

What Would Viola Do?
Demystifying the Elitism of Shakespeare
through a Modern Interpretation of *Twelfth Night*

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*Orsino: If music be the food of love, play on;
Give me excess of it, that surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken and so die.*
~ Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, Act I, Scene 1

Just for a moment, imagine the world without sound. The leaves on the trees have no whistle as they fall against the wind. The wind itself has no breath – only movement. Is a dance without music dance? How is the dancer challenged to master a technique or create a message without the soundtrack of sound? Furthermore, how is the dance of love perfected without the musical rhythms of the heart as its motivating underscore? William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* plays itself upon the magical music that is created when the heart feels itself in love, in need of love, and/or in the shadow’s of a love. Fortune has it that we do not live in a world without sound that we might enjoy this darkened comedy and relish in its dramatic whimsy.

Gentle reader, please be warned that this is not your “everyday Shakespeare” and certainly not your “everyday Shakespeare curriculum.” *What Would Viola Do* is a truly modern interpretation of *Twelfth Night* as it relates to why teens join gangs and to transgender. The uniqueness of this curriculum study is purely motivated and justified by the themes that have overtaken my students’ personal and classroom conversations – gangs and sexuality.

As an arts educator, I am continuously searching for ways to challenge my students and myself more in the classroom. One of my greatest fears is for my teaching methods to become stagnated, routine, or simply boring. I do not want to lose the inspiration and challenge that learning, teaching, and directing new theatrical works for my students brings. This fear of the mundane, coupled with my goal of establishing a professional theatre environment for my young players, has led me to create a complete theatrical season for my theatre arts department. Taking inspiration from political, social, and current global affairs, I choose a theme that will be consistently studied throughout the academic year and exhibited through the various theatrical works presented. With this, my middle school theatre arts program presents two to three mainstage productions annually, with an additional musical production and three to four project shows. A classical production is included in each season and counts as one of our mainstage shows.

The Houston Teachers Institute’s *Shakespeare and Film Seminar* has become an excellent addition to our theatrical curriculum by providing necessary academic perspectives, commentary and the supplemental materials needed to enhance my students’ desire to engage in this curriculum study. As an active participant of this seminar, I have honestly refreshed my love and dedication to Shakespearean study and performance.

I have the fortunate honor of teaching a student population that is reflective of our global society. The students of my school represent over 40 different countries. Most have recently come to America escaping war and/or other catastrophes in their native homeland. My students also reflect the economic spectrum – from the children of wealthy local power-players to the children of the incarcerated. This being said, my intention is to create a curriculum that is a vibrant, energetic introduction of William Shakespeare as an interesting and troubled young man while paralleling him to modern controversial icons with which students are far more familiar. With this, students will be given a dramatic picture of the environment of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre through visual parallels with current images in the inner-city ghetto. This is done with the intention of demystifying the elitism of Shakespeare and providing the motivation necessary for my students to be successful.

It has been my experience in education, from the perspective of both student and teacher, that oftentimes Shakespearean Studies are introduced as lofty and otherworldly. This is highly unfortunate. As one studies the realities that surrounded the environment of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre – the neighborhood, community, and people – it becomes very clear that the Shakespeare’s daily reality was not as lofty and elitist as many scholars and educators would envision it to be. *What Would Viola Do* is created with the intention of making the study of William Shakespeare more desirable for students by introducing this gigantic historical figure as an ordinary artist whose challenges and experiences validate their existence rather than allowing the language and artistry to diminish their self-esteem.

What Would Viola Do will greatly enhance my yearly theatre arts curriculum by providing the foundation for continuous thematic study. I am creating a performance season on the theme of identity – the definition, acceptance, and either the rejection or loss of identity. By the very nature of their ages, most middle school students (average age is 11-14 years) are experiencing strong identity crisis. They are trapped between being consistently reminded that they are children while, at the same time, being told that they should “act their age.” The National Institute of Mental Health has recently proven what educators have known for decades, which is that the middle-school teens do not use their entire brain because it hasn’t fully formed itself at this time in their human development. The fact that this scientific fact contradicts society’s expectations of teens creates the whirlwind of confusion which most teens experience at this age, causing many to deeply question their role as a part of the greater whole of society, including members of their family, community, and peer groups:

