

## 2012 Lakeside School Student Reflections for Shakespeare Course

After three weeks of intense analysis of four of Shakespeare's plays, I was ready for a fresh perspective on Shakespeare. Our trip to Stratford-Upon-Avon turned out to be entertaining, amusing, and educational. I especially enjoyed our time with the guest speakers from the Royal Shakespeare Company who lectured us on the plays and their productions, specifically the voice coach named Stephen. Stephen taught us what it's like to be an actor; he said that an actor should feel "confused", "dizzy", and "out of breath" when performing Shakespeare. He showed us that actors are actually putting themselves at risk of physical harm every night, making sacrifices for and commitments to the theater. I was especially intrigued by what Stephen said about the voices of the actors in Shakespeare's time; apparently, Irish, Scottish, and even American Southern accents are more closely aligned with Shakespeare's pronunciation than Standard British accents.

We learned more about Shakespeare's surroundings by visiting his hometown. I learned that his daughter's husband was a doctor and how Shakespeare's acquaintance with his son-in-law may have shaped his attitude toward the doctors in his plays: before he and his son-in-law met, all of the doctors in Shakespeare's plays were either bumbling or sinister, like Dr. Pinch in *A Comedy of Errors*, but after the two men became closer, Shakespeare began giving his doctor characters more credibility. Later in our trip, I enjoyed seeing a sketch of the kind of theater that Shakespeare was writing for, a thrust stage. When the Royal Shakespeare Company built the new theater, they built it as a thrust theater to best imitate the conditions Shakespeare had in mind for his plays. In all of our activities in Stratford, I felt very close to Shakespeare. Holding the baptistery pages between my fingers and getting to touch one of the Quartos are some of those local experiences that can't be found anywhere else, and I am so glad that we had the opportunity to be up close and personal with Shakespeare's world.

Our time in Stratford meshed our literary analysis of the plays in Seattle with a new theatrical perspective on Shakespeare. Although we concentrated most of our time in Stratford on learning about the theater and how Shakespeare's plays are meant to be performed, I also came to understand how a writer changes throughout his career. Shakespeare, who started his career focusing mainly on plot, transformed into a writer who centered his works on his strong, complex characters. These characters were brought to life with performances from great actors like Jonjo O'Neill, playing Richard III, and Jonathan Slinger as Malvolio. The risks that these actors took in their performances were impressive; they worked hard to make their characters both believable and entertaining. Both of these Associate Artists to the Royal Shakespeare Company managed to portray Shakespeare's characters as deep, multi-faceted beings.

Shakespeare's language is important for the production on all levels, but I never realized that his words can provide hints as to blocking and stage direction. Since Shakespeare didn't leave many explicit suggestions for the directors and actors in terms of movement, the inferences they can make from the text guide them in their interpretation. While the text is significant, physicality plays a large part in any complete and enjoyable performance of one of Shakespeare's plays, especially his comedies. The action counts just as much as the text. I didn't realize before this trip that Shakespeare can be--and should be!--much more than his words. For directors and actors, Shakespeare's lack of direction is actually a gift, allowing each production to be original and inventive.

If Shakespeare had had 400 years to work on his plays, he probably would have made significant changes to his work. I think that the productions have become more and more enjoyable over time, mainly because they have departed from the traditional presentations of Shakespeare. This creativity (modern sets, crazy costumes, miming, rapping) is what I think Shakespeare would have wanted for his works. Shakespeare's plays were never meant to be stagnant, but rather ever-

changing. Slight variations are inevitable, even in a single production from night to night, and sometimes the greatest changes can be the most fun and interesting to watch.

Our time in Stratford-upon-Avon made me realize why Shakespeare's plays have held audiences' interest for centuries: their flexibility and sparsely annotated texts allow for additions made by directors, actors, and crew members, which can change the entire production. *Twelfth Night* is the only play that our class studied in-depth in Seattle and watched live in Stratford; the Stratford production was an excellent example of a creative, modern spin on a Shakespearian comedy. The focus of the play seemed to shift from the conventional heroes, Olivia, Viola, and the Duke, to the antics of Sir Toby and Andrew Aguecheek, as well as the victimization of Malvolio. In my mind's eye, as I read the play for the first time, I pictured Olivia as a blonde and just as melodramatic as the languishing Duke, while Viola, in my vision, was subtle and nuanced. However, I thoroughly enjoyed seeing a new take on the play, especially the decisions regarding set design. The hotel theme added a comedic layer that dripped of tackiness, but not in a distasteful way. The hotel setting made the play lovable, realistic, and relevant. The hotel location is much smaller than the distant courts that we saw in the movie, making the play feel more crowded and explaining the frequent mix-ups of Viola and Sebastian. I really enjoyed making comparisons between how *Twelfth Night* unfolded in my mind during my reading of the play and how the director and actors mounted the play using their own interpretations.

Like *Twelfth Night*, the production we watched of *A Comedy of Errors* stretched the play in unexpected ways, even going so far as to add characters that weren't written in the text. Our group was lucky enough to see the play twice, and I noticed that I followed different characters with each viewing. Our vantage point changed on the second night, and although it was the same production and same cast, it felt like a fresh show because of our new perspective. I came to realize how much the audience's mood and level of engagement can define the success of a production. These small additions and changes really added to the depth and complexity of the show for me.

Shakespeare has remained popular for centuries because of his flexibility, and his influence has spread all over the world. The Royal Shakespeare Company may be a local organization that centers itself on Shakespeare's Birthplace, but I came to realize during my time there that Shakespeare's plays are of global interest. That is why so many tourists come to see his birthplace and his original surroundings. Our trip to Stratford-upon-Avon strengthened my understanding of the universal attraction to Shakespeare.

