

Shakespeare Stratford-upon-Avon
Summer 2015 Class Reflections
Lakeside School – Seattle, Washington

Nacole Abram:

Our trip to Stratford-upon-Avon was the cherry on top to the three-week long course. Although the fast pace class and forces you to put in a lot of hard work, I was able to see quite immediately how much more comfortable I was with Shakespeare's material. Not only am I able to read the plays and retell the story in my own words, but I am also comfortable with digging deeper into the text to come up with my own ideas of what Shakespeare was trying to accomplish or share in writing these plays. Going to Stratford only helped with my confidence. The workshops that we were able to participate in allowed for me to see that the ideas I had come up with (and we had come up with in class) when reading the plays were not completely crazy. I am now eager to read other plays on my own and try to grasp sections of them on my own. Not only were the workshops fun and helpful to our understanding of different interpretations of the plays, but we were also able to see a couple of plays. The highlight of our time in Stratford for me was in watching the plays. When reading the plays it is sometimes hard to imagine how one would act out some certain line or convey some feeling; however, the expertise of the actors allowed for a lot of those small confusing parts to be cleared up. One thing that I was taken by surprise by was the modern references weaved into the plays. Not only did it make the plays more interesting to watch, but it made them more relatable. All the way around I appreciate the class and the opportunities we had in Stratford.

Anna Blake:

While reading *The Merchant of Venice* the week prior to leaving for Stratford-Upon-Avon, I wasn't incredibly impressed. Perhaps it was my waning energy at the close of the three weeks of Shakespeare, or perhaps it was the conflicting emotions the play provides its viewers, but I much preferred our previous plays. However, studying and watching *The Merchant of Venice* in Stratford-Upon-Avon completely changed my mind. The pre-play discussion with Anjna built my enthusiasm—there were details we discussed that I hadn't noticed, and important intricacies like setting that I hadn't internalized. The RSC performance then completely exceeded my expectations. It shed a whole different light on every relationship—Portia was awkward and less elegant, Antonio was weak and helpless, Bassanio (with a jaw that could cut glass) was manipulative yet still in love with Antonio, and Lancelot, a character whom I thought useless while reading the play, provided not only comedic relief but a gateway between the audience and the play. That relationship between audience and Shakespeare's characters was also highlighted through the minimal set. The reflective surfaces on stage enabled the audience to see ourselves, which pulled us into the world of the play and left us more conflicted with our inability to help the characters. The beauty of Shakespeare's work is that, because of the always-relevant themes, there are an infinite number of interpretations. Originally, Shylock was a villain, but now we feel a huge amount of sympathy for Shylock and anger for what he has to go through. Each person interprets *The Merchant of Venice* differently, from happily ever after to a tragic and unfulfilled ending. As my drama teacher, Alban, would say, the mark of a good play is leaving the audience wanting more, which is precisely what the RSC performance of *The Merchant of Venice*

accomplished. Leaving the theater with a troubled and unsatisfied yet completely awed feeling after the performance of a play I originally disliked, I was finally able to fully comprehend the genius of Shakespeare's work.

Anderson Chen:

Reading Shakespeare's plays is one thing. Seeing film versions of them is another. Watching actors up front and personally performing live after months of rehearsal on a thrust stage? Whoa. Although reading and analyzing so many of Shakespeare's plays helped me understand *Volpone* and *Othello* a lot, it's safe to say that bringing the play to life allowed much more room for interpretation, reflection, and it brought an element of realism to the play that I would never have been able to get just reading them. Learning a little about the history, setting, and interesting notes on the director's take on a particular production was really eye opening and helpful as well. However, the treat was the play itself--in some ways, it erased the idea that the play was intended for an audience centuries ago, teaching everyone a lesson that is still prevalent today and making us question and think on human nature and the characters in everyone. The plays brought out the complexity and duality of many characters in the plays, especially Shylock and *Othello*. Although the sonnet class and makeup class were cool and all, I feel like the plays were what we came to Stratford for. It's amazing how Shakespeare could produce such a lasting legacy in his plays.

