

# “Let’s skip the part where you hate Shakespeare”

by Bob Koehler

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“You can get even more attitude-y than that. She’s rude, but in what kind of way? What’s with this person? Why is she so snotty?”

Director Sarah Ahmad is going over a complex scene early in Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night.” There are only three more rehearsals left, and she wants to get this moment of dialogue – typically subtle, compressed, fraught with multiple meaning – just right.

It’s the scene where the heroine, Viola, first encounters the beautiful Olivia. Viola happens to be in love with Duke Orsino, but to get a job at his court has had to disguise herself as a boy, and now must deliver the duke’s love message to Olivia. Olivia, however, not only can’t stand Orsino, but is awash with grief over the death of her brother. Viola shows no respect for this mourning, which in any case has turned self-indulgent, and delivers the love message with impertinence.

At one point she tells Olivia to lift her veil. Offended, Olivia replies, “Have you any commission from your lord to negotiate with my face?” – but then, perhaps out of vanity, reveals her face anyway and asks, “Is’t not well done?”

And Viola shoots back, “Excellently done, if God did all.”

Ahmad has stopped the action here. She wants the actress to shift gears, crank up the sarcasm, “throw the snottiness on top of that, she’s asking ‘Do you wear makeup?’ “

The players listen intently, then plunge back into the dialogue.

The moment is brief, the rehearsal moves along. Such on-the-fly conferences between director and actor are common behind the scenes in Chicago theaters, as cast and crew feverishly prepare for opening night. The only thing unusual in this case, perhaps, is that the actresses being coached on a recent Saturday morning at the Famous Door Theatre<sup>1</sup>, Christina Lepri and Sarah White, are only 9 and 8 years old, respectively.

The girls are part of the Young Actors Program, an organization founded six years ago by longtime Chicago actress Karen Fort to allow children (mid-teen and younger) to experience the magic of the stage. The program offers classes in which young people perform folk tales, fairy tales, even musicals. But there’s always one production of Shakespeare going on as well.

To Fort, children, if they are guided gently and sympathetically to the language of the Bard, can not only understand him but actually get excited about him.

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<sup>1</sup> Famous Door was, at that time, occupying the theatre in the Jane Addams Hull House, at 3212 N. Broadway near Belmont. That building is now (2009) an athletic club.

"I'm not too scared of the adult side of Shakespeare – murder, jealousy, adultery, lust. Kids can handle it," she says. The stage is "a very safe place for them to try out this adult world, these stories where people let their passions carry them away. Shakespeare is intense – so is adolescence."

Or as Ahmad, one of eight professional actors teaching at the Young Actors Program, put it on the first day of rehearsal for "Twelfth Night," "When I studied Shakespeare in high school English class, it was horribly boring because we just sat there and read it. Shakespeare's not meant to be read."

"So," she said as she eyed the nine youngsters, ages 8 to 13, "let's just skip the part where you hate Shakespeare."

Performing on a real stage, by the way, is integral to Fort's philosophy. "It's just not the same if you do it in a classroom or a Park District room," she says. She wants her students, as they practice their lines, to be part of a working theater, to absorb its bustle and clutter, its productions in progress. "I put them on the hallowed ground of the temple itself," she says.



Tribune photo by John Dziekan

Leo Davis, 13 (from left), Alex Kirsch, 9, Faya Kollisety, 10, and Christina Lepri, 9, perform a scene of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night."

Right now, the Young Actors Program stages plays at the Theatre Building, the Famous Door and the Bailiwick<sup>2</sup>, all of which have gone out of their way to accommodate the youngsters. "If you don't care [about kids], then there are plenty of sensible reasons not to put up with them. They're messy. They could fall down the stairs," Fort notes. But the theaters she works with welcome the idea of having kids around – of sharing their world with a new generation.

