

When the Hurly Burly is Done

Shakespeare in the Classroom



by

Dr Wendy Michaels



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Prologue the Second

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose

It is a sobering experience to return to a book I wrote thirty years ago and to discover that some things have changed but other things have not. In 1986, Bell Shakespeare was not yet a glint in John Bell's eye, the London Globe had not been reconstructed and drama teachers were still lobbying for 7-10 and HSC Drama syllabuses. Not only is Bell Shakespeare firmly established in Australian culture, the London Globe offering vibrant Shakespearean seasons, but the world wide web now gives us access to information and sources previously locked away in libraries and archives.

The first edition of *When the Hurly Burly is Done*, published in 1986, sought to document the approach I had been using in the teaching of Shakespeare for many years in both Drama and English classrooms. The approach essentially combined strategies from what was then called Drama in Education with those practiced in the whole language model of English teaching. At the time, there was something of a divide between those who adhered to a cultural heritage model of English teaching and those who had adopted a more process oriented approach that did not necessarily revere canonical texts. This divide was further fractured as those who saw texts as social constructs also entered the fray, arguing for an understanding of textual genres.

These divisions manifested themselves not only in curriculum and pedagogy but also in prescribed text lists. Shakespeare, as the supreme English writer, the man for all seasons, was firmly entrenched as compulsory study in English courses while Drama courses tended to eschew any mention of his oeuvre. Strange times indeed!

Irish drama critic, Fintan O'Toole sums up some of the attitudes of that time in the opening chapter of his 2002 book, *Shakespeare is Hard, but so is Life*. He writes:

'The plays of William Shakespeare were written on the playing fields of Eton. Or, at least, the plays of Shakespeare as they have been taught in school, were. In the form in which most people first encounter them, *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, *King Lear* or *Othello* are made to seem as if they have very little to do with the theatre, with the seventeenth century, with a man trying to create new rituals for a worlds that was changing at a frightening pace, and everything to do with building character, with the nineteenth century, and with teaching us lessons about how we should behave. They are the mental equivalent of a cold shower; shocking, awful, but in some obscure way good for you, bracing you for the terrors of life and keeping your mind off bad thoughts about politics, society and the way the world changes. They are an ordeal after which you're supposed to feel better, a kind of mental muesli that cleans out the system and purges the soul.'

A similar comment is made by James Muirden in the introduction to his 2004 book *Shakespeare in a Nutshell*. He writes:

‘School turned me right off Shakespeare. Twenty years later, as a ‘mature’ student taking a teaching degree in English, I met him again. As Mark Twain remarked of his parents, it was amazing how much more sensible he had become by the time I had grown up.’

This mirrored my school experience of Shakespeare, except that, as a school student, I had been involved in drama groups outside school which did not shy away from productions of Shakespeare. I was fortunate to have pursued this theatre-based drama training that gave me a rather unique take on Shakespeare teaching. First and foremost, it taught me that play-scripts are nothing more or less than blueprints for performance. They should be read, as building blueprints are, to work out the architecture of the play, and this occurs on the stage. My readings of Shakespeare’s plays aimed to determine how they might work on whatever stage I was preparing for and I soon came to the realization that to determine this I needed to understand how they worked on the large thrust stage of the Globe or Rose Theatre. This knowledge informed my teaching practice.

The book, *When the Hurly Burly is Done*, was in fact the documentation of my teaching practice and my reflections on it at the time. Following its publication I extended my knowledge and understandings of Shakespeare’s stage, language, and theatre practices through my role as National Education Director of the Shakespeare Globe Centre Australia, and ran workshops for students and teachers across Australia, and in the USA and UK. In this new edition, I have included some of the understandings I developed through these professional experiences.

I am also aware that the technology available in classrooms today is far advanced on that of the 1980s. The approach I am advocating is essentially an experiential one. The aim is to engage students in activities that encourage textual engagement. I have updated some references to take into account contemporary technologies, but I have not sought to alter the approach.