In Seattle, our approach was to treat Shakespeare's plays not as theatrical productions, but as literary works. We analyzed the language and themes that stood out in the plays and wrote essays regarding those specific points. It was intriguing to delve into the universal themes in Shakespeare's plays while we were in Seattle, but our trip to Stratford took my understanding to an entirely new level. Nearly everyone with whom we met said that Shakespeare's plays were never meant to be studied as texts, but rather enjoyed as performances. I could not agree more. I loved studying the theatrical side of Shakespeare, and I felt that the two segments of our course complemented each other wonderfully.

I used to think of Shakespeare's work as unmoving, timeless, and even written in stone. What I have come to appreciate, however, are the nuanced performances and directorial decisions that can bring his stories to life in surprising ways. He provides an incredibly strong platform on which directors and actors can build. Now I can see that variation is a vital part of Shakespeare's work, and that work on his plays will never be finished.

- Eleanor R.

I learned so much in our classes in Seattle, and our experiences in Stratford added more to my knowledge. When we were discussing the plays at Lakeside, I realized how relevant they are to our

issues today. I also discovered how valuable it is to annotate the text, and sometimes memorize parts of it, so one can really understand it. The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust provided classes and experiences that exceeded my expectations. We were given speeches, and told to read them out loud while walking around the room. This helped me understand what that character was trying to say, because while I was moving the text wasn't as overwhelming. When we saw the Royal Shakespeare Theater performances I loved when the speeches I had memorized were spoken. I felt as though I was officially a scholar of the plays, when I was silently mouthing the words, in the audience. While in Stratford I was presented with new ways of thinking about Shakespeare's plays, fun acting games, and an amazing meeting with the actor Bruce Mackinnon! I wanted to soak everything we learned up like a sponge. All the places we went, things we learned, and people we met; but in this reflection I will mention only the most memorable moments and thoughts I had on our trip.

I was very nervous to travel abroad without my family for the first time. I had no need to worry; even though it sounds cheesy our group really became family. We listened to each other for weeks in discussions of Shakespeare, and trusted one another. Arriving in a foreign land these bonds became stronger, and we were able to relax and enjoy each other's company. I think that our group helped me have the best climate to soak up all of the information we learned at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. Throughout the trip I saw how much the small town of Stratford thrived off of this amazing author that supposedly lived there years ago.

The authorship debate of Shakespeare's works really bothered me when we learned about it in the U.S. but after our enriching trip, I have a whole new perspective. I don't care who wrote the amazing plays we saw, I am glad that someone brought such creative ideas to life through theater. I don't think that Shakespeare's works would have been preserved so well, if the issues they dealt with weren't so omnipresent. Someone mentioned in our discussion that the portrayal of *Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night* seemed too modern. Our teacher Nick replied that the plays were written to be performed in a modern way in Shakespeare's time period. The jokes were made about politicians that would have been sitting in the audience, or a historical event that happened recently. I believe the Royal Shakespeare Company made the right decision by performing the plays in a modern set. It seemed to make it more relatable and enjoyable for the audience, which is what Shakespeare would have wanted.

After classes, tours, and seeing a play, I feel more and more in love with Shakespeare every night (and maybe the actors in the plays a little too). I realized that the text is important, but the actors add so much to the performance. Their talent of pulling energy from the lines and putting it into performance is incredible, and had us all on the edge of our seats or buckled over in laughter. When Bruce Mackinnon talked to us about playing a Dromio he told us that it is really a different play every night. Sometimes they get laughs from the audience with a certain joke, but on other nights the theater is silent when they say that same joke. He said that it is really up to the pair of the actors on stage, to feel the energy from the audience and change their acting depending on what the atmosphere is like.

We were all roaring with laughter at the Dromios' performance in *Comedy of Errors*, so we asked Bruce how he had become such a hilarious character. Bruce told us: "Everyone has a natural clown in them." This quote really made an impact on me. I realized that these weeks of studying Shakespeare and seeing such amazing performances put on by the Royal Shakespeare Company, helped me find the clown inside of me. Reading, memorizing, analyzing, and watching Shakespeare has changed me, and the way I interpret any piece of writing set before me now. Who knows, I might just take drama next year! Thank you Ms. Aegerter for, truthfully, the most enriching four weeks of my life.

- Evy L.

After spending a week in Stratford-Upon-Avon with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, let me first and foremost say that my appreciation for Shakespeare and his work has been nothing but enhanced.

Looking back, I can say that my experience in Stratford-Upon-Avon was nothing like I'd imagined it to be. Because we'd already finished the graded portions of the course, I really expected the trip to just be a week-long vacation with my friends and a couple teachers. And so when Ms. Aegerter showed us our schedule for our classes with the Birthplace Trust, I can say I was honestly disappointed. But now, I can't even imagine watching those performances without attending the Birthplace Trust classes. For example, since we'd spent the last three weeks intensely working over Shakespeare's plays, being able to discuss the plays in that same way really helped me understand the plays and strengthened my own experience with the live performances. And compared to our class discussions, where most of us hadn't read our focus plays in great detail, being able to work with Shakespearean professors and experts offered so many new opinions and different insights.

I liked especially that we were given these really in-depth pre and post performance discussions from each of the professors. Not only were they inherently interesting, but it was so helpful hearing from a different expert for every play; some of the experts had written very specific, college theses on the performances, and others just wanted to hear our opinions! Because of the variety, I never felt like I was forced to watch and interpret each of the stories in the same way, and at the same time they made me proactively challenge my own opinions.

