

BRITISH
SHAKESPEARE
ASSOCIATION



A MAGAZINE
FOR ALL
SHAKESPEARE
EDUCATORS

teaching SHAKESPEARE

POLICY • PEDAGOGY • PRACTICE

Issue 8 Autumn 2015

ISSN 2049-3568 (Print) • ISSN 2049-3576 (Online)

GET DIRECTOR IQBAL KHAN'S TAKE ON *MUCH ADO* WITH ABIGAIL RICHARDSON
TUNE IN TO AUDIO SHAKESPEARE WITH ROBERT SAWYER AND CYNTHIA LEWIS
TRY OUT A.J. KOHLHEPP AND JAMES ORTEGA'S CLASSROOM WAYS WITH WILL

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INSPIRING CURIOSITY CONFERENCE, COVENTRY, 22–23 OCTOBER 2015

The Inspiring Curiosity Conference, marking the 50th anniversary of Theatre in Education (TiE), will explore the relationship between theatre, education and learning, from the early inception of TiE at the Belgrade in 1965, through to current practice, and then to hopes, models and opportunities for the future. Contributors to the conference will include Tony Jackson; Roger Wooster; the Department of Theatre and Performance, Goldsmiths, University of London; Shakexperience, South Africa; London Bubble; C&T; Big Brum; Birmingham Repertory Theatre; Mercurial Dance; and Geoff Readman. For a full list of speakers and contributors as well as tickets visit: www.inspiringcuriosity.co.uk

SHAKESPEARE AND EDUCATION CONFERENCE BRIGHTON, 29–30 APRIL 2016

2016 will mark the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, provoking renewed interest in his work, his legacy and his contemporary cultural capital. As teaching methods change, pedagogy develops, technologies advance and culture evolves, what role does Shakespeare play now and in the future of teaching and learning? How do we incorporate performance practice in the teaching of Shakespeare in Literature – and vice versa? What part does education play in the construction of our public 'memory' of Shakespeare at this time of commemoration? Speakers include: Catherine Belsey (Swansea), Coppélia Kahn (Brown), Sean McEvoy (Varndean College), Shormishtha Panja (Dehli) and Emma Smith (Oxford). With participation from RSC Education and Cambridge Schools Shakespeare.

WORLD SHAKESPEARE CONGRESS CREATING AND RE-CREATING SHAKESPEARE 31 JULY–6 AUGUST 2016

The 2016 World Shakespeare Congress – four hundred years after the playwright's death – will celebrate Shakespeare's memory and the global cultural legacy of his works. Uniquely, ambitiously, fittingly, this quatercentenary World Congress will be based in not just one but two locations: in Shakespeare's birthplace, and final resting-place, Stratford-upon-Avon; and in the city where he made his name and where his genius flourished – London. The 2016 hosts – in Stratford, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, and the University of Birmingham's Shakespeare Institute; in London, Shakespeare's Globe and the London Shakespeare Centre, King's College London – look forward to welcoming delegates from around the world to share in a range of cultural and intellectual opportunities in the places where Shakespeare was born, acted, wrote and died.

BRITISH SHAKESPEARE ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE: SHAKESPEAREAN TRANSFORMATIONS: DEATH, LIFE, AND AFTERLIVES HULL, 8–11 SEPTEMBER 2016

The conference will be held in the official run-up to Hull's year as the UK's City of Culture in 2017. The programme will include plenary lectures, papers, seminars, workshops, and performances at Hull Truck and the Gulbenkian Centre. There will also be special workshops and sessions pedagogy. We welcome proposals for papers (20 minutes), panels (90 minutes), or seminars/workshops (90 minutes) on any aspect of the conference theme, broadly interpreted. Abstracts (no more than 200 words) should be sent to bsa2016@hull.ac.uk by 15 December 2015.

ASIAN SHAKESPEARE ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE DELHI, 1–3 DECEMBER 2016

Heads up for the Asian Shakespeare Association conference, Delhi, 1–3 December 2016. More details coming soon to: asianshakespeare.org/site/conferences/view/delhi

CONTRIBUTIONS

We're always looking to publish lively, engaging reports on teaching Shakespeare-related conferences, symposia, panels and workshops that our readers have attended – please contact sarah.olive@york.ac.uk if you're interested in contributing one.

PAULINA BRONFMAN is a first-year PhD student in the education department at the University of York. For her MA in Education Studies she collected the thoughts of teachers working in North Yorkshire on using Shakespeare to teach secondary school pupils about human rights. Their experience as teachers ranged from one to thirty-two years. Teaching human rights is part of the key stage 3 and 4 National Curriculum for Citizenship Education.

Approximately 80% of the teachers interviewed perceived the relationship between human rights and Shakespeare to be very important. However, they agreed that they never mention “human rights education” in class.

[Human rights] is an integral part of [teaching Shakespeare] and as I say, it’s the way of leading kids into actually understanding the plays and not just understanding, enjoying, the plays because how can they understand them unless they relate to them? (*Beatrice*)

Human rights, Shakespeare, that’s what makes Shakespeare so wonderful, isn’t it? He does explore all avenues of life (*Virginia*)

20% of teachers had never thought about that relationship directly before being interviewed, but said it could be important. These were all teachers with fewer years’ experience. 100% of the teachers interviewed who teach *The Merchant of Venice* talk about anti-Semitism, bigotry and intolerance in their classes. 100% of teachers talk about racism and multiculturalism when they teach *Othello*.

If you’re studying Dickens, you can look at the underclass of Victorian London and how they were treated, and the inequalities in society. If you’re doing *Othello* you can look at racism. If you’re doing *The Merchant of Venice* you can look at anti-Semitism. You know, all these things are, of course, relevant . . . [Human rights] is very prominent in Shakespeare . . . it’s impossible to ignore. (*Nicholas*)

In Year 9, they study a unit on freedom and slavery, and we have got a couple of lessons on *Othello* in there, looking at how racism and discrimination is presented in literature through the time. They are focused less on understanding an entire story or plot, and just then a snapshot of a character, or an idea, or theme, and getting them to engage with it that way. (*Anne*)

100% of teachers who teach *Romeo and Juliet* or *Macbeth* talk about gender equality and women’s rights when they teach these texts.