However you use the material contained in this book, please remember that it is intended as a description of what can occur in the classroom. It is a guide only, and not a prescription. Most importantly, be prepared to play with the plays.

Dr Wendy Michaels
2016

Prologue the First

O for a muse of fire ...

The study of Shakespeare's plays within our secondary schools is all too often viewed with dread by teachers and students alike.

It is my fervent belief that this need not be so.

The compulsory tag attached to such study is but one barrier to the enjoyment of this study. The entrenched attitudes towards the Bard in Universities, in schools and in the public at large are not easily shaken. Epochs and eons of teaching practices will not be spirited away overnight. And yet, with the present climate of change in English curricula it seems that the time may now be ripe to stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood and entering into the breach lay to rest forever the ghostly apparitions that have haunted the study of Shakespeare's plays as school texts.

This work throws down the gauntlet to all those concerned with the study of Shakespeare's plays. It invites them to enter the lists, pole to the ready and engage in the sport.

The work is divided into two main parts. Part One focuses on the first encounter with Shakespeare's plays. I have assumed this to be in the third year of secondary school, (Year 9 in N.S.W.), although I am well aware that it need not be so. The suggested approach is readily adaptable to other levels. It is not presented as a script to be slavishly followed. Piece out its imperfections with your own thoughts and improvise to suit your own space and needs. Part Two outlines some teaching strategies derived from drama games and theatre sports which can be readily adapted to explorations of any text.

Finally there are some suggested units of work that can be implemented or improvised in the classroom.

Wendy Michaels

1986



The reconstruction of the Globe theatre on the banks of the Thames, near the site of the original Globe

PART ONE

Well spoken, with good accent, and good discretion

Act 1

As the curtain is raised, I would like you to imagine yourself seated in an auditorium. You are about to witness the opening scene. Your program announces that the scene is set in a 9E 1 classroom in a co-educational high school somewhere in the western suburbs of Sydney or Melbourne or . . . on the first day of Term 2, sometime not so long ago.

As the auditorium lights dim and the stage lights go up you observe a typical classroom situation prior to the entrance of the teacher. Twenty or thirty students are talking, chatting, clowning around. You catch snatches of their conversations about the latest Facebook scandal, or what some celebrity tweeted in the early hours of the morning or last evening's episode of a tv soapie or reality tv show, or a film they saw during the holidays.

The students talk critically about the characters and the actions and the way the show has been put together. They speculate on outcomes and compare each show with other 'soapies', tv shows or the gossip on Instagram, Twitter or Facebook.

Other students are engaged in animated chatter about the movies they saw in the holidays and how the audience reacted to them. Another student does a take-off of the latest pop star's performance perched perilously between two desks. Another group is poring over their iphones, reading aloud to each other, laughing at the images and criticizing the content. A couple of students are engaged in covering the whiteboard with highly alliterative graffiti, both verbal and visual. Some of this indicates that English is not the only language spoken by students in this classroom. The attentive observer will have noticed that there is not a predominance of blond hair and blue eyes amongst this student population.

But this scene lasts only a moment or two before it is interrupted by the harsh resonance of the buzzer, and the entrance of The Teacher.

You watch as the noise level subsides, the board is wiped, magazines are stuffed in bags or up jumpers and students move to take up their places at their desks.

TEACHER Morning 9E 1. Good to see you keen to start the term. We begin this term with the study of the greatest writer in the English language—William Shakespeare.

CLASS Yuck! Boring! It's too hard!

[Ad lib. Ad nauseam.]

STUDENT Why? Do we have to?

TEACHER Because Shakespeare was the greatest writer we've ever had in English and we can measure all other writers by his work.

STUDENT But he wrote in that old English—all those thee's and thou's. You can't even understand it.

TEACHER It is not really difficult to translate it into modern English. The footnotes will help.

STUDENT But it's all in that high falutin' poetry stuff—like in Church.

TEACHER Shakespeare's poetry is the best that has been written, but he always included some prose for the groundlings.