Along with the strictly analytical performance discussions, we were also given lectures and work periods with a costume designer and Stratford historians - of which I especially liked the historical lecture on Shakespeare and viewing the Birthplace Trust's archives. And along with that, we took field trips every day to historical sites around Stratford that were connected to Shakespeare and his life. These work periods allowed us to view Shakespeare's possible inspirations and aspirations in his writing, and the mindset of people during the time in which he lived. Having this background information and in-depth understanding of Shakespeare's life really made me look at his plays differently, and I especially found myself comparing how the actors and directors in the performances we saw interpreted his words.

In that short week, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust exposed me to something that will undoubtedly last me a life time. I still cannot believe the intensity and the enthusiasm that each and every person we worked with brought to those classes. They all loved Shakespeare and loved teaching Shakespeare, and each in their own way. It was difficult not to compare the Birthplace Trust program to that of Lakeside's curriculum, where each student and teacher is so invested in their own learning and teaching. I guess in that way nothing much changed between classes at Lakeside and classes in Stratford – and I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. Thank you Ms. Aegerter, Mr. Burgess, Nick, Crystal, Paul, and everyone else at Lakeside and the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust who made this trip and the programs available. It's an experience I won't easily forget.

- Henry F.

My week in Stratford-Upon-Avon was one of the best trips I've taken. Any qualms that I may have had about being on a different continent than my parents for the first time vanished as soon as our group was introduced to Stratford with a musical rendition of *The Owl and the Pussycat* in front of Shakespeare's birthplace. Although the poem is one of my mom's favorites, instead of making me homesick, I immediately wanted to immerse myself in the obvious passion this town had for great writing, especially Shakespeare's. Luckily, this immersion was quite easy thanks to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. Through drama exercises, performances, workshops, lectures, and discussions, everything we did in Stratford was related to Shakespeare.

After reading *The Comedy of Errors* on the plane, I wasn't completely sure what to think; on one hand, the play seemed like it could be performed very well, but I couldn't find a lot of depth in the play. In our time at Lakeside, we had been discussing plays with very complicated themes and motifs, but *Comedy* seemed to mostly confront the issue of identity and not much else. By the end of the play, I had also become frustrated by how often the two sets of twins barely missed seeing each other; it felt very repetitive. With all of these preconceptions in my mind, I was looking forward to seeing the play, but I was not expecting much. However, after our pre-play lecture from Rev. Dr. Paul Edmondson, I found myself much more excited to see it. He brought to light the many ways the play could be performed, introducing us to quite a few different interpretations. He also delved deeper into the motif of water or a drop of water and how it pertained to identity. Getting a sense for the depth of the play, as well as the wide range of performance interpretations, made me eager to see how the Royal Shakespeare Company would perform these themes, and how they would use costumes, sets, and different emotions to interpret the play.

Watching the plays performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company was definitely one of the highlights of the trip for me. I enjoyed seeing *Twelfth Night* after discussing it so extensively in class because even though I thought I knew it very well, there were still some parts of the performance that gave me a new view of the play. I was extremely impressed by *Richard III*, too, because I did not like the play very much as I was reading it, but the RSC managed to perform it very well and I ended up having a new appreciation for the play. The only play I did not love was *A Soldier in Every Son (Aztec)*. Although I loved the costumes and the acting was good, the play itself was not very interesting to me. Seeing a non-Shakespearean play did not further my understanding of Shakespeare's works, although it did serve to give me more appreciation of Shakespeare's talent.

I found our various workshops throughout the week very helpful. Doing drama exercises with Crystal helped my confidence as an actress, and discussing Shakespeare with Nick really helped my appreciation and understanding of Shakespeare and his work. Having Michael Corbridge come in and work with us on how to perform Shakespeare gave me a greater appreciation for the actors performing the plays. He had us repeat the same lines countless times just to gain a better understanding of them; getting more of an idea of how much work actors put into acting their scenes perfectly was so interesting. Talking to Bruce Mackinnon (one of the Dromios in *Comedy*) also gave me more appreciation for performance because he described to us how the actors were given lectures and had many discussions on the play before they performed it; they also went through every line of the play, making sure each one made sense to the actor speaking it. The dedication and the work that was put into all of the plays astounded me, and made me so much more grateful for the opportunity to see such in-depth and careful performances of Shakespeare.

- Hannah K.

I couldn't stop thinking about the conspiracy theories. As we walked through the cobble stone roads of Stratford, my mind was distracted. We just spent three weeks studying the plays of Shakespeare and now we had finally arrived in his birthplace, but what if it was all a fluke? It sure seemed like a nice deal for Stratford-upon-Avon to me. The whole town thrived off of what could easily be a fallacy. Othello restaurants and Merchant of Venice bed and breakfasts were interspersed between the narrow streets and tourist shops named. Shakespeare's legacy literally ran through the town of Stratford. Despite all of the signs pointing to Shakespeare's infamous career, I could not get Edward Vere out of my head. This was not a great place to be starting a week at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, I admit. However, I quickly started to realize that maybe I was focusing on the wrong thing.