We talk about justice in terms of the equality consensus and justice in terms of no matter what you look like, who you are, you have the right to a good life, to privileges and we talk about, you know, these are privileges . . . The girls often cannot see education as a human right because they have not got a parameter for comparison. Juliet could not go to school and she was really forced to follow what her father chose for her. (*Anne*)

[When teaching *Romeo and Juliet*] you could not ask a [Muslim] girl what was their fear if [they] don’t choose a Muslim partner. As a teacher, you know that it has relevance and they might express some of their own worries and thoughts. It is very hard for them so you must be very delicate and very respectful [with] the issue in class. (*Virginia*)

Obviously we also discuss relationships between parents and children, and obviously parents have a certain right as well, but this idea of no-one can force you to marry someone. No-one can tell you to live your life a certain way for the rest of your life. (*Charlotte*)

I’ve just written a scheme of work for [*Dream*], talking about Hermia’s right to marry the man that she loves but her father is saying “No”, or you get sent to a nunnery, a convent, and this idea of what life is that? What choice do you have? (*Jane*)

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ROBERT SAWYER is an Assistant Professor of English at East Tennessee State University, where he teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in Shakespeare and the Victorians. He is the author of *Victorian Appropriations of Shakespeare*, co-editor of *Shakespeare and Appropriation* and Harold Bloom's *Shakespeare*.

When most people hear the name Orson Welles, they think immediately of his award-winning film *Citizen Kane*, or his hysteria-producing "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast, or his widely-acclaimed Shakespearean adaptations on stage and screen. Welles, however, was also interested in the teaching of Shakespeare in U.S. classrooms, and he spoke out often about it long before these other better-known events occurred.

Welles' own unorthodox education may have fostered his concern about proper teaching methods, as he was, more or less, self-educated until after his tenth birthday. When he was finally sent off to be formally educated at age eleven, he entered the Todd School in Woodstock Illinois in 1926, where he remained until his graduation in 1931. During his time there, Welles starred in and directed a number of plays, including a production of *Julius Caesar* (when he was only twelve), in which he played Marc Antony, the Soothsayer, and Cassius. More importantly, while at the school, Welles came under the tutelage of the Headmaster Roger Hill. The relationship, however, was more a collaborative venture than a mentor-student relationship, for Hill noted his student's genius early on, and the two eventually worked together on a number of Shakespeare projects.

One of their first goals was to reform the teaching of Shakespeare, specifically at the high school level, as they explained in a co-authored essay in *The English Journal* in 1934. "The average American high-school boy or girl studies three of Shakespeare's plays before graduation," they noted, as well as Chaucer, Milton, and others. They then wonder aloud, however, if "any of these millions of boys or girls develop a real appreciation of these authors," a personal engagement so profound that they might read them "for pleasure later in life" (464). They conclude that "an honest answer by high school teachers would probably set the number at an almost negligible minimum," perhaps not unlike the results in many educational settings today. When the essay rhetorically asks, "who is to blame for this problem?," Welles and Hill single out Shakespearean pedagogy as the prominent flaw (434).

They specifically attack the analytical method which, they claim, leads many classroom teachers to embrace a faulty

teaching method, one that usually stems from university teacher training programs: "Probably a large measure of the failure should be laid at the door of the [high school] teacher," they assert, and "here again the blame" moves up the ladder to the current teacher's former professor, and more broadly, the dominant "pedagogical system" at the university level (465). Tainted by the "scientific approach theory," Welles and Hill conclude that colleges have taught teachers to see a Shakespearean play only as "a cadaver, useful for an autopsy," and as a result teachers are "making dissecting-rooms of our English classes" (466–467).

"the target audience was high school and college students, not so much as a way to increase the students' critical understanding of the plays, but as an attempt to engage them emotionally with the works."

This essay, however, was only the beginning of their assault on the current trend of teaching, as well as their continued promotion of a performance-based pedagogical approach to Shakespeare. Welles eventually co-edited three plays with Hill, *Julius Caesar*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, for a collection entitled *Everybody's Shakespeare: Edited for Reading and Arranged for Staging*. The target audience was high school and college students, not so much as a way to increase the students' critical understanding of the plays, but as an attempt to engage them emotionally with the works. The focus on performance was signaled immediately in the introductory essay entitled "Advice to Students for Studying Shakespeare's Plays"; it was followed by the single word, "Don't" followed by an exclamation point for emphasis. Instead Welles instructed students to "Read them. Enjoy them. Act them." Using his favorite metaphor again, he enjoined them to avoid putting plays on the "dissecting table and analyzing under a microscope each organ and entrail," urging them to "[p]ut Shakespeare where he belongs – on the stage" (3). This notion of teaching Shakespeare through performance has been an ongoing theme by contributors to *Teaching Shakespeare*, including Conny Loder in the last issue, who suggests that a "performance analysis" facilitates

"welles instructed students to 'read them. enjoy them. act them.'"



finding “the hidden clues within the play that are otherwise missed” (7). Welles and Hill would applaud such efforts; as they argued many years earlier, in “studying these plays [a student] ought to act them out, if only in the theatre of [their] own mind” (27).

“a ‘performance analysis’ facilitates finding ‘the hidden clues within the play that are otherwise missed.’”

In a best case scenario, however, students would also act them out, and Welles implores teachers to produce one of the three plays in the collection “utterly without impediment” meaning scenery, lighting, and design (26). He suggests a setting that will sound familiar to most English high school teachers even today: “[f]ix up a platform in a class-room, a gymnasium, a dance-hall or a back yard and give Shakespeare a chance”; and he proclaims that participants will find Shakespeare “more literal than anybody’s paint brush” (27). In addition to Welles’s “Introduction,” he and Hill the shared editorial essay duties in *Everybody’s Shakespeare*, cutting the texts vigorously and carefully modernizing the spelling. Not only was this a task of somewhat sophisticated team editing, but we should not forget that Welles was only nineteen when it was first published.