Another series of MRI studies is shedding light on how teens may process emotions differently than adults. Using functional MRI (fMRI), a team led by Dr. Deborah Yurgelun-Todd at Harvard’s McLean Hospital scanned subjects’ brain activity while they identified emotions on pictures of faces displayed on a computer screen. Young teens, who characteristically perform poorly on the task, activated the amygdala, a brain center that mediates fear and other “gut” reactions, more than the frontal lobe. As teens grow older, their brain activity during this task tends to shift to the frontal lobe, leading to more reasoned perceptions and improved performance. Similarly, the researchers saw a shift in activation from the temporal lobe to the frontal lobe during a language skills task, as teens got older. These functional changes paralleled structural changes in temporal lobe white matter.

While these studies have shown remarkable changes that occur in the brain during the teen years, they also demonstrate what every parent can confirm: the teenage brain is a very complicated and dynamic arena, one that is not easily understood. (“Teenage Brain: A Work in Progress”)

This theatrical season is created to appeal to the natural inclination of many of my students to search for their individual identities in grand, unique and attention getting ways. William Shakespeare employs the theme of identity and the perception of such as a major element in his comedy, *Twelfth Night or What You Will*.

I believe middle school students will truly enjoy studying Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* because of the themes inherent in the play, which parallel many of their own lives. The themes of death and separation, love, unrequited love and identity will have a tremendous effect on a student's desire to study and perform text from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. *What Would Viola Do* will inspire both my students and myself to greatness by providing an interactive curriculum consisting of lecture, reading the literature, a film component, and, ultimately, performing the play as a part of our theatrical season.

TWELFTH NIGHT: A SYNOPSIS

Viola: What country, friends, is this?
Captain: This is Illyria, lady.
Viola: And what should I do in Illyria?
My brother, he is in Elysium.
Perchance he is not drowned: what think you, sailors?
Captain: It is perchance that you yourself were saved.
Viola: O my poor brother! And so perchance may he be.
(Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, Act I Scene II)

As one of Shakespeare's most notable comedies, *Twelfth Night* opens on a pretty dismal note. A passenger ship suddenly sails upon a thunderous storm whose might and strength tosses the vessel about the ocean causing several passengers to fall hopelessly into its waters. Amongst these passengers are twins – Viola and Sebastian. Their love for one another is especially strong because they are the only family that they have left in the world. Though they struggle against the waters' strength to save each other without success, Viola discovers herself swept upon the coast of a most strange and foreign land. After asking a fellow survivor, she is informed that she is in Illyria and the powerful Duke of Illyria is Orsino. He is feverishly in love with a countess named Olivia, who is suffering from a deep depression after just losing her father and brother. Upon hearing this, Viola immediately decides to impersonate a male eunuch in order to gain favor with the powerful Duke of Illyria, Orsino.

Viola is immediately successful under the guise of "Cesario." With this, Orsino instructs Cesario to deliver his strong intentions of love to the countess Olivia. Orsino believes Cesario may be able to break through Olivia's commitment of seven years without a man in dedication to her brother's memory. Cesario is successful in breaking Olivia's seven year committed depression. Unfortunately, it's because Olivia falls in love with Cesario!

Thus begins Shakespeare's comedy of mistaken love and identity. For the purposes of this curriculum, I will focus primarily on Viola and the circumstances which prompted her to take on the identity of Cesario.

Fool: Well, God give them wisdom that have it, and those that are Fools, let them use their talents.
(Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, Act I, Scene 5)

A credible note must be said in regards to the historical motives of Shakespeare's names for his characters. A viola is the alto member of the violin family and it varies more in size than do the violin and cello. A viola is also the name of a variety of small pansies. Shakespeare is clever in naming his central character Viola, as it surely blends his thematic play on music with the fact that she is a beautiful woman by giving her the symbol of a flower. The name Viola further

serves to foreshadow by acknowledging that here is a female whose masculine side will surely play a huge role in her life; thus, the heavy alto sound of the viola.

Shakespeare's wit and wisdom in naming does not end with Viola as he is just as specific in the naming of her twin brother Sebastian. The name of Sebastian can readily be credited to two sources. Firstly there is the Saint Sebastian who was a Roman martyr in the early 3rd century. Sebastian was a captain of the Praetorian Guard but was also secretly a Christian who made many converts. Once the Roman emperor Diocletian learned of Sebastian's faith, he ordered that he immediately be shot to death by archers. Amazingly, the archers did not kill him and he returned to the emperor and denounced him for cruelty. Diocletian then ordered him beaten to death and was successful.