The lectures the first morning immediately helped me get my mind off the authorship controversy. Instead, we focused on the reason why Shakespeare was famous. When we were given the arduous task of guessing why the plays were so successful, I realized I didn't really know. We were told that it was because of the open-ended questions posed in each play. *Of course!* I couldn't help thinking of our seminars. The lectures also reminded me of our presentations at Lakeside. The past three weeks

we watched or presented four history of performances of our own, and each day in Stratford, we had a version given to us. I learned that a version of *Comedy of Errors* was played with only one Antipholus and Dromio and it was not very successful, that *Twelfth Night* has been performed with clowns, and that one interpretation of the events on Illyria are that they are driven by boredom. On a meta-level, the histories of performance proved that no matter who wrote the plays, there will always be a new angle of interpretation and creative opportunity. The plays were not lost with the author, in fact, they are still very much alive today and ever-transforming.

In addition to lecturing us, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust also provided us with multiple workshops. Starting with the first workshop, taught by Crystal and Nick, I saw more to the Birthplace than just Shakespeare. By simply miming a range of emotions and spewing strange sounds, I got to look at the week from a different perspective; the actors. Reader's Theatre in Lakeside gave me appreciation for the people who performed Shakespeare. Crystal and Nick helped further my respect. We have discussed how actors are the true literary interpreters and I saw this come to light in Stratford. For example, on Thursday Crystal had us divide one of Adriana's speeches up. Depending on the tone of the thought we categorized the lines into ethos, pathos and logos. Later that night when we saw Adriana perform the speech, it was clear that she had done the same thing. At some points her voice was whiny to convey pathos, at others she seemed stern and full of logos. She also referred to herself with body language indicating ethos. The workshops helped me not only understand the plays, but also shed light on the role of actors. After all, the performers illuminate the text to its full potential.

The moment I stepped into the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, the plays started to transform in my head. The text, which had once been static on a page, was now bouncing around in creative ways across the set. My curiosity spiked as I tried to anticipate how the fish tank was going to be included into *Comedy of Errors*. I really enjoyed how Angela described watching theater in the *Twelfth Night* lecture. "You have to use both your right and your left brain," she said. Our time at the Shakespeare Birthplace allowed us to do just that. Whether I was carefully listening to Margaret's thought breaks in *Richard III* or completely frightened but entranced by the fight scene; both sides of my brain were fully stimulated.

I don't know if Shakespeare actually wrote the plays that we saw or even if only one person was responsible for them. I don't know if Shakespeare was really born in the room above his father's house and I really have no clue about most of Shakespeare's life. What I do know however is what really matters. The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust gave me a chance to fully immerse myself in the world of theater. It is now clear to me, no matter who the author is, the power of the plays written by who we assume was Shakespeare. Our week was full of historical facts arguing for Shakespeare as the true author, but I hope others aren't as distracted as I was by the authorship debate. No matter who wrote the plays four hundred years ago, each night as the lights dimmed we escaped for a few hours into another world.

- Maddie R.

Our trip to Stratford-Upon-Avon brought our course full circle. Visiting Shakespeare's home town gave us insight into the person behind the bard and brought new value to his plays. Through the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust's historical sites I came to understand how Shakespeare himself came about, through their workshops and shows at the Royal Shakespeare Company I was able to witness how much work goes into putting on these powerful plays and how they have evolved over time. This 4D Shakespeare experience allowed me to experience the Bard's life and greatest accomplishments as they should be: beyond the page. Shakespeare's works are beautiful, but because of our stay in Stratford, I now know that in order to experience all of the intended effects of Shakespeare's pieces, one must be physically involved.

On our very first day with the SBT we were ordered on our feet to engage in improv-orientated ice-breakers. We began the day this way and ended the same way, wandering through Shakespeare's birthplace. By actually being able to see how his family lived, know what his father did for a living, and learn about his school days, Shakespeare was made more tangible for me. It was amazing to think that this man, who was dressed as a girl as a child to ward off the plague and who dropped out of school, was the same playwright whose works we were studying in class. Each visit to the preserved sites revealed new information about Shakespeare that made him more relatable, and his works somewhat less foreign to me. The background provided by the Birthplace Trust on Shakespeare himself, made his works even more appealing to me.

This appreciation of Shakespeare's works extended to everyone who was willing to attempt bringing the plays to life. Through the SBT we got to work with voice coaches, hair & makeup artists, and even actors from the RSC. Each experience was hands-on, engaging, and enlightening in a way that I did not expect. Michael Borbridge, the RSC's voice coach walked us through some of the exercises he puts his actors through when they're just beginning to prepare for a show. He explained how to approach the complicated speeches of Shakespeare's world. Brenda Leedham used her skills with makeup and costumes to transform myself and some of my classmates into whole other people. She spoke vibrantly of everything that goes into making a perfect persona for the actors and the time constraints backstage whenever a change was needed. It was incredibly fun to be transformed into a completely different person but it also made me wonder what the actors had to do in Shakespeare's day when they didn't have chewable blood pellets or boxes of jello and malleable clay. Of all of our workshops, my favorite would have to be the Q&A session with the actor who played Dromio of Syracuse in *The Comedy of Errors*, Bruce Mackinnon. He was kind, funny, and forthright. He answered all of our questions about the play, his life, and his acting. His demeanor was so strikingly different from that of his character onstage that I realized how amazing the actors of the RSC must be to completely efface their own personalities to become one that Shakespeare has dreamt up for us to interpret.