One other emerging teaching technology was also embraced by Welles and Hill – the use of Shakespeare phonograph records in the classroom – and the two promoted their use in the *English Journal* essay as a way to make learning

more enjoyable. While they praise “the growing library of phonograph recordings” of Shakespeare, including speeches by John Gielgud, John Barrymore, and others, they also point out that “Columbia has now recorded almost a complete version of the *Mercury’s* current production of *Julius Caesar*,” which was, of course, the production which Welles directed and in which he also starred (468). But lest this personal plug only seems to smack of self-promotion (although it surely was in part), my point is that Welles’s recordings were soon sought out by Shakespeare teachers at the time since they included a “complete” text, instead of snippets of single speeches. Their value was confirmed in the inaugural issue of *College English* published the following year (October of 1939). Not only did the author praise Welles’s records, but he also noted their affordability. The *Mercury Julius Caesar* comes packaged with four records, he writes, plus the “text of the play as it appears in *Everybody’s Shakespeare*,” and also supplemented with “a *Handbook for Teachers*, all for \$18 dollars” (60).

But in spite of Welles and Hills’ efforts, and as Orson was soon to realize, it was easier to create a national hysteria in the form of a radio broadcast than it was to transform entrenched teaching modes. For, as we know, his performance-based pedagogy would soon be trampled asunder by the New Criticism, a teaching style that reigned for some forty years, and one which also reveled in the “dissection” of Shakespeare’s plays. Although Welles and Hill’s method would lay dormant in the soil for at least a generation, it would finally bloom in the last decades of the twentieth century.

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CYNTHIA LEWIS, Charles A. Dana Professor of English, has been teaching Shakespeare, Renaissance literature, and creative nonfiction at Davidson College since 1980. She is the author of numerous scholarly articles on Shakespeare and his contemporaries, as well as a book, *Particular Saints: Shakespeare's Four Antonios, Their Contexts, and Their Plays*.

In the spring semester of 2014, I taught "Radio Shakespeare" for the first time. Its main purpose was to provide a small group of advanced students with the opportunity to study a single Shakespeare play as thoroughly as possible over several weeks. They would meet in seminar for the first part of the semester, discussing the play as in a typical, upper-level English class; during the semester's second half, they would start rehearsing, at which point class would consist of learning the play through performing it.

Many times in the past, I had taught "Performing Shakespeare," in which about fifteen students had mounted a full-scale production from the ground up and performed it publicly. "Radio Shakespeare" would include some of the same elements and yield some similar learning outcomes, but the performance of Shakespeare on the radio – its history and its distinct nature – were new to me and would pose a learning curve. The reading for the course, in addition to literary criticism about *Merchant of Venice*, consisted of basic articles about radio performance of Shakespeare. Some of

Shakespeare's plays are far better suited to the radio than others. For the launch of the class, I chose *Merchant*, which is something of an ensemble play and thus well-suited to a class performance. In addition, it is classified as a comedy and offers much humour, but its humor is more verbal than physical or visual. The play's emotion is often visceral, which I thought would play well on the radio.

I had the good fortune to collaborate with the director of the non-profit radio station sponsored by my institution, Davidson College. His enthusiasm for participating in the academic program, as well as his background as an amateur Shakespearean actor, were key. Once the logistics of broadcasting were arranged, my next concern became the students' voices. Even professionals might balk at the

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Photograph © WDAV Classical Public Radio



stress of carrying an entire, full-length production through unenhanced voices alone; few students have trained voices or even think about how their voices sound and how to use them for acting purposes.

Compounding this challenge was the necessity of cross-gendered casting. The abundance of women in the class of ten students meant that even some of the prominent male roles – Gratiano, for instance – had to be cross-cast. The young woman who played Gratiano, moreover, was also assigned Morocco, and another woman played three men: the Duke of Venice, Salerio, and Launcelot Gobbo. These women, then, had the added burden of differentiating one male character from another. For help on this front, I hired a voice coach from a nearby college who met with the students for one long session, then listened to recordings of them later and evaluated them, providing helpful advice. Gradually, the class discovered audio aids to advance characterization. One of the most successful was a little toy horn, officially called “The Wildly Noisy Wooden Thing,” that Launcelot used both to introduce his entrance and to punctuate his speeches with toots that can only be described as hilariously silly.

At the end of the course, and following the four performances, the students were required to write a substantial, analytical essay (twelve or so pages) on an aspect of performing Shakespeare on the radio. Three broad topics emerged from those essays: the implications of the lack of a live audience for a radio performance; the affirmation that, as is often observed, a Shakespearean play is essentially its language; and the principle of freedom within limitations.

Stage actors take a live audience for granted. Even if their production doesn’t observe Original Practices, like the absence of the fourth wall, they can hear the audience’s reaction and both feel and glimpse their auditors’ presence. Radio actors, by contrast, perform for each other – in a very small space. One student wrote about the effects of performing in close quarters, which, he observed, seemed to increase the tension in already tense scenes – in particular, Salerio and Solanio’s heckling of Shylock in 3.1 and the negotiations over the bond in 1.3. In 1.3, considerable discord arose between Shylock and Bassanio, in addition to that between Shylock and Antonio. The latter is universally recognized; the former was perhaps made accessible through the physical proximity between actors.

Another student’s essay explored the experience of the individual actor, describing listening to radio as a “solitary experience . . . more akin to reading a novel than seeing a staged play [because of the] isolation of the participant and requirement of individualization.” While surrendering the continual approval of an audience’s laughter, facial



Photograph © WQAV Classical Public Radio

expressions, utterances, and applause robs actors of a good deal of enjoyment and motivation, the analogy of reading a book to oneself points to another kind of pleasure that attends radio performance. Reading Shakespeare’s poetry aloud after rehearsal has polished the delivery – and reading it for people you know are listening, even if they’re invisible – is its own reward.

“READING IT FOR PEOPLE YOU KNOW ARE LISTENING, EVEN IF THEY’RE INVISIBLE – IS ITS OWN REWARD.”

Radio performance foregrounds, not only language but also, silences. The student who played Nerissa wrote about all manner of questions regarding her character, who is often onstage without speaking much or speaking at all. Her motivation and disposition are repeatedly difficult to fathom, but in a staged performance, where even a silent character can participate visually, the issue of what’s missing is more easily ignored.