Eduardo Gutierrez:

Where Do I Begin? The trip was a wonderful experience for me. My favorite part of the trip was definitely seeing the plays. I did not think *The Merchant of Venice* was so complex until I saw the play. I was particularly surprised by the way Portia showed contempt on her face when she saw Bassiano and Antonio kiss in front of her, and I was shocked when Shylock was spit on throughout the play. Lorenzo had a much larger part in the play than I thought he would have. *Othello* was also a highlight on the trip. I was not sure how they were going to make Iago a black character but they played it beautifully. I thought the music was perfect for Iago's speeches and I was always on my toes while watching. When Iago laughed at the end I was surprised because I never thought Iago could be happy at the end. I loved finishing each play and being so blown away that I had to discuss the plays on the way back to the bed and breakfasts. I thought that Nick was a great lecturer and I was always captivated by what he had to say. The sonnet workshop was also a highlight for me because I was so captivated by Shakespeare's plays that I did not realize he had so many sonnets that I could wrap my head around. The classes that we had on Shakespeare's life and London during his time help me understand some of the decisions that he made in his plays like not making Banquo a bad guy in *Macbeth*. The only thing that I was displeased with was the play *Volpone*. I wish I had read the play before watching it and I think the play was too long. Of course this play that I did not like helped me understand why Shakespeare is so timeless and how much more a head of his time Shakespeare was than his contemporaries.

Maris Kamalu:

The most enriching aspect of this experience for me has to have been our study of *Othello* and later being able to attend a production of the play unlike anything I'd ever seen before. I had read *Othello* and studied it in class, but never had it

been presented to me in the way that it was by Shakespeare Birthplace Trust lecturer Nick. He was so engaging, as were all of the staff, and really challenged us to question the motives and psyches of every character. I had only ever had one very standard interpretation presented to me in class: Iago is evil; Desdemona docile and so on, so to be presented such a liberating challenge was daunting but quite exciting. When we saw the production of Othello, a post-apocalyptic interpretation, with a personable and sassy Iago, a brute Othello, and wild Desdemona, I was on the edge of my seat. Lines took on new meaning, subtle choices had big impacts, and although I knew what was going to happen, I had not a clue how the company that had turned this play on its head would go about it. Being newly in possession of a much greater deal of knowledge on Shakespeare's works and Shakespeare productions I was able to better appreciate and understand what may have been the best production I've ever seen. This was not only an impressive production but one that enriched, solidified, and tested that which I learned at Lakeside and in Stratford. It truly was an amazing production and an unforgettable experience.

Pearl Lam

The highlight of this trip was most definitely watching the Royal Shakespeare Company's Performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. The actors were incredible and Polly Findlay, the director, did an amazing job of interpreting the play in such a unique way. After seeing it, I had such conflicted views; I didn't know which characters to like and my previous understanding had been destroyed. Despite having such a minimalistic set, the performance was really engaging and provocative. I also really enjoyed the thrust stage. I've seen plays on thrust stages before, but none of them had this effect; I felt like I was really part of the scene. The actors delivered incredible speeches and I was really engaged and moved. What I also really liked was how we got to debrief the day after. I enjoyed talking to Dr. Anjna Chouhan before about what to expect and after about our thoughts. It was nice to be able to speak with one of the actors afterwards and get his point of view on the moral of the play and the meaning behind the simple set. I thought the whole process was very satisfying; I liked reading the play, discussing it in class and with a lecturer, watching it, and discussing it more.

Ifrah Mumin:

One of the highlights of the Stratford trip for me, was seeing the plays Merchant of Venice and Othello. Merchant was definitely my favorite, and since it was the only play that we watched and also read as a class, it was so cool to be able to compare what I envisioned while reading, with what the director chose to do. For example, while reading Merchant, I didn't really despise Portia like I did after watching the play. Seeing and hearing her be so hypocritical while giving the speech about "mercy," and then watching her be so cruel to Shylock was heartbreaking. While I was reading the play, I definitely felt pity for Shylock, but I had not nearly as much pity and sympathy as I did while watching the performance. Even though I've not fully read Othello (I've read bits and scenes for my acting monologue) it was so amazing to see what the directors chose to do with the play. For example, while I was reading parts of Othello, I never imagined Iago as being brown, besides the fact that the character is not specifically white, he is even racist towards Othello, which made the play even more impressive to me. While I was reading the play I was thinking how could Othello really trust Iago over his wife Desdemona? But after watching the play, I could see why two men who had to endure the same racism and prejudice while trying to achieve great things would be so close. Getting to watch these plays in Stratford-Upon-Avon really helped to not only bring a new perspective to what I've read, but also solidify ideas and themes in the plays. I only wish we get to watch more plays!