We saw Bruce perform again in *Twelfth Night* on Wednesday and in *The Comedy of Errors* again on Friday. He and his fellow performers were phenomenal in every production we saw. We saw 4 different plays in all: *Comedy of Errors*, *A Soldier In Every Son*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Richard III*. *A Soldier In Every Son* was the only non-Shakespearean play we saw. Shakespeare's plays were the highlight of the trip for me. We learned all about Shakespeare and his life during the day, but experienced his legacy at the theater in the evening. The sets, costumes, and actors all brought Shakespeare's words to life in a way that I could never imagine. Anything that I was unable to understand while reading the plays in class was made clear through the vocal implications and gestures of the actors. In Shakespeare's day the stage was the main way that people were able to experience his works; personally, I believe it was the best way. Though many of them were semi-modern adaptations, Shakespeare's unique style was still apparent. I loved it. As soon as the lights in the theater went down I knew that I was about to witness something beautiful. Seeing the plays in Stratford actually awakened a want to be in theater myself. I now have a passion for Shakespeare and acting that I did not have before. The entire trip added to this feeling and I hope that I will be able to return to Stratford and visit the SBT and RSC sometime in the near future.

- Mia K.

At the beginning of the week I thought we were going to learn all about William Shakespeare: his life, inspirations, children, etc. It turned out that we learned about most of his inspirations while we were still in Seattle and his life is a mystery to everyone, including the experts. After that first day when Liz asked us "Why is Shakespeare famous?" and there weren't really any right answers; I realized that this trip was not going to be about Shakespeare's life, but about his art, his legacy.

Learning that Shakespeare became a phenomenon against all odds shed light on Stratfordians' belief in Shakespeare. Being the first of his parents' children to survive the plague in his day was

exquisite, but after quitting school at 14, because his father was in debt, and he still became the author we know today is extraordinary. Liz agreed that his life story played a role in his success/fame because rooting for the underdog makes for a good story. Although we received some background information from his life, we only know about what he did when he was in Stratford, which was a small amount of time. After this first day of class we no longer talked about his life, and only focused on his plays.

*A Soldier in Every Son* gave me insight on how people can be inspired by Shakespeare's works in order to create their own play. It was not the best play, but it taught me to appreciate the good things about the play—it's rich background and history. It also made me realize how hard it is to be in the live acting business: with the recycling of actors, heavy spiting, and performing plays that you might not enjoy or like. The stage in which they have to perform in is not negotiable and a bigger stage would have worked better for this play, but the smaller theater worked well for Richard III.

The plot line in Richard III is based on his interactions with the crowd, so a smaller theater and stage fit the play. *A Soldier in Every Son* takes place in the mountains and fields near the Amazon rainforest, which in order to be accurately portray they would need a bigger stage. Analyzing the two plays held in the same theater showed me the importance of the stage. The actors have no say in where they perform or what they perform and that is not an easy task to accept. Although this play did not have a full house each night, the other plays did. These are well-known plays, which received better reviews from our group.

*Twelfth Night* and *Comedy of Errors* were plays we saw on the new stage and they were represented effectively. Everyone had things they would have liked to change like: their portrayal of Feste's character, but most people (in our class) gave it around five stars. Furthermore, everyone agreed that the music within *Twelfth Night* added to the plot and unify the play with the audience. We loved seeing *Comedy of Errors* twice because we got to see it from a different angle. When we had watched the play twice, it dawned on us how easily things could go wrong when performing live and how flexible actors had to be in case anything went wrong. We also saw things we missed the first time around, which added to our understanding of the play.

Understanding the beauty of live production was the gift we received at the end of our week in Stratford. We were allowed to delve into the lives of the actors and producers and even got to pretend to be actors, when we performed parts of the plays, and producers, when we were criticizing and analyzing the scripts of plays and deciding how we would direct the performances. This was an experience that I wish every scholar studying Shakespeare could acquire because they would leave with a deeper and richer knowledge of the world of Shakespeare. They will get the chance to study the plays on their own and not worry about what Shakespeare intended. His plays are great because they enrich the lives of everyone who reads them and we received that enrichment fully. The life in which William Shakespeare lived adds another layer to his plays that one can't receive without experiencing it in Shakespeare's hometown.

- Robrenisha W.

During our one week visit to Stratford we got to see and do many amazing things that added to our appreciation of Shakespeare's world and work, such as visiting sites relevant to Shakespeare's life and going to plays nightly. While we were there we got to work with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust which I think highly complemented our learning at Lakeside, as well as enhanced our overall understanding of Shakespeare. Three things that the Birthplace Trust did that added to our learning were the lectures, the discussions and the visitors they brought in for us.

Throughout our six days we got to hear four different lectures on *A Soldier in Every Son*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night* and 'The Life, Times and Historical Content of Shakespeare.' All of these added to our understanding of Shakespeare because we got to hear different viewpoints on

plays that we've read, and we got to hear it from people who spend so much of their lives studying Shakespeare. The lecture, 'The Life, Times and Historical Content of Shakespeare', I thought was especially informative because it gave us good background and helped us understand better who Shakespeare was. I also learned a lot from the discussions that were held. It gave us a chance to express what we thought, but in a way that was led by somebody who knew so much more than we did and could help us get more in depth. The people who help led the discussions were so excited about what we were talking about and it really added to the experience.