The discussion of how our class would portray Shylock exemplifies how the limitations of audio Shakespeare can also provide opportunity. We didn’t have the option of dressing Shylock in gabardine or a yarmulke, and we decided against identifying the character with any particular nation or historical period – with, for instance, a Yiddish accent. As a class, we chose to de-emphasize Shylock’s Jewishness *per se* and to emphasize his alien-ness in Venice. Our Shylock invented his own accent, which was vaguely Eastern European, but not linked to any particular country or culture. It simply made him sound different from the other characters. We believe that detaching the play from specific Holocaust history and awareness enabled it to resonate more broadly than is usually true of *Merchant* in contemporary performance.



a J. KOHLHEPP teaches at Berkshire School, an independent boarding school in rural Massachusetts, where he also serves as a squash and baseball coach, an academic advisor, a faculty sponsor for the Gay-Straight Alliance, and director of the Writing Center.

HOW THE PRINCE OF DENMARK CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE

In case you haven't noticed, Shakespeare is hard to shake. Everywhere we turn, we encounter echoes of and allusions to Shakespeare's plays. And *Hamlet*, probably the Bard's most famous work, seems particularly adept at worming its way into unforeseeable corners of our world. From Disney adaptations to Adam Sandler parodies, the Prince of Denmark remains an active commodity in the contemporary cultural machinery. What keeps the Bard of Avon's works alive, and what might the Prince of Denmark's words mean to you?

A famous Russian director has argued for the primacy of the Danish prince: "If all the plays ever written suddenly disappeared and only *Hamlet* survived, all the theaters in the world could . . . put on *Hamlet* and be successful" (Neill 307). Ira Glass from the radio show *This American Life* notes the prevalence of performances: "When we first broadcast today's show, the American theater website listed 12 theaters doing Shakespeare's *Hamlet*." What would Shakespeare's play be like if it were actually performed by murderers and other violent criminals, wonders Glass: "What would they see that the rest of us do not? And the answer is, a lot" (Act V). Incarcerated felons at a maximum security facility made connections with the play that few could have anticipated.

"if ALL THE PLAYS EVER WRITTEN SUDDENLY DISAPPEARED AND ONLY HAMLET SURVIVED, ALL THE THEATERS IN THE WORLD COULD . . . PUT ON HAMLET AND BE SUCCESSFUL."

You don't have to be a murderer to bond with Shakespeare's play, of course, nor do you need to be male, as Shakespeare's casts were, nor even to live in the English-speaking world. Shakespeare's plays continue to be produced and enacted in the most bizarre places, and *Hamlet* leads the charge. The Arslankoy Women's Theater, an all-women's troupe from a rural Turkish village, recently put on a touring version of "'Hamit' by Sekspir." Of course, the translations and mutations go well beyond the names, as we might expect. In one ingenious adaptation, the director revised the final scene, in which Hamlet dies and falls to the stage. The problem? The

actress portraying him was 8 months pregnant. The solution? "Nobody dies and Hamit just goes really crazy," opined the director. As Elif Batuman observes, "The success of *Hamlet* in Arslankoy might attest to Shakespeare's universality" (80).

"HAMLET DEMONSTRATES A UNIQUE ABILITY TO MOVE BETWEEN TIME, PLACE AND GENRE."

Hamlet demonstrates a unique ability to move between time, place and genre. Curious about what the PoD might do in today's world of wifi? Check out *Hamlet's BlackBerry: A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age*. Wondering how to connect medieval Danish turbulence and modern Egyptian unrest? Take a look at *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Shakespeare Prince and Nasser's Ghost*. Hoping to adapt the prince's fantastic interpersonal skills for your own professional advancement? Download a copy of *The Emotional Intelligence of Hamlet*.

I too have witnessed the *Hamlet* effect. A teachers' workshop led by Shakespeare and Company assigned us the task of memorizing and reciting any Shakespearian soliloquy. I don't even remember which text I chose, but Mike, an English teacher and baseball coach from a big high school in New York, brought in a passage from *Hamlet*. We read and wrote and recited our lines until we had them down cold. For Mike, however, all this activity was simply laying the groundwork for an amazing epiphany. He stood up in front of a motley band of teachers and began: "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now . . . What is 't to leave betimes?" (V.ii.238-9). Mike stopped, with two words left to deliver.

We wondered at his pause and waited for his finish. "It's my Dad," he said haltingly. "He didn't care much for Shakespeare," Mike continued, "but I think he would have understood this passage." Mike paused again, closed his eyes and gathered himself, and brought us home: "Let be" (V.ii.240). The Prince of Denmark, trying to connect with his own departed father and sensing his own demise in the near future, provided this modern man with the means to access his own feelings for his father.

You might be wondering whether this is applicable to contemporary students, who wonder why we even read, or

“THE PRINCE OF DENMARK, TRYING TO CONNECT WITH HIS OWN DEPARTED FATHER AND SENSING HIS OWN DEMISE IN THE NEAR FUTURE, PROVIDED THIS MODERN MAN WITH THE MEANS TO ACCESS HIS OWN FEELINGS FOR HIS FATHER.”

see, or perform Shakespeare at all. Perhaps you are expecting me to provide you with some kind of definitive answer to this question, or to any others related to this ambiguous subject. I suspect that a dozen different teachers would provide you a dozen different rationales for The Bard’s ubiquity in high school curricula. But I am glad that we do so, and I will fight fiercely to keep it that way. Because Shakespeare’s plays offer an opportunity for students to forge connections different from those they develop through the other literature they encounter.

The chance to put *Hamlet* on stage opens up a unique range of experiences and insights. This is not to say that there aren’t plenty of digressions, or even transgressions, along the way. My school’s annual production of *Hamlet Night* brings with it numerous difficulties, the foremost of which is far too few students remembering lines and far too many slaughtering them. Our seniors have also proven themselves susceptible to sidetracks, as shown a decade back when one fantasist built a life-sized model of the Millennium Falcon in which to set his class’s single scene. But we have also witnessed moments of the sublime. In fall 2001, as the ashes of 9/11 literally smoldered, my seniors donned black costumes from the NYPD, peered over the horizon for incoming jets, and started *Hamlet Night* with a haunting “Who’s there” (I.i.1). A few winters later, a studious but shy young woman, who had been mostly mute throughout the semester, was forced to fill in when the queen-in-training fell ill. We expected utter failure until the moment she stepped forward, put her hand on Hamlet’s shoulder, and blew us all away: “Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet. I pray thee, stay with us” (I.ii. 122–3). Though she hasn’t climbed another stage or uttered another line of Shakespeare since that night, I am certain that this, her turn as Queen Gertrude, has stuck with her in ways that other academic experiences have not.

