

# **LABOURS LOST OR LABOURS WON? TEACHING SHAKESPEARE THROUGH PERFORMANCE AT SOFIA UNIVERSITY**

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## **What is the end of study?**

During the past decade in Bulgaria we have witnessed a gradual but steady decline of students' interest in the humanities. Naturally, reasons for this may be sought along different political, economic and cultural lines – yet the main contention of this paper is that it would not be fair for educators and policy-makers to do so before they have addressed effectively a fundamental problem that lies at the very heart of current educational practices. Studying the humanities in Bulgaria still largely consists of memorising content, reproducing other people's critical thinking, and second-guessing instructors' expectations. Educational activities are often planned and executed with the sole purpose of fostering academic ability that has little, if any, relation to life outside educational institutions. At the same time, young people today enjoy instantaneous, virtually uninterrupted access to information and understand intuitively its shared and dynamic nature. Therefore, it is self-evident to them that memorising and reproducing available data is very unlikely to give them any competitive advantage in a rapidly changing labour market. Moreover, they are painfully aware of the fact that employers today increasingly value the so called “soft” or “transferable” skills, such as creativity, innovation, resourcefulness, enterprise, leadership, social intelligence, capacity for teamwork and self-respect. However, developing these skills seems to remain outside the scope of most educational curricula.

Expectedly, the described discrepancy between what educational institutions provide and what students need is not limited to the field of the humanities, nor is it limited to the educational system in Bulgaria alone. In his award-winning book *Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative* and later in his inspiring 2008 RSA Lecture, the knight of educational reform, Sir Ken Robinson acknowledged all these problems on a global scale and called for a fundamental change in education paradigms. In order to meet the needs of the new age, passive learning should give way to active learning, which should be grounded in real-life experience; the hierarchical and linear structure of lecture and seminar courses should be reassessed and diversified with non-hierarchical and more flexible workshop models; content-based learning should be complemented with project-based learning, which should be focused on the development of specific skills that can be transferred to other areas of life; traditional individual learning and testing should make room for collaborative learning practices; and standardisation and compartmentalisation in the classroom should give way to divergent thinking, interdisciplinarity and creative pedagogies.

## **The play's the thing!**

Placed in this broader context, the objective of this paper is not to address the outlined problems theoretically but to report on the realisation of an experimental educational project, conducted at the Department of British and American Studies of Sofia University between March and November 2011, and thus invite discussion on issues such as “activating” learning, shifting educators' gaze to creative pedagogies, fostering students' healthy self-confidence, developing transferable skills and social intelligence. The aim of the project was to explore innovative learning practices for teaching Shakespeare through performance. It focused on the production of a single play, *Love's Labour's Lost*, in its original language. Of course, the choice of the play was not accidental: no other Shakespeare play focuses so closely on education.

Since the project was conceived as independent and extracurricular, participation in it was entirely voluntary and open to students of all year groups. They were expected to demonstrate their motivation by attending a special audition and reading expressively a couple of lines from the play. This led to the recruitment of twelve participants: three boys and nine girls. Shakespeare's play, however, has twelve male and five female roles, so logically ideas of cross-casting and cross-dressing were immediately suggested.

Having abolished all hierarchies in our group, we agreed on the general framework of our collaboration during the summer semester (March-June 2011). We planned thirteen weekly workshop sessions. Two of them were introductory: the first was dedicated to watching and discussing Michael Wood's documentary *In Search of Shakespeare* over coffee and biscuits, while during the second each of the participants presented a chapter of Andrew Gurr's book *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642* exclusively by using visual aids that they had found through individual research. This was necessary in order to provide a general understanding of the cultural context of Shakespeare's work since more than half of the participants in the project had not yet been introduced to Renaissance literature. Participants were advised to first read the play on their own and at their individual pace, and then attend five group sessions for exploring the text, the contexts and the structure of the play with the instructor. Students were also encouraged to take notes of the thoughts and ideas they had during analytical discussions because they knew that during the second stage of the project they would be required to cut and adapt the play for the stage on the basis of their close reading. The analytical workshops were followed by the adaptation laboratory – a longer session during which the text was cut and staging concepts were sketched out. All proposed solutions were tested during the subsequent five creative rehearsals. The distribution of the roles was deliberately postponed until this moment because the group decided that it was better to let the characters find the right actors and not the other way around. Therefore, during the first creative rehearsals each participant was experimenting with different roles.