Despite how educational the lectures and discussions were, admittedly my favorite thing that the Birthplace Trust did with us was bring in the visitors. We got to meet a RSC actor, Bruce MacKinnion, we got to do a RSC voice class with Michael Corbridge and we got to see and participate in a wigs and makeup demonstration with Brenda Leedham. I think these activities helped develop our understanding of Shakespeare in a more unconventional way- not just the typical way that lectures and discussions do. With Bruce we got to learn more about what it's like to perform Shakespeare and the decisions that go into every production of a play. Bruce also reinforced what we said in the class room about different interpretations. He told us about his personal experiences with how arguments happen sometimes with actors and directors over an interpretation of a certain passage or the like. With him we gained an appreciation of what it means to be an actor because he is doing three Shakespeare plays at once. With Mr. Corbridge we really got to understand how to break down a speech or monologue, even if at first we weren't really sure what everything meant. It was very interactive and we got a chance to practice what he told us multiple times which reinforced what he was trying to teach. With Ms. Leedham we got to learn a lot of fun facts about behind the scenes at a play. Like Bruce, she gave us an appreciation about what it's like to work backstage and how busy they are. And while she didn't teach us a lot about Shakespeare specifically, she supplemented our whole understanding of Shakespeare's world vs. the current world of acting.

Overall, I think this experience was very worthwhile and educational. While not everything that we did there was directly related to Shakespeare, in some way it was connected and added to our whole understanding and appreciation of theatre and playwrights in general. For example, being able to explore the archives and actually touch old materials with my hands is something that people don't get to do too often, and the fact that the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust made it happen is amazing. On top of that, going to all those plays really sparked my interest in live theater, as well as watching Shakespeare live. I think the Birthplace Trust had a good schedule that mixed things up and kept everything interesting with the different variations of activities that we did each day. They definitely enhanced my overall understanding and appreciation of many things.

- Ashley R.

After being able to explore Stratford-Upon-Avon, in all its quaint and quirky glory, I have a much more profound appreciation for Shakespeare's work. Although I was disappointed to hear about the authorship controversy before arriving in Stratford, being able to see Shakespeare's work performed live was an absolutely unforgettable experience. I keep asking myself why Shakespeare appeals to me and so many others, and why Shakespeare is relevant today. His name is known throughout the world and so are many of his terms, phrases and lines. Even people who have not studied Shakespeare, or who have just barely done so, are familiar with the line from Hamlet "To be or not to be, that is the question" But why? It's important to think about why so much of Shakespeare's work is still alive, adapted and cherished to this day. I believe it has to do with a number of things: The unending ways in which we can interpret the meaning behind his words, his ability to explore the complexities of human emotion and even the intricacies of interpersonal relationships. Even Shakespeare's comedies explore the deepest of emotions and Shakespeare has the ability to find beauty even in death.

Over time, as artists became involved with Shakespeare's plays, adaptations were made and directors began to stray further from the script. Shakespeare's plays began to incorporate dance, and

some were thrown into different settings. Part of the beauty behind Shakespeare's work lies in his personal mystery and in the mystery of his plays. Shakespeare wrote minimal stage directions leaving much up to interpretation. It makes a reader, an actor or a director wonder, would Shakespeare have approved of certain variations or recreations of his work? How would he have wanted certain characters to move, to speak or to talk? This mystery gives directors and actors just enough freedom to stay true to Shakespeare's intentions while expanding and growing using Shakespeare's words as motivation while still pleasing ever changing audiences. Watching the Royal Shakespeare Company perform *Richard III*, *A Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night* sparked my love for Shakespeare. I enjoyed Shakespeare but seeing the live performances with red-faced, sweating and spitting actors, was truly remarkable. The beauty lies within the passion of the actors and the rhythm of the words and verse. It really is music. It is sometimes difficult to understand the meaning behind Shakespeare's words when reading it off a page and it can even feel like a foreign language. This is because Shakespeare's work was not meant to be read on a page, it was meant to be heard and it was meant to be felt. The Royal Shakespeare Company renditions of *Richard III*, *A Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night* made me see the pure beauty in Shakespeare's prose, verse, soliloquies, and interpersonal exchanges. The fact that these plays can be performed over and over again with slight adaptations and variations, while still maintaining undying beauty and relevance will never cease to amaze me.

Another incredible part of our stay in Stratford was the lectures. Part of the reason I enjoyed the lectures we observed at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust was not always necessarily in the content, but in the lecturer's passion for and devotion to Shakespeare's work. The admiration and the adoration the lecturers showed was utterly inspirational. Another experience in Stratford that I will never forget was being able to ask Bruce Mckennan questions about performing Shakespeare. He spoke of the fact that he made a good living but that he was not rich. This made me appreciate the plays and actors even more. Bruce's profession was based on his love for acting and not based on money. These days there is so much pressure to be successful, that people get caught up in thinking that money and success are synonymous. Talking to Bruce made me think about my future profession. I truly believe that I will be content making less money doing something I am passionate about then by working solely for the purpose of making money.

Studying Shakespeare was a gratifying and special opportunity. I will remember our trip to Stratford-Upon-Avon for the rest of my life. I didn't used to appreciate Shakespeare but Shakespeare's work now has a special place in my heart. The incredible rhetoric employed in *Henry V*, the pure comedy in *Twelfth Night*, the heartbreak of *Richard the III* (which I only truly understood after seeing it performed), and my deep connection to Othello are all parts of Shakespeare that I will cherish forever. I feel so lucky and so blessed to have had the opportunity to experience the culture of Stratford, and watch some of the best actors perform work written hundreds of years earlier, still relevant today. I think back to my time in Stratford often and I will cherish these memories always.

- Djenanway S.

