



Study Guide

The Grand Valley Shakespeare Festival presents *Bard to Go*

The Wonder of Will: This Is Your Afterlife

This year's *Bard to Go* production follows William Shakespeare as he appears on a modern TV show, with the show's hosts reminding him of some of his most famous plays and characters. *Bard to Go* is a lively, audience-interactive production that introduces students to multiple Shakespearean plays. *Bard to Go* also employs many performance conditions from Shakespeare's own time period, which gives students a taste of theatre history. This year's program contains excerpts from *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, and *A Midsummer Night's*

Dream.

Scene Summaries

Below are brief summaries of the scenes from Shakespeare's plays that appear in this production of *Bard to Go*.

Richard III

In this speech from the very opening of Shakespeare's play, Richard, Duke of Gloucester, tells the audience that he feels out of place now that England's civil war is over. His brother has become king, and Richard, who is an outstanding soldier, feels less confident about his ability to participate in courtship and entertainment. Some historical accounts of Richard's life describe him as a hunchback, and Shakespeare used this image in his dramatic depiction of Richard.

The Comedy of Errors

This play follows the adventures of two sets of identical twins separated at birth. One set of twins, both coincidentally named Dromio, are servants to the other set of twins, both coincidentally named Antipholus. At the beginning of the play, Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse travel to the city of Ephesus, where unbeknownst to them, their long lost identical twins live. In Ephesus, strange things start to happen, like people seeming to recognize them, and strangers addressing them by name. Dromio encounters a woman, Nell, who works as a kitchen wench. Nell claims that Dromio is her husband, and Dromio tells his master Antipholus about this strange meeting.

Romeo and Juliet

Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet come from rival families who have been in a feud for generations. Romeo and his friends crash a party at Juliet's family home, and there he meets Juliet. The two fall instantly in love, using their lines to create a sonnet, a 14-line love poem. Later in the play, after Romeo and Juliet have gotten married in secret, Juliet's cousin Tybalt is looking for Romeo to challenge him to a duel. When Romeo refuses to fight, Romeo's friend Mercutio steps in and fights with Tybalt. Mercutio is killed in their fight, as Romeo and his cousin Benvolio attempt to end the brawl.

The Merchant of Venice

The heroine of *The Merchant of Venice* is Portia, who starts the play with a problem. Her father has recently died, and in his will, he created a test for any man who wants to marry Portia. They must choose between three chests made of gold, silver, and lead. One of them contains Portia's picture, and if some one chooses correctly, he gets to marry her. So far no one has chosen correctly, and the men who have come to take the test are not exactly the cream of the crop, as Portia discusses with her waiting gentlewoman Nerissa.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a group of characters called "The Rude Mechanicals" put on a play for the Duke of Athens. Their play is called "Pyramus and Thisbe," and it follows the ill-fated love of the title characters, who first fall in love by talking through a hole in the wall that separates their two families' gardens. When they arrange to meet secretly and elope, a lion scares Thisbe away. Pyramus mistakenly believes she has been killed by the lion, and kills himself. When Thisbe returns and finds him dead, she stabs herself with his sword. The Mechanicals are not very skilled actors, and their performance turns this tragic story into a comedy.

Hamlet

At the beginning of the play, Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, discovers that his father was murdered by his uncle. His father's ghost demands that Hamlet revenge his death. Hamlet has previously been in love with Ophelia, a young woman who lives in the royal court. Now, however, he must distance himself from her as he plans to take revenge on his uncle as the murderer and take his revenge.

Macbeth

After receiving a prophecy from three witches, Macbeth has become King of Scotland by murdering the former king. Being on the throne does not prove easy, and Macbeth is paranoid that others are attempting to remove him from power. He pays a visit to the three witches, who are busy preparing a potion, to demand that they give him knowledge of his future.

The Tempest

In this speech from the end of *The Tempest*, Prospero, a powerful magician, gives up his magic and asks the audience to help him return to his home. Many scholars have identified the character of Prospero with Shakespeare himself, since *The Tempest* was his final work as a solo playwright, and he was giving up the "magic" of the theatre.

Performance Conditions

Bard to Go uses many of the original staging practices of acting companies from Shakespeare's own period. The use of original staging practices is a recent movement in the production of Shakespeare's plays, a movement with such proponents as the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Virginia, and Shakespeare's Globe in London. Because it is a touring production, *Bard to Go* fits very well into this tradition, with the use of such staging practices as:

1. Performance in non-traditional theatrical spaces. The touring companies of Early Modern England performed not only in purpose-built playhouses like the Globe and the Blackfriars, but in such venues as innyards and noblemen's houses. *Bard to Go* may perform in a traditional theatre at your school, but you may also be seeing us in a cafeteria, gym, or classroom. Finding creative ways to use a variety of spaces -- including theatres of different architectural types as well as non-theatre spaces -- keeps the actors on their toes and results in an exciting and spontaneous performance atmosphere.
2. Universal lighting. Shakespeare's audiences sat in the same light as the actors, either in outdoor playhouses or in candle-lit indoor playhouses. The members of the audience were visible to the actors and to each other. Because of this visible audience, many playwrights of that era wrote the audience into their plays, giving the actors lines to speak directly to the audience. You may notice that we leave the lights on in the audience during *Bard to Go*'s performance, and employ audience contact in the performance, making audience members feel as if they are a part of the play.
3. Minimal sets. Acting companies of 16th and 17th century England did not employ the elaborate sets that 21st century theatre audiences have come to expect. The texts of the plays, the actors' actions, and the audience's imagination helped to transform a nearly bare stage into all of the locations necessary in a given play. *Bard to Go* follows this practice in order to maintain an energetic performance pace,

uninterrupted by frequent set changes. Using minimal or no sets also means that the company can travel easily and can perform in venues of many different sizes without lengthy set-up time. The backdrop that you will see during our performance is based on the *frons scenae* seen in many theatres of Shakespeare's time period, a wall with doors that was a permanent part of the theatre architecture.

4. Cross-gendered casting. During Shakespeare's time, women did not perform in the professional acting companies in England, so the female roles in Shakespeare's plays were originally performed by boys. While we do have female actors to play women's roles in our own time, you may sometimes see women playing men or men playing women. Through this kind of casting, *Bard to Go* explores the ability of actors to create characters that are wholly different than the actors themselves.

5. Doubling. Records from Shakespeare's own period suggest that the acting companies of the time were relatively small, typically employing 10-15 actors. Since many of the plays performed during the period have 30-40 characters, we know that each actor played multiple roles in any given production. During *Bard to Go*, you may see the same actor play as many as five roles. This practice demands great skill from the actors, who must be able to distinguish their characters very clearly for the audience.

Questions for Discussion

Which was your favorite scene in the performance and why? Try to be as specific as possible in describing what the actors did.

How does seeing performance help with understanding Shakespeare's language? What kinds of things can the actors add to Shakespeare's words that you don't get when you read his plays on the page?

Do you think Shakespeare's plays are relevant to modern culture? Why or why not?

Why do you think we study plays and other literature from historical time periods earlier than our own?

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Some of the content in this document also appears on the website of the Pigeon Creek Shakespeare Company, for which Katherine Mayberry serves as executive director.