



BEYOND THE STAGE

Dramaturgy Notes for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival



INTERVIEW: BRINGING SHAKESPEARE TO YOUTHS

Festival Dramaturg Kee-Yoon Nahm speaks with the directors of the 2020 Bard in a Box touring productions: M.F.A. in Directing candidate Britannia Howe (*Romeo and Juliet*) and Professor of Acting Lori Adams (*Who Stole Cleopatra?*, written by Nancy Steele Brokaw). Bard in a Box visits schools and community groups on Fridays throughout the academic year. For more information about Bard in a Box, visit:

<https://illinoisshakes.com/education/touring/>

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WRITTEN BY:
KEE-YOON NAHM

BRITANNIA HOWE

KYN: What is your approach for *Romeo and Juliet*?

BH: I already had a 90-minute version of the play because I have always wanted to do a touring production of *Romeo and Juliet*. When John Stark said

that we are going to do the play for Bard in a Box, I thought I would just take my version and cut it down to 40 minutes. But it is so hard because I love the language so much. I focused on the story of Romeo and Juliet, cutting a lot of the parents' stories. In forty minutes, the stakes rise very quickly.

I do not have a design team, but I am thinking of something that the students can see: what if we can take off prejudice or hate like a sweater? Whether that is a coat or a patch, the actors could place these things on themselves during the Prologue. Then, at the end of the play, you could see the cast take them off again. By doing that, the students will not only see a physical representation of what they have been reading in their English class, but also see that theatre can discuss themes related to what is happening in the world today.

I have created some "mirror scenes" to save time. For example, when Friar Laurence tells Juliet to go home and take the sleeping potion so that she seems dead when her parents try to wake her, the action will happen onstage while the Friar is speaking. The same thing will happen when Juliet finds out that Tybalt has been killed and Romeo is banished. There will be a "mirror scene" where Friar Laurence comes to Romeo to deliver the news. Juliet and Romeo will say "Banished?" at the same time.

KYN: It is a great idea to have these "mirror scenes" because Shakespeare's plays are multifocal. The so-called "B plot" can sometimes dominate the play. I think this is a great way to get the students used to the



Britannia Howe

idea that there are many things happening at the same time in Shakespeare.

BH: I also had to cut Paris dying in the end.

KYN: Eh, whatever.

BH: I know, whatever. But I know that most of the time Paris is cut so that Romeo does not have to kill him. I am not worried about making Romeo seem like a bad person. I want audiences to see the extremes that people can go to, and how that can be dangerous. I cut Paris for sake of time. But if there is a Q&A after the show, I would love to ask the students about what was taken out—what they read in the play that they did not see onstage.

KYN: Why is Shakespeare for young audiences important?

BH: If you are talking about the acting, training with Shakespeare is great for anybody who is a debater or political speaker—anybody who gets in front of people—because it forces you to look at the words and slow down. You learn to take your time with what you are saying because Shakespeare’s figurative language is intentional and fills in the picture. But more than that, people can empathize with his stories. The themes that Shakespeare touches on are relevant today, whether it is politics or what happens within the family. Some people say that Shakespeare is universal. I do not like that term because his plays hit me on a more personal level. What he has written in his 37 plays I too have experienced at some point in my life, or I will.

KYN: Right. You will have an easier time reaching young audiences talking about what is personal rather than universal.

BH: Yes, I think words like “universal” and “timeless” are overused for Shakespeare. How can we make Shakespeare’s plays more personal to students? As I work on *Romeo and Juliet*, I try to ask myself: as a 16-year-old or even a 14-year-old, what will attract me to Shakespeare, to his words and the people onstage speaking them?

KYN: Can you talk about your own background in Shakespeare?