In order to enhance our collaboration, we blended our sessions with distance learning elements using Moodle and Facebook as platforms for sharing content and communication outside of our meetings. We also organised group visits to the theatre, watched films and filmed productions of Shakespeare plays, discussed them, etc. In this way we generated several noteworthy ideas related to the staging of the play. First, our analytical reading of the text, with a little help from Alexander Shurbanov's recent book *Shakespeare's Lyricized Drama* (56-86), yielded the understanding that *Love's Labour's Lost* is governed to a great extent by the

principles of lyrical poetry. We drew a parallel between the uses of lyrical poetry in Elizabethan England and that of visual aesthetics in our own culture today. In order to explore further this area we decided to translate the imagery of the poems embedded in the play text into visual metaphors – images from our surrounding world that could be easily collected by photography or video capture. This idea developed into a very stimulating side project which we called *Shakespeare's Visual Poetry*. We liked the results and decided to use a selection of the collected images in order to put together an MS PowerPoint presentation, which could serve both as stage set and as a sort of safety net for the would-be actors. The powerpoint was further complemented by the workshop we had on sound and music for the theatre in which we watched Kenneth Branagh's 2000 film adaptation of Shakespeare's play and selected music for our own production.

By this time, however, it became clear that only seven students (six girls and one boy) would be able to participate in the production phase which was scheduled for the winter semester (October-November 2011). Therefore, we had to sit down and reinvent our whole staging strategy. At this point we were reminded of our discussions of lyrical poetry, and in particular of the sonnet form. We were reminded of how Shakespeare's play resembles in structure the sonnets of Philip Sidney's sequence *Astrophel and Stella*, how in these sonnets the lady is idealised by the poet and grows much larger than life. In our contemporary culture such an idealisation is often associated with the cinema and television. Could it be possible to film the parts of the Princess of France, Rosaline, Maria and Katherine and then have the same girls play the King of Navarre, Berowne, Longaville and Dumaine onstage? Why not? This would allow us to hint at the observation that often in Elizabethan sonnets the speaker is so preoccupied with himself, while the addressee is represented in so conventional terms, that the poems almost read like conversations with one's self. We borrowed costumes from the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts, we asked a friend with a video camera to come over and help us, we got permission to use the botanical garden of Sofia University, and we had great fun shooting the clips.

However, this did not solve all our problems: we had three people left and nine roles to be played. At this point we had another noteworthy idea: Could it be possible that the King of Navarre, Berowne, Longaville and Dumain invented the characters of Armado, Moth, Holofernes, and Nathaniel, in order to stage their own little comedy within the play which could serve as "quick recreation" after the long hours of study? Why not? This conflation would allow us to offer a new take on Shakespeare's use of subplot in the comedies and demonstrate the resemblance between the comic characters and the main ones. So, we decided to design masks for the lords, which they could hold while playing the comic characters. Dull, Boyet and Mercade could easily be played by the same person and there remained two people to impersonate Costard and Jaquenetta. Of course, our whole cross-dressing game would have been incomplete if we hadn't asked our only boy to do the part of the dairy maid.

Since we cut most of the text of Act V, we decided to represent the masque of the Muscovites by means of a short episode of music and dancing. Therefore, we asked a friend who works as a dance coach to read the scene and propose a choreography. And although eventually we decided to convert it to freestyle dance, important ideas were generated during the choreography session and interesting experience was gathered. We also decided to represent the

pageant of the Nine Worthies by means of an Adobe Photoshop collage which shows a comic blend between the faces of the actors and ancient sculptures or Hollywood personages.