Then there was the young post-graduate who arrived at Berkshire with high hopes from a broken home. The harder they fought on the sports field, the further they seemed to be from that elusive sports scholarship; the more they tried to storm their way into the future, the more they felt trapped by the challenges of their past. They had written about their father, who had died, in journal entries, but they had always resisted the impulse to delve deeper into this relationship. They drew the role of Hamlet and worked hard to memorize their lines. When the big night came, they were ready on levels that none of us had foreseen. “Methinks I see my father,”

they declaimed from a stool on stage. The prince’s best friend, Horatio, asked this young player where he had seen the departed king. Our post-graduate, as both Hamlet and himself, answered with measured notes, drawing out each syllable as much as they could: “In my mind’s eye, Horatio” (I.ii.191–3). For a moment on stage, they peered into tragic aspects of their own life in a way that neither mandatory counseling sessions, nor clandestine self-medication, nor the sanctioned violence of sport had offered. Just for a moment, perhaps, this lost child became whole again.

“FOR A MOMENT ON STAGE, THEY PEERED INTO TRAGIC ASPECTS OF THEIR OWN LIFE IN A WAY THAT NEITHER MANDATORY COUNSELING SESSIONS, NOR CLANDESTINE SELF-MEDICATION, NOR THE SANCTIONED VIOLENCE OF SPORT HAD OFFERED. JUST FOR A MOMENT, PERHAPS, THIS LOST CHILD BECAME WHOLE AGAIN.”

I never promise students that kind of insight or experience, nor do I guarantee that any performers or troupes will achieve dramatic history along the way. Nearly twenty years into my own experience with the play, I find something new every time through. You cannot plan your experience with this most remarkable play; you must simply approach it with an active mind and an open heart, “if it be made of penetrable stuff” (III.iv.44). It’s really up to you. You can approach this play, and this experience, as just another assignment. But you never know – *Hamlet* may change your own life in ways that you can never anticipate, at moments in which you least expect it. As the Prince of Denmark himself observes: “The readiness is all” (V.ii.237).

“NEARLY TWENTY YEARS INTO MY OWN EXPERIENCE WITH THE PLAY, I FIND SOMETHING NEW EVERY TIME THROUGH.”

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a verbal blocking approach to teaching

JAMES N. ORTEGO II is an Associate Professor of Renaissance Studies and Associate Chair of English at Troy University's Dothan campus. He has served on the editorial board for *Fifteenth-Century Studies* and as an editorial reviewer for Pearson Publishers and Broadview Press. His research interests include Renaissance and Biblical Literature.

“they have been at a great feast of languages, and stolen the scraps.”

The quote above (Moth to Costard in *Love's Labor's Lost*, 5.1.35–36) reminds instructors that teaching Shakespeare poses a special challenge; some students struggle with Shakespeare's language while others have difficulty understanding the social context of the Renaissance. Still other students question the influence of Renaissance science and technology on Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights (Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* readily comes to mind as one example, but students of Shakespeare are not alone, for sometimes teachers struggle with the same problems as students. How then do we teach Shakespeare? I have found that the best way to help students understand Shakespeare is to have them go through an exercise that I call “verbal blocking.”

By verbal blocking, I mean slowly reading a scene in Shakespeare and noting the theatrical significance of each word, phrase, or line within the context of the scene and the play as a whole. When I teach Shakespeare's Comedies, I have students read scene two of act one in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (the first appearance of the “Rude Mechanicals”). They walk onto the stage, gather around each other, and then the person reading the part of Quince begins with, “Is all our company here?” (1.2.1). However, before Quince utters this line, the stage directions read, “Enter QUINCE, the Carpenter; and SNUG, the Joiner; and BOTTOM, the Weaver; and FLUTE, the Bellows-mender; and SNOUT, the Tinker; and STARVELING, the Tailor” I then ask my students, “Enter from where?” “Do all of the characters circle around each other?” What difference does it make to the audience where they enter?” “What is a Joiner?” “How about a Bellows-Mender?” “What would be the appropriate dress for Quince?” “Would he be holding anything in his hands?” And so on. At first my students get a little annoyed because I keep interrupting their “acting” of Shakespeare; they just want to read their parts and go home, but soon they try to anticipate my questions and discern the theatrical nuances for themselves. The attentive process by which a director shapes a play is the one that I try to mimic when I carefully question my students

during their reading of Shakespeare, and this process I call “verbal blocking,” which I have found to be a marvelous way to teach Shakespeare. The whole point is for students to hear the language of Shakespeare and go through the dramatic motions on stage while considering theatrical components that are often lost when reading Shakespeare silently. When reading Shakespeare aloud as part of a verbal blocking exercise, my students discover the theatricality of the play and the dramatic necessities that every director addresses, and they learn more about Shakespeare and his art than they would by simply reading the plays silently and listening to me lecture in class.

“the attentive process by which a director shapes a play is the one that I try to mimic when I carefully question my students during their reading of Shakespeare.”

Essentially, almost any key scene in Shakespeare would be a good choice for a verbal blocking assignment. In *Julius Caesar*, for instance, when Caesar enters the company of Cassius before the murder plot is fully developed, Caesar takes one look around the room then immediately says, “Let me have men about me that are fat, / Sleek-headed men, and such as sleep a-nights. / Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look: / He thinks too much: such men are dangerous” (1.2.191–194). So then, how does the actor portraying Cassius appear with “a lean and hungry look?” What is he wearing? What is he doing with his hands? How about facial expressions? Antony does not seem to notice anything unusual, for he says to Caesar, “Fear him not, Caesar, he's not dangerous” (1.2.195). What then does Caesar see that Antony does not? And since Antony has not yet been approached about the plot against Caesar, he does not have any reason to suspect Cassius. These are all questions that – if studied through verbal blocking – might teach students something about the dramatic art of Shakespeare not readily apparent through reading silently.