So amid the backdrop of the Famous Door's "A Yard of Sun," the young actors on that first day began reading their lines. For most of them, it was their first

encounter with Shakespeare, and they read in tiny, cautious voices, stumbling not just on words that an adult might find strange and archaic ("prithy," "cross-gartered," "th'unmuzzled"), but also on the likes of "hoist," "improbable," "austere," and "whence."

At this point, the fainthearted might give up and conclude that kids and Shakespeare don't mix. Best to wait until they're high school seniors and administer it in the usual way, as a bitter pill: Hold your nose and swallow "Hamlet." Now you've got culture.

<sup>2</sup> Bailiwick Arts Center, 1229 W. Belmont. Vacated by Bailiwick in Jan 2009.

But the teachers at the Young Actors Program are anything but fainthearted. They're patient. They go slowly, accentuating the positive, praising every effort. Fort is adamant that her teachers have to care deeply about the kids, and she tells all aspiring actors, "Never study with anyone who doesn't believe in you!"

Fort also is convinced that "Shakespeare himself would never mind having a beginner tackle Shakespeare and do his best. There's no such thing as hurting his plays. The complexity that you find in Shakespeare is also in young children."

Beneath the densely packed, pun-replete iambic pentameter in which Shakespeare's characters speak, there simmers a caldron of universal emotions. Youngsters can understand jealousy, pride, arrogance and anger. And once they grasp the emotion in a particular speech, they can take hold of it and put it into their performance.

A few years ago, during a rehearsal for a Young Actors version of "Romeo and Juliet," Fort found herself working with a 9-year-old would-be Juliet trying to deliver the wrenching speech to her mother in which she vows she won't marry Paris. Fort saw she needed to light a fire under the young actress, who was not so much younger than Juliet herself.

"Can you imagine," Fort recalls saying to her, "your parents telling you you're going to have to marry some guy who's *40 years old*, sign a document, get in his bed. And meanwhile, there's this boy you like a lot, but you haven't told anyone about him, it's a secret..."

"Whose side do you think Shakespeare was on?"

"The girl had been playing it way too sweet," Fort remembers. "But all of a sudden she was exploding with temper and suddenly she saw it didn't matter that the play was written centuries ago." There was a principle at stake: A kid was about to get cheated out of her life. The girl turned her character into the passionate, rebellious teenager Shakespeare meant Juliet to be.

Transformations like this were occurring on the fifth Saturday of "Twelfth Night" rehearsals, after several weeks of diligent practice that eventually would build to a Saturday performance on Nov. 8. Most had memorized at least some of their lines, on their own and while working with a partner. And they had responded to Ahmad's continual questioning: "What's really going on here?" "How does that make you feel?" They were beginning to make the play their own.

Next up onstage, after Viola's saucy encounter with Olivia, is the scene in which Viola has a tricky discussion with the duke about the failure of his love entreaties to Olivia. Leila Davis, age 11, is now playing Viola; multiple actors playing the lead is another feature of the Fort method. "I almost always balance the parts," she says, to counter to usual pattern in which "several kids get gigantic parts and the rest 'fail.' They get to be



trees – and they come to hate theater, because it rejected them. I want to make the class a place where everyone is affirmed.”

So Leila, as Viola, has to tell the duke, with whom, of course, she is herself in love, that he has struck out again with Olivia. The self-important duke simply cannot believe this and whines, “I cannot be so answered.” Viola tries to reason with him, suggesting hypothetically, with an irony the audience can appreciate: “Say that some lady, as perhaps there is, hath for you love as great a pang of heart as you have for Olivia: you cannot love her; you tell her so. Must she not then be answered?”

To which the duke delivers this oration: “There’s no woman’s sides can bide the beating of so strong a passion as love doth give my heart; no woman’s heart so big, to hold so much; they lack retention.”

Ahmad jumps in and asks the usual: What’s going on here? After some discussion and analysis – the duke is saying that no woman could possibly feel as much love as he feels – Leila suddenly concludes, “He has totally insulted me!”

Ahmad asks her, “Are you going to take that lying down?”

And Leila shouts, “No!”

And awareness fills the stage like a floodlight.