The week we spent in Stratford and the education we received through the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust caused me to see Shakespeare's work from a new angle. Learning about Shakespeare's background added another layer of meaning his plays; for example, Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* not long after his son Hamnet died, and the similarity between their names and the close period of time between Hamnet's death and *Hamlet* being written suggests that Shakespeare may have written the play in honor of his son. In that case, certain scenes in *Hamlet* could be actual references to Hamnet and carry a different implication. Visiting the town and Shakespeare's birthplace offered a glimpse of Shakespeare's life and his social status during the time. Descriptions of the tannery outside of Shakespeare's house signified his humble class and showed how remarkable it was for someone of his social rank to write such beautiful plays. Shakespeare's class adds new meaning to his portrayal of the commoners; he grants certain moments of eloquence to characters such as the Boy in *Henry V*

and Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and seems to convey the message that commoners can also be intelligent.

The lectures at the Birthplace Trust and the performances of the plays added another dimension to Shakespeare's plays. They reminded me that his plays were meant to be performed and not read. Shakespeare emphasized on the performance, and the scripts merely reminded the actors of their lines. While the text is more or less the same, no production (even by the same director) is ever the same. Our chance to see *The Comedy of Errors* twice showed me that every performance has its differences. For example, the Duke was the one interrogating Aegeon during the first performance while the security guard assumed these duties in the second performance. The Dromios also did not run into the door in the second performance. Although we learned about different portrayals of Shakespeare's plays through the History of Performance presentations, *The Comedy of Errors* gave me a first-hand look on how different interpretations can carry different meaning to the same text, and this is the reason why Shakespeare remains popular today.

I realized after seeing the two performances that the plays in Shakespeare's time probably would have varied as well. Many minor things can go wrong in a production, and because of this, actors often need to use improv for unexpected situations. I would imagine that such errors also happened in Shakespeare's time, and that each performance would have been unique from one another.

The performances really enlivened the text, I did not think *The Comedy of Errors* was very funny when I read it, and it was the actors who made the scenes comedic through their movements and expressions. Bruce's lecture and his talk about actors' responsibility to bring life to the play taught me how crucial timing is, especially in comedies. For example, a pause before Angelo's line "That chain, sir, that you had of me" made the difference between silence and an uproar of laughter from the audience. Hearing from the actors and reenacting the scenes prompted me to take a deeper look into the meaning of the words. I especially enjoyed the game where one person is the "body" while the other is the "arms" and we act out the first scene in the play. While fun and amusing, playing the game and watching the other team's portrayal of the scene solidified my understanding. Similarly, our session with the voice coach and reading Queen Margaret's speech while walking around the room helped me gather the rhythms and repetition that I missed during my first reading of *Richard III*. It was only then when I noticed how the clever repetition of "my Edward" and "your Richard" underlined the royal family's sins against Margaret.

The way acting deepened my interpretation of the plays emphasized Ms. Aegerter's earlier idea that actors and directors are the real Shakespeare experts. In order to effectively express the emotions and thoughts embedded in the script, the actors must first decipher the meanings of Shakespeare's words. *Richard III* seemed to be a long and tedious read, but my enjoyment of the performance proved the significance of the stage to Shakespeare's work. Actors and directors have the power to transform a dull play and add small details to invoke interest from the audience. I imagined Richard to be a one-dimensional evil character who calculatingly plots his way to the throne. However, Richard in the play was cheeky and engaging; his direct address to the audience and amusement at others falling into his trap cause us to become invested in his character. The director finds specific scenes to insert comedic moments that I would have never imagined while reading the play. The scene where Richard threw his bible over his shoulder and waved goodbye to the audience was very memorable and captured my attention. The performances, lectures, and tour of Shakespeare's environment provided background and context about his plays and helped me further develop my understanding of his work and his influences.

- Shirley C.

I really had no idea what to expect when it came to the structure of the main part of our days in Stratford, and I assumed that the Birthplace trust would impart historical information about Shakespeare and England in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in the time we would spend with them. I

was pleasantly surprised; the depth of information on plays and Shakespeare from Birthplace lecturers was impressive and had little overlap with what we had studied before the trip. For example, Dr. Paul's session on Comedy of Error gave religious context for the play when he discussed the correlation between the Feast of the Holy Innocents and the theme of birth in the play, originally performed on Dec 28<sup>th</sup>. The biographical information that we received during these lectures was also useful and the most complete, especially when we could put what we knew about Shakespeare's life in context as we visited the places he lived around town and could see the primary source documents from which the Birthplace trust scholars had gathered their information. However, I didn't really care for the lecture format of the presentations (though all of the presenters were knowledgeable and passionate). This is why the exercises that brought the plays to life were so refreshing. Working with the scenes and monologues from a Comedy of Errors was immensely satisfying for three reasons: it allowed us to actively participate in our study of the play, to better understand the text, and also to experience the processes of the actors at the RSC. These sessions went hand-in-hand with our encounters with Bruce, the Voice coach, and the Makeup/Wig artist from the RSC, and it made seeing the plays a whole lot more personal.

