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Cal Shakes Offers "Discovery" Program for Students

By Lou Fancher



"Bianca" - Alexandra Henrikson (back row, middle) - stopped to chat and pose for a photo with the JM drama class after the show. Photo L. Borrowman

The kids eat it up, especially when Worsley steps aside and the cast, arriving to a whistle blast worthy of a sailing vessel and a thumping, "Come on, boys" soundtrack, vamp in line and toss buxom beauty queens in yellow swim suits.

There's a sense of humor everywhere in Director Shana Coopers' interpretation.

From actor Alexandra Henrikson's blue suede spiked heels to a rapid undressing (down to briefs only) and re-dressing on stage to a Three Stooges-style exchange of hats, laughter keeps the kids engaged during wordy expository scenes.

But it's all aimed at learning, a purpose made evident throughout Cal Shake's extensive educational outreach programs.

The discovery matinees come with a package of optional workshops, a Q&A with the actors, and an extensive Teacher's Guide. The guide, offered online to classrooms, is impressive.

There are plot diagrams, historical context, actors' photos with adjacent character descriptions, Q&A's with the director, evaluations of things like physical comedy and how it was used in Shakespeare's time versus modern theater, classroom activities like Facebook pages for characters, and questions to answer for aspiring theatre critics.

"We discuss how placing Shakespeare's stories in contemporary times helps us to understand the story and characters," Worsley said, about the work he does with student groups. "[With Shrew], we ask kids how the gender-based stereotypes in the play differ from our time or what ways they are similar."

Don Read brings one of his classes from Joaquin Moraga every year.

"Although they're in drama, they may not all have seen live productions. I want them to notice the physicality and how they stay in character," he emphasized.

Going on a field trip also creates a bond and hearing the words they've memorized in class makes the plot less confusing. Read believes the experience contributes to their being a "special drama community" by the end of the year.

On this day in late September, the students unite through the play's intense physical interactions. There's nipple twisting between two male characters who wrestle to the ground, fathers hoisting warring sisters to end territorial battles, a slap fest between Katherine and her fiance, and a costume that draws a question in the post-show Q&A.

"Do you feel weird with your butt hanging out?" one student asked Slate Holmgren, the actor whose minimalist pant leg revealed spandex undies.

"Actually, it's really freeing," he laughed, explaining that a different pair of underwear had been used for the student show.

"Did anything happen that wasn't according to plan?" another student asked.

Trees falling, wind, and heads rolling, came the answer, followed by the strangest things each actor had experienced in a play.

Cut faces and forgetting to put on a full costume preceded fainting, fire alarms and seeing a ghost, before the actors answered one of students' most frequent questions: What made you want to be actors?

Henrikson had the most uncommon answer, stating that she had composed an opera at the age of two, called The Tongue. She declined a request to perform it, especially without adequate rehearsal.

Students also wanted to know if the lovers in the play were actually married to each other in real life, or were drunk when they played inebriated scenes.

"I was pretending to be drunk," Henrikson answered immediately. "I thought it would be good for the scene, but don't drink. Ever."

The students left with a new perspective on Shakespeare, acting, and live theater.

Still, one boy, overheard talking to Worsley as his buddies waited, had one burning question.

"Do the actors have a hard time kissing strangers?" he asked.

Worsley fulfilled his teaching role, telling the student that by the time they were in performance, the actors weren't strangers anymore because "they practice kissing a lot."

With this information, the student, and his friends, may have found what actors the world-over seek: proper motivation.



JM students present "30-second Shakespeare" (a very abbreviated version of Taming of the Shrew), directed by Cal Shakes educational staff, before the show. Photo L. Borrowman

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