The creative rehearsals ended in the beginning of July by putting together for the first time the adapted play on the stage of the university theatre hall. Then the participants went on their summer holidays and each of them obtained a copy of the powerpoint presentation, complete with all images, sounds and video clips, which served as the backbone of the production and allowed them to learn and practice their roles individually. The new academic year started in October with more or less traditional rehearsals. Little by little, the students managed to liberate themselves from the fetters of memorising the text. And this was when the true magic happened. They started experimenting with space, with movement, with their bodies, with costumes, with stage properties and the screen. This was the moment when all our work came to fruition: it was the moment when we all really felt the profound joy of Shakespeare's comedy.

Let us revisit at this point Ken Robinson's idea of changing education paradigms. Our experience has shown that deconstructing the established hierarchies in the classroom and placing students, as a group, at the centre of the learning process does unleash powerful creative energies, and does stimulate collaboration greatly. Focusing students' work on a real project does motivate them to carry out independent research and to become active and responsible producers of knowledge, rather than passive recipients of it. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine a more active and efficient way of learning content than experiencing a literary text to the point where not only the learner's mind but his or her very body starts responding to it. One of our most memorable moments occurred after we had started rehearsals in the theatre hall while we were having an additional run-through text. We were supposed to only work on the text and pronunciation, so we went to a study room and sat down on the desks. As the students started delivering the lines, however, they spontaneously got up on their feet and started vigorously moving around as if they were on the stage. We paused and laughed about it.

Another important aspect of active learning is that it trains the particular type of soft skills, described in the introduction of this paper, which, once picked up in the classroom, can easily be transferred to the learners' professional and personal lives and developed further. We have here three cases in point. First, in the beginning of the project many students joined in with the firm conviction that they would not participate in the production stage and play before an audience. Many of them really did not, but some changed their mind and it became obvious that playing Shakespeare successfully in a theatre gave them the necessary confidence in their own abilities and entrepreneurial spirit to participate more resolutely in future projects. Second, participation in a collaborative project involves a high degree of teamwork. Our open dress rehearsal was the first time our student-actors performed before an audience. Naturally, they were all stressed out. We came to Act IV, Scene iii, where each lord comes out on the stage to read his poem and then hides in order to listen to the following one. This scene is full of asides, which makes it very difficult to perform. Due to the stress of the first performance, our student-actors started unwillingly to skip forward and backward through the text, but they were all so much inside the play that when one skipped a few cues, everyone skipped along, so that the integrity of the scene was never broken. When I commented on this after the performance, they were all very surprised, they said that they did not realise it had happened at all. Finally, there is yet another important aspect of active learning – creativity. In its effort to streamline students'

thinking, traditional education somehow overlooks the existence of multiple intelligences beyond the linguistic and the logical – intelligences that are of a manual, visual, kinaesthetic nature. In our project alongside studying Shakespeare we took pictures, we shot videos, we processed them, we put together power point presentations, we drew masks, cut them out, glued them to cardboard, we tried to learn how to dance, we listened to music, we did so many creative things, which ultimately contribute to students' professional and personal capability.

In conclusion, hopefully this paper has succeeded in putting through the important idea that active learning and developing transferable skills alongside teaching content are attainable educational objectives. Approaches based on these principles can achieve outstanding results and have their rightful place in educational curricula in the humanities as well as other fields of learning. At the same time, the results of the described experimental project clearly show that active learning structures can be both intellectually stimulating and very entertaining for the students. So, by borrowing Hamlet's phrase in claiming that "The play's the thing" this paper tries to wrench a wider understanding of the word *play*. Whereas Teaching Shakespeare through Performance, with its history of application of over 30 years now, hardly needs much advocacy, its underpinning principles of creative enjoyment may easily be transferred to other stimulating areas. How about rewriting Shakespeare to produce an intelligent parody, or composing a script for a Shakespeare-based computer game, or designing a YouTube sonnet sequence?

## Works Cited

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