The plays were, without a doubt, the highlight of the trip. Unexcited as I was by the idea of seeing Comedy of Errors twice, I was stunned by the quality of the performance on the first night. It is probably the most enjoyable play I have ever seen, and increased in power tenfold by my low expectations. The productions by the RSC provided the clearest Shakespearean dialect I have been exposed to, including any film adaptations we had seen in class. What made the Shakespeare productions so powerful were the modern twists and the modern humor, the energy of the actors in conjunction with the experience of the thrust stage, and the quality of the set and direction. Everything had been kicked up a notch. When I think back on my expectations for Richard III, I was not enthused by the prospect of a good two and a half hours of watching an evil man manipulate his surroundings. I had enjoyed the movie (as a big Ian McKellen fan), but didn't really enjoy the story. But I was engrossed in the play from the moment we entered the Swan theatre. The set was so simple and beautiful. Jonjo O'Neill's performance was breathtaking. I rooted for his Richard III, though he was just as despicable as ever. It didn't feel long, like the movie did. I felt similarly about Twelfth Night and Comedy of Errors. The only production I didn't really enjoy was the Aztec play. I had high expectations – it seemed like it would be a colorfully designed epic. The opening dance and the conch opening had so much promise, but the story was convoluted, and no character was particularly well developed. As we discussed the morning after, it would have made a lovely Cirque Du Soleil show, but fell flat as a play. This brings me to the post-play discussions – a very satisfying component of our viewing experiences. The morning discussions were very fulfilling. Being able to rant or rave about a performance and analyze the choices made by the RSC was therapeutic after a disappointing production and prolonged the fun of an entertaining one. In fact, I think that the sandwich of a lecture, a play, and a post-viewing discussion was a good one. The only negative was that occasionally the lecture would influence my perception of the play before I had seen it. For example, Dr. Paul had mentioned that he disliked when Nell was portrayed in A Comedy of Errors, so when she came out on stage, I immediately thought "Well, that's a strike against this performance". But I thought that the character was well-acted, added humor to the performance, and didn't detract from my experience in any way. I wish that I had had no preconceived notion about her part in the play, though understanding that different choices can be made in a production is an important thing that I learned when watching the RSC's productions.

All in all, my experience in Stratford was enriching and enlightening. Just being able to experience some of the things Shakespeare had, and to see some of Shakespeare's plays with the energy of a live performance, really felt like a satisfying end to our intense study of some of Shakespeare's work. As a student, I am inspired by the enthusiasm of all those I met in Stratford to continue to enjoy Shakespeare's works in any way I can.

- Sneha D.

When I try to look at my time with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in retrospect, I honestly do not know where to begin. There were so many amazing experiences, and I learned so much about Shakespeare and his plays; in many instances, the scholars at the Birthplace explored the plays and their themes from a completely different perspective than mine. As a result, they shared with me an interpretation that enriched my own interpretations of the plays, especially in areas that I may have inadvertently overlooked. Because of the lectures that they gave before the plays, I felt like they gave me themes or certain things to look for during the performances. With this guidance, I felt as if I could be a really active part of the audience and that I could absorb more of the plays' meanings than I could have if I did not have any previous knowledge of the stories and the themes.

On the first day, I could immediately tell that the people who work at the Birthplace are very passionate about Shakespeare and his plays. For example, the woman who delivered the lecture about Shakespeare's life is obviously knowledgeable about his life and is aware that many of the Birthplace's claims are based on conjecture and extrapolation from known facts. Unfortunately, her passion for Shakespeare manifested itself in her inclination to be contrary: whenever a student attempted to answer a question, she promptly found a flaw in his or her response, which gave the impression that she thought that she was the authority on Shakespeare and his fame. Later that same day, a man named Paul spoke to us about *The Comedy of Errors*. He was noticeably cheerful and seemed to have a naturally optimistic attitude; consequently, he was particularly engaging, and he seemed genuinely excited to be able to share his knowledge about the play with us. Most of his lecture was about the repeated motif of water in the play, which is something that I did not notice at all when I read it. He explored the metaphor of being a single drop of water lost in a giant expanse the size of the ocean and how many characters express this sentiment explicitly and perpetuate this theme with words like "water," "waves," and "gulf." During the performance, I made a concerted effort to follow this theme, and I noticed that the production made it easy to actually *see* the theme because of the props they used (for example, the fish tank showed up many times throughout the duration of the play).

In our next lecture about *Twelfth Night* – unfortunately, we didn't have a chance to discuss *Richard III*, which ended up being my favorite production of all the ones that we saw – Anjna gave a very broad interpretation of the play, with a specific emphasis on Feste and Malvolio. Focusing on these two characters was very fitting because at the performance I realized that they are very central to the meaning of and the action in the play. She explained that Feste's use of music, especially the lyrics, showed his wisdom and held very interesting commentaries, perhaps from Shakespeare himself, on life and the role of theater. She also gave an insight into Malvolio's character and how he has suppressed his human urges in such a way that he goes overboard in his attempt to impress Olivia after finding the letter. With these two new perceptions of these characters, I found myself really focusing on them during the production. As a result, I saw how music linked the entire play and how Feste's music contained the truth about the haunting reality of life (putting the harmony in a minor key complemented the words), and I also perceived Malvolio in another light: I realized that he is a much more dimensional character than I thought when I read the play, and I could genuinely feel his pain and hurt at the end of the play.

Although the time devoted to Wigs and Makeup, Voice Class, talking to Bruce, and directing our own scenes from *The Comedy of Errors* was not specific to learning about Shakespeare and his plays, I feel like they really enhanced my understanding of acting and gave me a new appreciation for theater. I realized how much work goes into making a production and how the actors and directors must have a clear vision of the play in order to create a unique yet understandable version of the play.

The combination of all these experiences gave me a new appreciation for Shakespeare's work because I now see how much thought he put into his plays and how everything in his screenplays and the productions are deliberate to enhance the message and the viewing experience. I also think that

since two out of the three plays that we saw were ones that we did not study, we were able to come to the productions with a relatively fresh outlook. Therefore, I saw how our rigorous work at school laid a foundation upon which I was able to gain a deeper understanding of other plays without having to engage in long, in-depth conversations. Throughout this experience, I have learned so much about Shakespeare, his plays, and the themes within the plays, but I also have gained an interest and appreciation for theater.

- *Taylor H.*