Reading Shakespeare silently makes it difficult to discern the word-play and verbal wit that often accompanies significant moments in his plays. At the beginning of Act 5, scene 1 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, the directions read, “Enter QUINCE for the Prologue,” and almost always,

“READING SHAKESPEARE SILENTLY MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO DISCERN THE WORD-PLAY AND VERBAL WIT THAT OFTEN ACCOMPANIES SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS IN HIS PLAYS.”

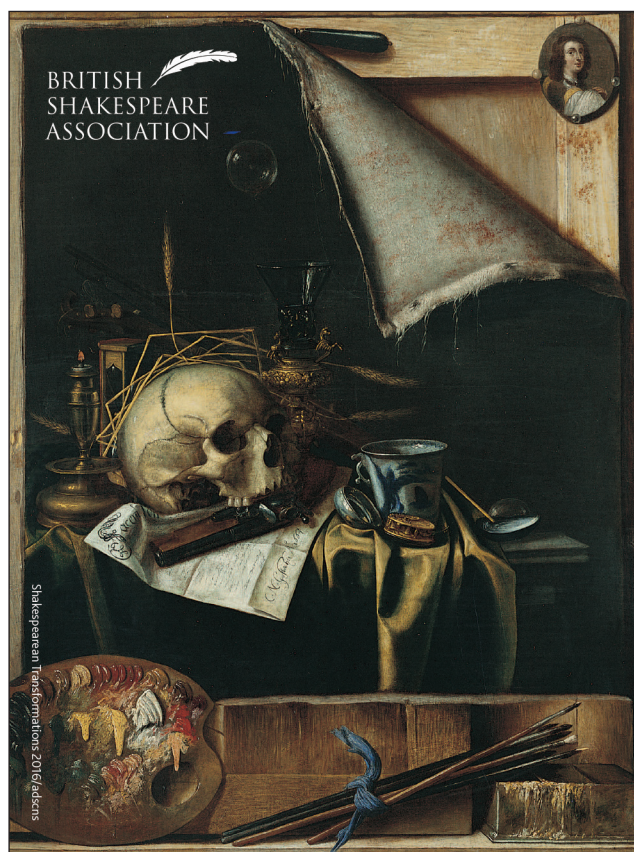
the student reading the part of Quince trots on stage and begins reading the lines but ignoring the punctuation. The opening lines of Quince’s “Prologue” are entirely dependent upon carefully reading the punctuation to emphasize the humor and/or nervousness of this character. The first line of the “Prologue” reads, “If we offend, it is with our good will” (108), but the actor playing this part must mind the pause after the word “offend”; otherwise, the humorous suggestion that the Mechanicals are willfully “offending” the wedding party is not clear. I ask the student playing Quince, “How do we know Quince is nervous in this scene?” “Why is he nervous?” “What are the other Mechanicals doing while Quince is reading the “Prologue?” In this fashion, I encourage students to imagine Quince’s lines as a performance rather than a confusing mixture of poetry and prose. Once students begin to view Shakespeare’s plays as dramatic scripts written in highly skilled verse, they learn more about Shakespeare and his era.

On the first day of my Shakespeare class, I review the syllabus, explain my course policies, then I tell students about the verbal blocking assignment (I know that I am not the first, nor only instructor to use this method, but I offer my best practices here for those who have not considered verbal blocking as

an academic exercise for students of Shakespeare). I explain what I mean by “verbal blocking,” then I re-assure them that I will not grade their acting ability (many who, like their instructor, have none), nor will I embarrass them publicly. Once I’ve alleviated their concerns, I explain the assignment’s writing component, which is a short essay (300–500 words) explaining what the student learned about the character and/or play after completing the assignment. The assigned essay adheres to the “Five Principles” outlined in *Writing Across the Curriculum* ([1] task tied to specific pedagogical goals; [2] audience, purpose, and writing situation; [3] all elements clear; [4] include grading criteria; [5] break down task into smaller steps). I require participation from all students, and I expect them to keep an open mind about the assignment; they have yet to disappoint me.

“I LIKE TO HAVE ABOUT 15 STUDENTS THOUGH BECAUSE THAT WAS ROUGHLY THE NUMBER OF MEMBERS IN SHAKESPEARE’S COMPANY, SO WORKING WITHIN THE SAME PARAMETERS AS SHAKESPEARE GIVES STUDENTS A SENSE OF DOUBLING.”

Depending upon the scene selected, I usually need about 15 students to conduct a verbal blocking exercise, though the assignment may be done with fewer students simply by selecting a scene in Shakespeare that features fewer characters. I like to have about 15 students though because that was roughly the number of members in Shakespeare’s company, so working within the same parameters as Shakespeare gives



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students a sense of doubling. A larger class causes problems such as finding a scene that has a part for each student. The marriage scenes could work, but then some students might be assigned a part that does not require any speaking lines, such as "Attendant Lords and Ladies." To avoid such situations, I use the verbal blocking exercise for classes of about 15 students; too few and I'll exhaust my students; too many and I'll confuse them.

Since student absenteeism could potentially create performance problems, I take care to assign the more prominent roles to students I know I can trust; I also make sure to assign an "understudy" to the major roles that are scheduled to be performed. In the event that a student misses the classes reserved for the verbal blocking exercise, I have that student deliver his/her lines at a later date on stage, alone, in front of the entire class. I have found that students will miss the verbal blocking exercise only in the case of a genuine emergency, and I'm happy to report that not one of my students has had an emergency for the past ten years.

In anticipation of my verbal blocking exercise, I reserve the university theater in advance and explain to students that I simply want them to stand on a stage and read their characters' lines. I do not require students to wear a costume (although I ask them to think about their character's appearance) or try to act. The learning process is really the guiding principle behind the verbal blocking assignment, though like any assignment, some students seem to learn more than others. The student who performed the part of Bottom in my most recent Shakespeare's Comedies class, for instance, had this to say:

In portraying a foolish character like Bottom, I understood the efficient methods Shakespeare employed to reveal character. Certainly, character would be revealed in a characterization by an actor, but I think that Shakespeare's text also does enough [so] that his characters can be understood even by someone unprofessional, like me.

This student seems to gain a greater understanding of Shakespeare through a close reading and performance of his lines; other students, however, seemed to miss the point. The student playing the part of Snug the Joiner wrote:

I learned a lot from the dramatization of A Midsummer Night's Dream; one thing was the difference between 'stage right' and 'stage left.'