The second motive for Sebastian is the Italian navigator and cartographer, Sebastian Cabot. Cabot is best known for his expeditions for Spain and England to South and North America during the 16th century. His most notable and controversial expedition was in 1525 when Cabot received command of an exploring expedition to the Pacific Ocean. In 1526, he reached the coast of what is now Brazil, near the estuary of the river he named the Rio de la Plata (Silver River). Believing reports that the La Plata region contained vast amounts of gold and silver, he abandoned his mission and began exploring the area conducting a fruitless search for wealth.

Through Sebastian, Shakespeare has created a character that parallels each of these gigantic historical figures. Like Saint Sebastian, the character Sebastian amazingly survives a brush with death that is never fully explained to the reader; yet easily accepted as miracle. The greater likeness can yet be further drawn between the character and Sebastian Cabot. Like Cabot, the character Sebastian is discovered to be a sea explorer in search of riches. Cabot's famous expedition to Brazil also factors greatly in Shakespeare's choice for Viola's alter male name of Cesario; as there exists the Cesario Lange, San Paulo, Brazil. It must also be noted that there exists the San Cesario sul Panaro, Modena, Emilia-Romagna, Italy. This suggests the symbolism of Shakespeare's choice in naming his characters as he did. The twins are united during Sebastian's expedition to a foreign land. Interestingly enough, the character Sebastian only discovers his sister Viola is alive after stumbling upon her transformed as Cesario. While Viola's alter male name of Cesario represents both the foreign destination and the Italian home of the original explorer, Sebastian Cabot.

WHO IS VIOLA?

Olivia: You might do much. What is your parentage?

Viola: Above my fortunes, yet my state is well. I am a gentleman.

(Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, ACT 1. Sc. 5)

In 16th century England, a woman finding herself suddenly alone was a ripe prescription for danger, turmoil and death. The realities of vagrancy, homelessness and general unlawful behavior were the norm. This was a male dominated society and women were generally the property of the men in their family who provided the vital protection females needed to be safe. Unfortunately, upon her entrance into *Twelfth Night*, Viola survives a terrible storm and is suddenly alone in a world of rogues and thugs. Herein lays the premise for our study, *What Would Viola Do*, investigating the motives and choices of a female left to the elements of a dangerous environment on her own.

Viola's first instincts are to clarify her whereabouts upon the shores of this new land. "And what should I do in Illyria?" she then asks. Her instincts for survival are ripe knowing that her situation requires clever thinking and skill if she must survive without the protection of her brother. This being said, she wastes no time inquiring, "Who governs here?" Her motives for knowing who in fact holds the social and political power of the land are extremely clever for a

female with no means of protection about her. Viola intends to gain immediate favor of the power structure as her only means of survival the only way she possibly can – under the disguise of a man:

Regardless of the threat of punishment, several women did cross-dress, and because the decision to alter one's life is so radical and the change so abrupt, their motives must be considered. Dekker and van de Pol gathered data on cross-dressed women in Europe between the years 1550 and 1839. They admit that their information may be slightly tainted, as it was retrieved from old court documents and transcripts and very few personal writings of the women. However, they found 119 cases, and discovered some interesting reasons why women cross-dressed. They found a common generality in that most of the women who cross-dressed came from the lower classes in society and from broken homes either by cause of death or family quarrels. In addition, they divide it into four categories: Romantic motives, Patriotic motives, Economic motives, and Criminality. (“Cross Dressing: A Historical Perspective”)

Are Viola’s motives for survival foreign to most modern women today? Are there not women and young girls in our society who find themselves lost, abandoned or without protection from dangerous forces in our communities? Where do these women – and particularly young girls – run to for protection? What would Viola do if she found herself shipwrecked upon the shores of America’s modern urban community nightmares? What do young girls who are feeling that they are lost and abandoned go to for safety? And, ultimately, does safety actually exist for such woman and girls?