STUDENT But it's ancient Miss—all about those kings and things!

TEACHER You need to know about the kings of England because that's part of your heritage.

STUDENT But the characters have funny names - it's confusing knowing who they are.

TEACHER We'll make a list of the characters so you will know when we're reading it.

STUDENT But the plots are always so complicated—you never know what's happening.

TEACHER The prose and verse will help us know whether it's the plot or the sub-plot. In any case we'll draw a plot tree.

STUDENT But it's so long ago. Times have changed. We want something modern.

TEACHER You cannot possibly study literature of today if you have not studied the great literature of the past.

STUDENT But what's it got to do with us?

TEACHER It will ennoble your mind.

STUDENT But we won't be able to understand the language.

TEACHER I have some handouts by important critics that will help you.

STUDENT Will there be a test on it?

[BLACKOUT]

This may appear, on the surface, to be a piece of absurdist drama, or perhaps a fantasy interlude from a pantomime. Yet, I fear it is perilously close to realism. Let us pause for a moment to examine the dynamics of this classroom scene. Firstly, prior to the entry of the teacher the students were engaged in animated discussion. There was a good deal of talking and listening happening. The discussion was alive, informal and animated. The students were involved, motivated, critical and not afraid to express opinions openly and to support these opinions with evidence from their own observations and experiences. There were also some reading, writing, representing and performance activities happening. All these students had undoubtedly engaged with the texts they were discussing.

There is an instantaneous change with the entrance of the teacher. Let's not assume that this is a personality problem—for notice that there is an exchange of views that occurs quite candidly between the teacher and her class. Instead let's see if the problem is located in the attitudes of both the students and the teacher. To determine this, we will need a close reading of the script.

The teacher, in announcing the study of Shakespeare, uses a fanfare approach, not unlike some T.V. advertisements. Within the text is contained a 'received opinion—the greatest writer in the English language'. Presumably The Teacher has acquired this view as a result of her schooling and particularly her University Education. It is rooted in what has come to be known as the Cultural Heritage model of English. It is based on the notion of a canon of literature that is to be handed down to future generations as a heritage to be preserved and revered.

In this approach there is little if any room for students to exercise their own critical, evaluative or judgemental faculties. Those judgements have already been made and are handed down as part of the students' inheritance in the handouts from important critics.

Likewise, the students' responses indicate not only a preconceived notion about Shakespeare (boring!) but also a rejection of the teacher's 'received opinion'. The students' own 'received opinion' is presumably derived from their peer group and represents a notion that has been garnered over eons of Shakespearean study in schools.

Thus the teacher and students confront each other with opposing 'received opinions'—a negative situation, before the opening lines have been uttered. But this teacher is really quite enlightened. She does allow her students to ask questions, which she dutifully answers according to the catechism she has learned in her alma mater.

Let us take a look at the sorts of questions the students ask.

They fall into three main categories probably reflecting the sort of English teaching they have had to date, and contrasting markedly with the type of critical discussion we witnessed at the opening of the scene. Their first area of concern is the nature of the language, perceived as 'old' and 'poetic'. The oldness is located in such surface areas as the forms of pronouns; and poetry seems to be equated with the very formal, rhetorical and inaccessible. For the students these features present a barrier—a 'verfremdung'!

A second feature of concern for the students is the content of the plays. The subjects are seen as about distant kings and the characters are further distanced by their unusual names, and the plots are seen by the students as too complex to understand.

These factors contribute to the third difficulty: the distance in time raises the question for the students as to the relevance for the contemporary adolescent.

What is interesting to note is that these students have framed their queries around a very traditional 'lit crit' format of subject, themes, character, plot and language. Nowhere in their queries and objections is there any sense of the physicality of the plays as theatre.

But perhaps the most revealing question is the last:

Will there be a test on it?

Underlying this is the tacit assumption that the chief objective in engaging with a text in the English classroom is the 'passing' of the test that will mark the finale of the study. This is probably the only point where our students and the Teacher have congruent notions.