I hoped the student would have learned more than this; perhaps she did since she mentions "learning a lot," but she reached for the distinction between "stage right" and "stage left" when describing her learning experience, so I must consider her response. Still another student said:

While I could understand the gist of the play through my personal reading, there were many jokes and added word play that I would have never caught on my own without having read the lines aloud on stage.

For every comment that appears to be discouraging, there are at least a dozen more positive comments about the verbal blocking exercise. Thus, I continue to have my Shakespeare students perform the verbal blocking assignment, and I continue to see success each and every time students get on stage and read his lines aloud.

And this is the whole point, really, of just about any class on Shakespeare: to get students to learn something about one of the world's greatest writers, his works, and the culture that informed his creative efforts. I still lecture to my students; show them videos of Shakespeare's plays; use visual aids such as slides and pictures, and call on students to read passages aloud in class, but the verbal blocking assignment has expanded my students' understanding of Shakespeare and encouraged them to think on a deeper level. I hope that every one of my students learns more about Shakespeare after completing the verbal blocking assignment; for one, their critical reading skills increase considerably, and as long as students gain a greater appreciation of Shakespeare, I feel that I've done my job well.

"AS LONG AS STUDENTS GAIN A GREATER APPRECIATION OF SHAKESPEARE, I FEEL THAT I'VE DONE MY JOB WELL."

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a BIGAIL RICHARDSON, a secondary school teacher for 23 years, has been questioning whether Shakespeare study is relevant today and how it could be a significant part of a child's education.

MUCHADO ABOUT SHAKESPEARE'S RELEVANCE TO YOUNG PEOPLE

One of the arguments put forward for Shakespeare's lasting place in British and international culture is the continuing 'relevance' of his plays today. Karma Waltonen and Denise du Vernay (2011) observe that, just like the writers of *The Simpsons*, 'Shakespeare wrote under the constraints, attitudes and expectations of his time', hence should sit comfortably in popular culture. However, Shakespeare also serves as a symbol for high culture and good education: 'Knowledge of his works, it is assumed, acquaints us with what it means to be civilized. That's one of the reasons Shakespeare is taught in school' (Lanier 2002). But are his plays relevant to students today?

The literary blog *Spinebreakers* (2012) is clearly geared towards the youth of today. I was interested to note a student's response to the website's question: 'Shakespeare's

been dead for nearly 4 centuries . . . seriously, so does he still have contemporary relevance?' Student, 'Anisa' responds with: 'In my mind there's no doubt that Shakespeare to this date has an abundance of contemporary relevance. Many of his concepts such as status and the fight between good and evil deal with human nature, and so are timeless.' On the same page there are links to Harry Stiles – Shakespeare synonymous with Stiles? Clearly not, but the suggestion is that Shakespeare is still very much alive in our youth culture. The documentary, 'Muse of Fire', aired on BBC4 in October 2013, interviewed ten Oscar nominees, five Oscar winners, one dame, one Harold Bloom and seven Knights to conclude that, 'Shakespeare knows and speaks to every man and woman . . . Anything that happens to you happens to (his) characters. He's there for you.' Bella, a 13-year-old London schoolgirl, sums it up nicely: "Shakespeare can still be

"SHAKESPEARE'S BEEN DEAD FOR NEARLY 4 CENTURIES . . . SERIOUSLY, SO DOES HE STILL HAVE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE?"

Photo by Ellie Kurtz © RSC



extremely relevant today. Just because times have changed, basic human nature hasn't . . . War, ambition, greed, love and political conspiracy are all themes relevant to our society."

"SHAKESPEARE CAN STILL BE EXTREMELY RELEVANT TODAY. JUST BECAUSE TIMES HAVE CHANGED, BASIC HUMAN NATURE HASN'T . . . WAR, AMBITION, GREED, LOVE AND POLITICAL CONSPIRACY ARE ALL THEMES RELEVANT TO OUR SOCIETY."

I feel the most pertinent approach is to teach the plays through the lens of Presentist study, a way of interpreting past texts in relation to current affairs. For example, Ewan Fernie (2007) suggests *Hamlet* could be used as a tool for students to consider terrorism today. Furthermore, having taught *Much Ado* at key stages 3 and 4 on many occasions, I was drawn to Iqbal Khan's 'Indian' version. I was fortunate to meet, interview and participate in a workshop relating to the creative decisions for the play with Iqbal at the Worlds Together Conference in September 2012. I met Kahn prior to seeing his production in London in October 2012, which meant that my viewing was an informed one, as I was well versed in his directorial decisions for this interpretation.

At the conference, Khan told us that his overall premise was to adhere to his belief that, 'Every play should have some kind of cultural transposition'. He was quick to add that although of Asian descent, he didn't feel as if he was any kind of authority on India, having only visited twice and his only experience of Pakistan being a six week visit, at the age of two – 'it is my culture and yet not my culture'. In fact the Indian concept was Michael Boyd's idea and it was after the RSC had signed Meera Syal that Khan was approached. Although 'his heart sank' at the Asian pairing, he agreed to the project. He conceded as he felt a connection to this world albeit via family stories and, ultimately, because the concept spoke to his overall philosophy for theatre: 'do theatre that challenges and that speaks to the modern condition, as well as [seeking to] enlighten and entertain'. He could also see how it would fit into the World Shakespeare Festival programme. But he did demand a visit to Delhi with his designer and producer in order to get a first-hand understanding of the culture as well as some initial workshops to ensure the accent would work with Shakespearean language.

"DO THEATRE THAT CHALLENGES AND THAT SPEAKS TO THE MODERN CONDITION, AS WELL AS [SEEKING TO] ENLIGHTEN AND ENTERTAIN."

Once on board, Khan was determined not to 'just do an aesthetic thing with it'. He was adamant that he wanted to relate the play to contemporary society. This led to him contextualising it in response to India's work with the UN-led

peacekeeping operations (UNPKOs) today: 'The only way it made sense was seeing the Soldiers (as ones) returning from a UN peace-keeping mission: . . . (thus providing) a universal context that speaks beyond a narrow frame.' Dominic Cavendish's review in *The Telegraph* (2012) agreed that:

Conceptually the continental shift works well. To judge by their blue berets and camouflage gear, Don Pedro and his men are returning from a UN peace-keeping mission. For all the bling consumerism on display in Leonato's pile, the transposition easily houses the play's strict social hierarchies, gender inequalities, arranged matches, honour codes and ad hoc approach to justice.

