



In *Teaching Shakespeare Through Performance*, Ralph Cohen sets down a number of exercises to help student actors. Here is one for Shakespeare readers to try:

The Elizabethan-stage classroom allows a teacher to explore the way that most of the lines in Shakespeare's plays are multidirectional, designed to go out to the audience as well as into the action onstage.

Take the most intimate moment in any of the plays—usually a scene between two persons—and run it in class. First, do with it what is normally done: have the two performers speak only to each other. Then run it a second time and ask the actors to take half of the lines to the audience.

The effect of such a reading is complex, and good questions to put to students are: What is lost and what is gained by including the audience in the dialogue? Does the scene lose its intimacy? Does it gain in meaning?

If Hamlet directs to the audience the lines selected in this passage, he will surely seem as interested in discussing the innate sinfulness of man and womankind as in talking to Ophelia. By contrast, the lines that Ophelia directs to the audience may enlist more sympathy. Her line “I was the more deceived,” delivered to the audience and not to Hamlet, presents a more wounded and resigned Ophelia, a woman accepting her fate rather than complaining of her treatment. In that regard, her acknowledgment of the audience serves to make the crowd conscious of itself, to see itself surrounding her, and thus to see her as a creature surrounded and trapped in the arena.

Every exchange in Shakespeare has this potential for the inclusion of the audience, and every exchange provides an opportunity for students to consider the extra dimension of Shakespeare's language set in the midst of the visible audience in an Elizabethan theater. ■

(Ralph Alan Cohen, “Original Staging and the Shakespeare Classroom,” in *Teaching Shakespeare Through Performance*, Milla Cozart Riggio, ed., New York: MLA, 1999, pp. 98-99.)

Throwing Lines About

1. Put the classroom desks in a horseshoe. Two students walk through this dialogue from *Hamlet* 3.1.104-10.

Hamlet. Are you fair?

Ophelia. What means your lordship?

Hamlet. That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty.

Ophelia. Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?

Hamlet. Ay, truly, for the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness. This was sometime a paradox, but now the time gives it proof. I did love you once.

Ophelia. Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

Hamlet. You should not have believed me, for virtue cannot so (inoculate) our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not.

Ophelia. I was the more deceived.

2. Now, have two new students repeat the scene. This time, on the underlined parts, actors should direct these lines to the audience, as if the audience were a character in this scene, too.

Hamlet. Are you fair?

Ophelia. What means your lordship?

Hamlet. That if you be honest and fair, your honesty should admit no discourse to your beauty.

Ophelia. Could beauty, my lord, have better commerce than with honesty?

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