Kendall Titus:

Our class trip to Stratford-upon-Avon was definitely one of the most unforgettable experiences of my life so far. It was enlightening to hear lectures and have workshops with professors who are so in love with studying Shakespeare. They all have a contagious excitement, which created an engaging learning environment for me at the Birthplace Trust. The most memorable part of the trip for me was the Royal Shakespeare Company production of *The Merchant of Venice*. I was

awestruck by the performance because of how attached I felt to all of the characters, and in particular the relationship between Bassanio and Antonio. I loved how this production portrayed their relationship as a bittersweet and impossible love. In addition, Portia was phenomenal in making the audience feel for her, and whether they liked her or not, I didn't speak to anyone after the performance who didn't have a strong opinion about her character! Most importantly, seeing *The Merchant of Venice* on stage solidified in my mind that Shakespeare wrote his plays to be performed, acted, and spoken out loud in front of hundreds of people. The play captivated me a hundred times more when I saw it performed on stage than when I read it to myself. The opportunities we had, provided by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, to watch and listen to Shakespeare's plays on stage made studying Shakespeare beforehand seem much more meaningful, and now my appreciation for his work and his language are even greater than they were before this trip.

Loren Wallace:

Going to Stratford-upon-Avon was an overall fantastic experience. Before going to England, I had only seen one play, and I remember it being very boring. Because of this, I was not really sure what to expect from seeing the Shakespeare plays. I'm happy to say that I was blown away by both the plays we saw by Shakespeare, and I really enjoyed the play we saw by Ben Jonson. Out of everything we did on the trip, my highlight was seeing *The Merchant of Venice*. When we entered the theatre, I was immediately surprised by how close we were to the stage and how far the stage came out into the audience. I loved the play, especially the performance of Shylock. I really liked the actor's interpretation and really felt for Shylock throughout the play. My second favorite moment of the trip was the lecture we received on *Othello* from Nick Walton. It was super engaging and made me much more excited for *Othello* than I was before receiving the lecture. Overall, I think the experience of going to Stratford really helped me to understand the plays as plays. When I read them and had not yet seen them, I had a hard time visualizing different interpretations and fully understanding different themes. When I saw the *The Merchant of Venice*, not only did I understand a different interpretation of that play, but it helped me to understand how to think about and read other Shakespeare plays. Going to Stratford was really an amazing trip, and has inspired me to read more Shakespeare in the future!

Dihu Wu:

Our visit to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust was immensely satisfying and eye-opening. The one thing that really struck me was the boundless enthusiasm that each and every one of the presenters at the Birthplace Trust brought to their job. These were people who had dedicated their entire lives to the preservation and study of one man who had died 400 years ago. It was obvious from the passion and zeal they brought to their job that they were largely responsible for the bard's memory and legacy living on for so long and affecting so many people. One of the best presenters had to be Nick Walton. Though every one of the presenters at the Birthplace Trust brought an obvious love for Shakespeare's works, Nick had the ability not just to convey his affection and emotion but also to infect other people with it. When he presented us with a synopsis and brief analysis of *Othello*, he turned a potentially mundane lecture into something much more. It became a collective experiencing of Nick's love for the play and whetted everyone's appetite for what would be our final play in Stratford. Much of the excitement that I felt for *Othello* came not from the things I had heard and studied beforehand, but rather Nick's impassioned one-hour session about the play. Though it is relatively easy for one to analyze the different themes of *Othello*, Nick allowed us to see the emotional impact of the play as well as the ideas Shakespeare was trying to express. In many ways, this was the best possible way to prepare us for the viewing of the performance. Though the entire Stratford experience will be very memorable, this moment in particular will stand out because it perfectly sums up the spirit of the small town: everything revolves around Shakespeare.