Clare Brennan agreed, in her review in *The Observer* (2012): 'the transposition fits well: it plays to possible audience preconceptions about the communality and hierarchical structuring of life in India that map effectively on to similar structuring in Elizabethan England', picking up Khan's conviction that modern day Delhi and Elizabethan society 'live on top of one another.

According to Syal, any modern interpretation of Shakespeare should 'sing with urgency' and indeed it did with the many parallels between the two societies. Khan thought the audience would be familiar with the plight of women in Delhi today – certainly the fatal gang rape and beating of Jyoti Singh Pandey in December 2012 generated widespread national and international coverage and condemnation. Khan explains: 'The tension of what it is to be a woman – the struggle between loyalty and independent aspirations for oneself as well as respecting traditional rituals (as seen in the play) still exists for women in Delhi today. There is also a real sense of community, which has an oppressive quality.'

The sense of a community in transition was another deliberate parallel that Khan was conscious of from the start, with modern day tensions changing the dynamic of the family hierarchy. This was evident in the central scene of the production which was staged, as an honour killing, and which according to Syal, highlighted a very sinister reality in Asia today in terms of rates of domestic violence and dowry death – 'where a woman is killed by her husband because she didn't bring enough money with her as a dowry'.

It was Khan's intention for the wedding scene to be shocking. He wanted to educate the audience about the reality of modern day India where women's reputation 'hang on a thread . . . and their freedoms can only extend so far.' Originally, Khan had wanted to film the wedding and project it onto the back wall with all of the actors on microphones to emphasise the public disgrace to which Hero and Leonato are subject: 'In India infidelity destroys the blood line. To make it

public is to destroy the family name – in the Indian context this destroys (a woman's) marriage potential (for the future).'

When I taught the RSC workshop to year 8 students, who hadn't seen the play, I asked them why a director might choose to project the wedding scene and why he would use microphones. They were quick to understand that this would enhance the profound public shaming. Khan's intention was for the wedding to be 'huge': 'I was unashamed to go there. I wanted it "kitschy" even, and I wanted to invite the whole audience... (there was to be the sense of) primitive, unbridled joy, nothing sophisticated – it needed to be very public as the crisis is how these people are perceived in the public eye'. He explained that in India today weddings are large family affairs where everyone is invited – even strangers or tourists. In this context Hero's alleged infidelity would be shared by so many – and it is this that is 'shaming' for Leonato. In this version, Leonato is even less concerned about his daughter's reputation, more about his own; again, another concept that the year 8 girls were quick to grasp. Add to this the military men and the scene becomes like a martial court. In Khan's version, Hero does not speak, nor does Beatrice speak for her (except to accept Claudio as her husband – with 'She does') as, in the Asian context, the role of women in these ceremonies is to be mute.

“HE WANTED TO EDUCATE THE AUDIENCE ABOUT THE REALITY OF MODERN DAY INDIA WHERE WOMEN'S REPUTATION 'HANG ON A THREAD . . . AND THEIR FREEDOMS CAN ONLY EXTEND SO FAR.' ”

For me, Syal's interpretation of Beatrice was a gutsy one but in Khan's version she is perhaps less feisty than in the original. She is visibly subservient to Leonato and Don Pedro during the masked ball and the lines in the opening scene, where she is critical of Benedick, are cut. I did wonder whether the sexist world that Khan depicted might be unfamiliar to some members of the audience but Khan later explained that Beatrice's actions in this scene, albeit shocking, would be 'culturally normative behaviour': 'In the cultural context a respect and gratitude for her elders, particularly one, an uncle, that has taken her in is only seen as due deference. It also suggests he is not the usual patriarchal tyrant – having a daughter that winds him round her finger and a niece that teases him almost as an equal.

However, when honour and the family's name is at stake, a switch is pressed.' Claudio's responsibility is to defend the woman he loves but he doesn't; he listens to the men. Leonato also immediately accepts the allegations as he is afraid of

“THESE YOUNG, WHITE, GIRLS WERE BEING EDUCATED ABOUT REAL LIFE ATROCITIES THAT STILL OCCUR TODAY.”

his daughter's potential sexual encounters, again reflecting a setting where women are beaten and killed if they don't obey their fathers or pay their dowry. My students were not as familiar with honour killings as much as the notion of arranged marriages so the setting of the play in this context was made all the more powerful, as these young, white, girls were being educated about real life atrocities that still occur today.

There were many other elements of the production that I felt would be appealing to younger audiences. The use of Bollywood-style dance and music during the celebratory and funeral scenes would be instantly familiar and engaging. The cross cultural costumes were helpful in deciphering the hierarchy of the play, with the elders wearing more traditional robes, Benedick and Beatrice wearing a mixture and the younger generation for the most part in modern dress. Interestingly, Margaret was wearing high-fashion western clothes with provocatively tight jeans, rather suggestive of her reckless character. The all-white (a colour often associated with innocence) attire at the end points to a lack of remorse – visible clues of Khan's interpretation of character. Khan also used many modern gadgets and props which helped contextualise the play. Khan told me later that, actually, he had not included the technology as tools to engage a younger audience. The reason for the technology was to show the impact of the western world in Indian.

At the end of Khan's production, his Hero came across as empowered since she was palpably slow to forgive her father. When he walked towards her she backed away. Leonato looked chastened and offered his hand with a 'Well, daughter' and finally she offered a gesture (an incline of the head) of forgiveness. I asked Iqbal about this after seeing the show and his response was: 'In today's world, it's the potential for forgiveness, growth that's important.' And to that end, it is my belief that Shakespeare's plays, if studied through the lens of a Presentist curriculum, could be vehicles that allow our students to grow morally, or at least to come to understand a little more about themselves and the world in which they live.

“IN TODAY'S WORLD, IT'S THE POTENTIAL FOR FORGIVENESS, GROWTH THAT'S IMPORTANT.”

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