Safety and protection is a basic fundamental need for all human beings. When this need is not met, a furious search to meet this need begins. As an educator, I have witnessed several students in situations where their safety and protection was at risk or was non-existent. In each of these cases, I carried the burden of knowing that as an educator, I had a limited amount of power over the choices of these students. I would make countless referrals to several agencies, yet the decision to consistently follow-through with these recommendations was theirs to make. How they would ultimately choose to meet their basic need for protection and safety was beyond my control. Far too often, students make an immediate negative turn and become either sexually promiscuous, gang members or drug addicts. *What Would Viola Do* is designed to educate students on the choices and motives of females who suddenly find themselves in search of protection and safety. This study will focus on the character of Viola, paralleling her situation and choices with those of other young ladies who must also find immediate means of survival and make similar choices in either gangs and/or transgenering.

THE SEARCH FOR PROTECTION IN GANGS

Ethnic marginality often lies behind economic marginality. In the 1920s, most gang members were civilian of European immigrants. By the 1980s, most were African-American and Latino. In recent years, large-scale immigration from Spanish-speaking countries and from Asia has changed the ethnic composition of the US. (Moore and Hagedorn)

Gangs can be traced throughout history. Gangs serve man’s primal need for protection and community. As a teacher with students, who are actively associated with gangs, I choose to approach this topic from a psychosocial perspective versus the popular method of condemnation. I want my students who are gang members to realize, through research and conversation, why they made the choice they have made, an oftentimes permanently negative solution to a temporary problem.

A study conducted in 1999-2000 found that school size is positively correlated with the concentration of school violence and school crime in a given district. There is also a significant correlation of the concentration of violence in one district versus others. Using a tipping point for school size of 1000 pupils, small schools on average experience 29 to 40 percent fewer than do all of the schools in the sample. Schools with more than 1000 pupils experience between 58 and 108 percent more incidents of violence. (“School Size, Violence, Cost and Achievement”)

A curriculum, which addresses gang association and violence, is a positive, proactive move on the part of educators as a means of creating a safe educational community. Personally, I have lost several students to gang violence and association; they are either incarcerated or dead. The thought of one student in particular always brings me to tears. After several run-ins with the juvenile system, he had just returned from boot camp and was placed into my class upon his re-entry into school. Our first meeting was rocky, to say the least, because he would not follow the rules of my classroom. Looking back on the situation, if I had had prior knowledge of him, I might not have responded so demandingly towards him. Teachers across campus were literally afraid of this young man because he’d threatened several of them before and was a reputed gang leader. Yet, it was our run-in that cemented our friendship. He had finally met a teacher who treated him as a person and was *not* afraid of him. (Later I shared with him that I might have been more conscious of myself had I known the realities of his lifestyle.) Unfortunately, our friendship did not last long before the gang violence began to prevent him from attending school. One day before the first bell, there was a drive-by at the school and he was their target. Although no one was hurt, as a result school administration required that he not come onto the campus any longer for the safety of other students. He had accepted that his life was going to be short and that his enemies were simply a way of life for him. My countless words of positive encouragement were nothing compared to the bitter reality that he knew so well. He is now serving a considerable prison sentence for aggravated assault and robbery as a result of his gang associations.

I was Mama’s favorite grandchild. I thought that as long as I had her, I had someone who made me feel special. I was about seven years old when my mother and I moved to South Central Los Angeles. I was sad. I thought I would never see my grandmother again. I thought I would never fit in anywhere else. (Williams 5-6)

This quotation is from Stanley “Tookie” Williams, the founder of the infamous CRIPS Street Gang. At present, Stanley Williams is on California’s death row for multiple murders. Since his life in prison, Williams has reinvented himself as an international children’s book writer dedicated to teaching the truth of gang association to children in the hopes of ending the violence. Williams has won numerous awards and honors for his children’s book series including being nominated for the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize.

