

Exit Stage Left

Bringing out the Bard at Library Drama Camp

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Most people would agree that the public library is an unconventional agency to host a youth drama camp, let alone a Shakespeare drama camp for children. So, how did I end up creating exactly that at my library?

STEAM programming has been getting a big push recently, but most of the emphasis seems to be on the STEM part, and I wanted to focus on the arts. I had participated in youth theater myself back in the day, and it was a transformative experience. I loved the idea of having a theater program, especially for younger school-age kids, so I started brainstorming on how I could bring the theater experience to our young patrons.

Why Shakespeare?

The reasons for using Shakespeare in youth theater are myriad—the Bard is considered the premiere playwright of the English language. His plays examine universal themes and yet, they were written for the common man.

Is Shakespeare too hard for kids? Absolutely not! Like fish to water, they respond to the stories and absorb the language quickly. They love the ageless humor and the compelling characters.

It is great to gain exposure to the Bard at a tender age, before children begin to believe that Shakespeare is considered too hard or highbrow. Let's celebrate Elizabethan English in all its glory. Huzzah!



Fifth-year camper Bella, facing, practices mirroring techniques with veteran camper Lanie.

Assessing a Need

In our community, there is a definite interest in youth theater. In fact, there is more interest than opportunities, especially ones that are free or low cost. After having many discussions with parents about the lack of local youth theater options, I began planning a way to offer the experience through the library.

Our two-week Drama Camp runs Monday through Friday for two hours a day, and it has been met with enthusiastic public response. We have room for twenty-four students, and the program, free to participants, usually fills up immediately. This limit enables me to fill all the parts and make adjustments for



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the shyest campers, ensemble, narrators, understudies, etc. Since there are few Shakespeare plays with that many actors in the cast, expect to divide roles into multiple parts or to pad the ensemble.

Due to high demand, I've been asked to run multiple sessions. The program also has a wonderful retention rate, with more than 50 percent of attendees returning in following years, either as campers or as teen counselors.

Our camp is open to students going into grades 3 to 8. I chose third grade as the lower limit because campers need to be able to read the scripts. At the top end, I went with eighth grade because there are several theater programs in the area for older kids. And, second, high schoolers are eligible to apply to be teen counselors.

Camp culminates in a performance on the last day. Meeting daily fosters a more immersive experience for the campers, as well as creating intensity and continuity for the kids.

Low Budget? No Budget? No Problem.

This program can be run on very little money. Outside of staffing costs, there is not much outlay involved. You don't need elaborate sets, costumes, and props to make the production successful. It can be accomplished with minimalist staging—just leave the rest to the imagination, as they did in Elizabethan England.

Youth services programming money is used, and costs are a little different each year; stage rental runs \$220 to \$290, with props running \$50 to \$75. Scripts cost \$30, so total cost is less than \$400. Not bad for ten days (twenty hours) of programming for twenty-four kids. That's \$16.67 per child, or \$1.67 per child per day.

One of the most challenging parts is selecting a play and finding a script. I select the play by February, five months before camp is held. When the play is selected, I have no idea how many boys or girls will sign up or what their exact ages will be, so I have to pick a script and then fit the campers into the roles.

This means reading many different scripts. Shakespeare's comedies are well suited to youth theater. So too, are many of the tragedies. (Although I'd recommend avoiding *Titus Andronicus*, who is a general who presents his enemy with a banquet, only to tell him after he's eaten that the meat pie was made from his child's remains. Saying it's a little grim might be the understatement of the year!) The campers adore performing death scenes, so *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are not out of the question. Our

past productions have included *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

I usually choose abridged scripts, but not ones that have been adapted or changed. The shortened plays make memorization more manageable for the younger actors.

I've also chosen to use Shakespeare's original language, for a variety of reasons. The first is for authenticity. Changing it up alters the very fabric of the play. Secondly, the original language is fun. The campers get a real kick out of learning what some of the "archaic" phrases mean. It's also great for vocabulary development. They learn about rhythm and meter and how to interpret iambic pentameter.

If You Build It, Will They Come?

One of the most important pieces of advice I can share is to create an attendance policy and give it to the parents/guardians at registration. Stress the importance of attendance; every camper needs to attend for the production to be successful.

Stress, too, that attendance at the dress rehearsal and performance is mandatory. It might seem that is a no-brainer, but I learned through experience, if you don't tell campers outright, there can be a misunderstanding.

I don't hold traditional auditions. Instead, I evaluate all the campers on a variety of criteria

which includes memory games, group interactions, and cold readings. Roles are not assigned based on age or gender. If a girl is the best fit for a boy's role and vice versa, that is how they are assigned.

I always have a few nonspeaking roles reserved for timid campers. Understudies are also a necessity. Having one or two, just in case, is a wise precaution, which you'll hopefully never have to implement. Having to scramble to recast at the last minute is stressful for everyone—kids, parents, and directors.

Rehearsals

How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice! Our campers might not be performing on the Great White Way, but they do practice, practice, practice. We rehearse two hours a day, five days a week for two straight weeks.

I have a detailed schedule planned out before camp starts, including day's exercises, theater and history lessons, break times, small rehearsal groups, games, and run-throughs.



Five-year veteran Emily performs as Feste the Clown in *Twelfth Night*.