BH: My dad loved Shakespeare and he would say, “I am going to the theatre. Do you want to come?” And of course I did—it got me away from household chores! I remember seeing *Twelfth Night* at the Utah Shakespeare Festival and being so entranced by Viola dressing as a man and doing things as a man would do at the time. I discovered the beauty of acting: how you can be something that is completely different from yourself. After I got my B.F.A. in Classical Acting from Southern Utah University, I started an all-female Shakespeare company called Women of Will to create more opportunities for women in Cedar City. Our first production was an all-female *Julius Caesar*, followed by *Pericles*. The company is doing *The Comedy of Errors* right now. Just recently, I was hired by Utah Shakespeare Festival to direct *Cymbeline* for the 2020 season. I love Shakespeare. I love that you can adapt Shakespeare to make him relatable to our time.

LORI ADAMS

KYN: For people who missed it over the summer, can you explain what *Who Stole Cleopatra* is about?

LA: Playwright Nancy Steele Brokaw has written this delightful tale. Shakespeare is in a rut. He just penned a play called *Cleopatra*—just *Cleopatra*—and Mr. Henslowe wants him to bring it to the Globe Theatre quickly. It has to be good, but Shakespeare does not think it is very good. Meanwhile, Robert Greenbottom, an educated man who is jealous of Shakespeare and thinks he does not deserve the praise he gets, steals Shakespeare’s manuscript. In this madcap romp, Shakespeare spends the entire play trying to figure out where Greenbottom hid the play. Along the way, Shakespeare meets Romeo and Juliet, Rosalind and Orlando; he has a turnaround with Hamlet, the Ghost of Hamlet’s Father, and Prospero. We also visit the tavern where Prince Hal, Mistress Quickly, and Falstaff reside. The long and short of it is that Shakespeare comes up with inspiration for six other plays while he searches for *Cleopatra*. Meanwhile, the young audience is introduced to Shakespeare’s characters and listen to some of his language. It is wonderful and there is audience participation, with everyone shouting the main theme: “Be Strong and Carry On.”

KYN: I have heard that one new addition for the Bard in a Box version is that some of the lines will be in Spanish.

LA: Yes, we have two Spanish-speaking actors, and Nancy had that idea right away. We have rehearsal



Lori Adams

today and I am sure she will bring that new page to us. As a playwright, she never overlooks the chance to incorporate something that is right in front of you.

KYN: What do you personally hope to achieve through Bard in the Box?

LA: I think the hope is always to expose young audiences to this whole world out there that they may not have known about—unlike my own children who grew up in a household of theatre people and for whom the Illinois Shakespeare Festival is a part of their lives. I have worked with Nancy many times, and I think she is brilliant in weaving in famous passages that students have heard in their lives—things that Shakespeare wrote that you use in everyday language without knowing that they are his words. I would like to start that process for the students, and hopefully foster a love of Shakespeare’s language. The students listen to it and realize they can understand it.

KYN: Do you recall your own first exposure to Shakespeare?

LA: I do, I do! I grew up in a small town and we had one movie theatre twelve miles away. In 1969 or 1970, the Franco Zeffirelli *Romeo and Juliet* came to our movie theatre. I do not remember how we got there, but my friend and I went to see it and I was transfixed. I was fourteen years old and I had never seen anything like that before. I remember it played for four nights, Thursday to Sunday, and somehow—I do not know how I did this—I went every night. And I bought a big poster of the play and put it on my bedroom wall. It was just so understandable to me. Juliet was fourteen

and I was fourteen, just like that. I think because of that exposure I was never afraid of Shakespeare. I remember reading *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* out loud in my honors English class, and I was not afraid.

Years later, when I was teaching at Arizona State University, one of the guest actors for a production was Michael York, who played Tybalt in the movie. Oh my God! I have never been so starstruck in my life. One night in rehearsals, Michael York was sitting there and he said, "Does anyone want to run lines with me?" because he was not on in the next scene. I looked at all the students who were watching and nobody said anything. So I said, "I will! I would like to!" So that is how far-reaching it was.

KYN: One more question. As an acting professor, do you have any tips for young students who are interested in Shakespeare and want to perform Shakespeare?

LA: Well, if they are interested, I would tell them to make sure that the artistic staff at the Illinois Shakespeare Festival knows that, because we use children sometimes in the productions. The other thing I would say is that we have the ISF summer camps. But mostly I would just say, "Come see the shows. Come hear professional actors speak Shakespeare, and you will not be afraid."