound to be interesting and this one was no exception. Afterwards, I couldn't seem to get the way Ophelia was portrayed when she "goes mad" out of my mind. She had wild, twisted hair and almost clownish paint on her face that I found exceptionally disturbing, yet all the children around us (and, this being a "Young People's" production in the mid-afternoon, there were many) were laughing uproariously at the absurdity of her appearance and found what I think to be Ophelia's scene of utmost desperation to be silly and comical. This was really intriguing to me. Of course, I'm not condemning their behavior because, really, I don't believe there is such a thing as a "wrong" reaction to theatre (and that's what I truly love about it). I was just quite surprised by how much their laughter affected my experience of this particular scene. I found that their amusement actually enhanced the disturbing nature of this segment of the play, turning the atmosphere in that of a carnival where one feels even worse for the person on display because of the viewers around him/her who are laughing.

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Anna

I loved this morning's lecture on *Romeo and Juliet*. We learned so many interesting facts and scraps of information about random things in the play, like Juliet's birthday and her age, and what Benvolio's name means. I love learning about symbolism, the little things that Shakespeare thought of to completely pull each play together. He paid attention to so many details; for example, this afternoon the Royal Shakespeare Company voice and text coach told us that in Romeo's speech ("Tis torture, and not mercy..."), all the "h" sounds lead up to his collapse at the end of the piece. She said that aspirating repeatedly throughout the speech helps the actor to reinforce the physical connection between the diaphragm and the top of the mouth and the tear ducts. Who other than Shakespeare would have thought to help out his actors like that?