Getting Teens Involved

Our Drama Camp program uses teen volunteers who assist as camp counselors, and we wouldn't be able to do it without them. Camp counselors must be entering ninth grade or later.

Candidates are asked about their theater experience and are evaluated for leadership skills. Having the teens allows me to break the campers into four or five different rehearsal groups. Each teen is assigned to a specific rehearsal group, allowing me and my co-director to float around the room and pull out campers to work one-on-one, or to observe scenes.

I meet with the volunteers before and after camp each day to discuss and review production, who might need attention, to pass on directors' notes to teens, and get feedback on how each group is doing. The counselors work with small groups during rehearsals, participate in the acting exercises, and fill a variety of roles during the performance including stage director, director's assistant, props/scenery masters, and line prompters.

We start with team building exercises, which include memory testing/building exercises. The memory exercises serve a dual purpose, as I use these as one part of our casting evaluation. Each day's rehearsal also will include one or two improvisation games or exercises. Daily mini-lessons on theater basics, Shakespeare, Elizabethan England, and vocabulary are also included.

On Day Three, we usually announce the cast assignments and perform the first reading of the play with assigned parts. From Day Four onward, the campers break into small groups to run lines for specific scenes. Each day's rehearsal culminates in a run-through of the entire play. The last few days of camp we will do three full run-throughs, back-to-back. The next to last day of camp is our full dress rehearsal.

Staging

For staging, I keep it simple. I recommend having a stage of some sort, since it is hard to see the performers from the back of a packed room. I rent a stage and steps from a local rental center and use masking tape to lay out stage dimensions on the floor during all rehearsals until our stage arrives for dress rehearsal.

If you don't have an auditorium or stage, you can still put on your production, but you might want to change to a theater-in-the-round setup for more visibility.



Fourth-year camper Gavin waits for his cue in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

Scripts in Hand

Each camper gets a script with their lines highlighted. Teen counselors and the directors have master copies with blocking and stage notes included.

Campers are responsible for their scripts and are encouraged to bring pencils/pens to write notes on them. Each day, I take attendance for both the camper and the script. I do have extras, but I really want them to learn the importance of always having their scripts with them.

We also then approach blocking—simply put, the positioning of actors on the stage. The sooner the campers learn their marks, entrances, and exits, the smoother the performance will run. For each production, I create a sketch of the stage layout, one for each page of the script.

Costumes, Hair, and Makeup

As with our props and sets, our costumes are minimalist. Most of the roles require simple costumes—leggings and oversized belted tees. This keeps costs down for the parents and gives a uniform look to the acting ensemble.

I also offer the parents the option to buy or make more elaborate costumes. Some really nice, inexpensive costumes can be found online. When roles are assigned, I send home a letter to parents/caregivers outlining the costume requirements for their camper's assigned role. There will be a few campers who don't want to dress in costume, so be prepared to work with their parents to get them on board.

All the actors need to have their hair pulled back so the audience can see their faces. Girls in male roles usually braid or put their hair up. Boys in female roles may wear wigs. Beards and moustaches are the most common makeup addition I've used. These can be either drawn on with eyeliner or face paint or glue-on costume beards. Certain characters may require

masks, or specialized makeup, such as a donkey head used in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Backdrops, Props, and Other Scenery

Because they can be costly and time consuming to construct or set up, backdrops, props, and other scenery are not necessary. Less can be more.

I keep props to a minimum in our productions; in the past, we've used swords, baskets, tables and chairs, jewelry, and parchment letters wrapped with ribbon.

Backdrops are an easier addition to youth productions. I added backdrops to our production for the first time last year. The library's graphic artist made some simple panels that indicated where the action was taking place—the forest, a castle, the city, or on a street.

Parents/Caregivers

Parents and caregivers can sometimes be more challenging to deal with than the campers themselves. I have learned through trial and error to require both a registration form and permission slip, along with a caregiver's letter, which explains rules and expectations for all campers. This was the single most useful tool I added in year two to make the camp run more smoothly.

Parents/caregivers have to sign the form at registration; this includes an acknowledgment that campers will accept their assigned role. This simple addition to our process has eliminated most (*but, alas, not all*) tears when casting is announced and stage parent syndrome kicks in.

Community Partners

Since the inception of Drama Camp, I've collaborated with our two villages' park departments. We open registration to residents of the park districts that are not residents of the library district, which is a goodwill gesture. The camp is advertised in the parks' program guides, and parks department director and staff help with ushering, filming the production, keeping tabs on the performers, etc. In the future, as the program continues to grow, we may move our performances to either a park facility or an auditorium in one of our three local school districts.

Performance

Somehow it all magically comes together. Forgotten lines are memorized, cues are remembered, costumes are lovely, and the campers are energized.

Seating for the show is on a first come first serve basis, and the campers perform to a full house; we can seat one hundred, but often have standing room only. We haven't had to issue tickets yet, but if you have limited space you might want to consider that option.

To avoid parents fighting for prime aisle space to film their stars, we do film the production. A reception with light refreshments is held after the show.

Due to space and time constraints and a very active summer programming schedule, we only hold one performance. I am looking for alternative, off-site performance spaces for next year's camp, which would open up the possibility of having multiple performances.

Huzzah and break a leg! 🍷

To view Algonquin's Drama Camp performance of Two Gentlemen of Verona, visit <https://youtu.be/rehQzYN3UMM>.