Joining a gang can be an assertion of independence not only from family, but also from cultural and class constraints. In joining a gang, young, Puerto Rican women in New York felt that they would be able to express themselves as assimilated Americans, spending money freely and standing up for themselves... An image of the gang counteracts the suffocating futures they face. (Moore and Hagedorn)

The majority of gang members become associated with gangs from a basic need for survival and protection. Gangs provide a high sense of protection from other stressful factors that many are faced with daily in communities across America. Many gang members become associated as a result of being threatened, beaten, robbed or bullied as young teens in school and/or their neighborhood. Unfortunately, oftentimes the protection is needed from family members. A large

majority of gang members are literally running from abusive home situations. Here's an example:

Another Decept girl, Nelsa, was the daughter of a heroin addict, and she had been taking care of her mother and younger siblings from the time she was 13 by working as a stripper. She would come from the club to school with a bagful of money, a fur coat and a gun. My best friend, Lisa, had been born in jail. She shuttled between foster care and her mother's house till she was 8. While living with her mother, she was abused – she actually looked forward to going back into foster care. Lisa could be just cold. If you messed with her in any way, she could hurt you without blinking.” (Robotham 74+)

A large number of female gang members are survivors of sexual assault and live in abusive homes. The gang provides a community shelter from the harsh treatment from their families. The gang becomes their family. Viola believes she has no family:

Valentine: If the Duke continue these favors towards you, Cesario, you are like to be much advanced. He hath known you but three days, and already you are no stranger.

Viola: You either fear his humor or my negligence, that you call in question the continuance of his love. Is he inconstant, sir, in his favors?

Valentine: No, believe me.

Viola: I thank you.

(Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, ACT 1. Sc. 4)

Viola from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* can easily be compared to Stanley “Tookie” Williams in several ways. Viola is a young lady who has literally lost everyone whom she loved and who loved her. She is now suddenly left to survive in this world with no family and no protection. Just as Williams describes himself, Viola is very sad and thinks that she will never fit in the world anywhere. Viola realizes that she must fend for herself and her first priority in this new place, like Williams' move to South Central Los Angeles, is to secure solid protection from the most powerful faction. With this, she changes her appearance to that of a male (transgender) and immediately gains employment with the Duke of Illyria who is the most powerful person in the land and whose power can be directly paralleled with that of a gang leader. Surely, Viola has secured her need for protection.

TRANSGENDER

Some girls may withdraw, frightened of getting close to anyone and getting hurt again, well aware of their own sensitivity, and protecting themselves. Some girls may feel differently and not want to be reminded that they are different because of the death. Losing a boyfriend, sibling, or parent when you are a teenager marks you as unusual, because the event itself is rare. It deviates from the natural life cycle.

Girls, who lose a loved one, in their need and longing to be consoled, may seek out sexual relationships or encounters, may “act out” sexually because they need physical comfort. They want to be held close, which is a protection from grief. Some girls may adopt the behaviors, mannerisms, or ideals of the lost person. This is called “introjecting” and it is a part of bereavement. It's similar to internalizing. (Machioian 107-108)

Machioian's research supports Viola's choice of transgenering as a result of the death of her brother and immediate need for protection. Viola has transgenered herself into the likes and mannerisms of her lost brother. Though Shakespeare may not have defined Viola's action as transgenering, research proves that there were in fact many female to male transgenerers in 16th century England. Like Viola, women transgenered themselves for protection as well as to gain

entry into all male environments such as was highlighted in the Academy Award winning film *Shakespeare In Love*, where the female protagonist transgenders into a male in order to perform onstage. Here's an example:

Growing up in rural southwestern Maine, Alice Myers was so androgynous that she often was mistaken for a boy. She had screaming fights with her mother when she was forced to put on a dress, "the ultimate statement of femininity," for special occasions. "There was no way to be who I thought I was and wear a dress," Myers says.

Always an outdoorsy kid eager to traipse through the woods with her older brother and his pals, Alice left Paris, Maine, to enter ninth grade at Exeter. Shortly after arriving, she decided that she was a lesbian.

It seemed a solution to a persistent sense of being "different from other girls," Myers recalls. That's a trait any therapist who works with the transgendered would recognize, an early sense that "who I thought I was" didn't match the body nature had provided.

But how many ninth-graders would know what it meant? "I hadn't met any transgendered people, but I'd met a fair number of lesbians," Alex says now. "I figured there was a place for me in the lesbian community as a sort of masculine woman."

Which worked for a while. Alice threw herself into nonstop athletics and academics to avoid thinking too much. "But when I did think about it, who I was, there wasn't anyone who understood me." (Span F01)

The case for including transgender into the classroom curriculum is solid. Across the nation, the synergy around this topic has grown increasingly strong forcing some colleges and universities alike to address the issues amongst their student population directly:

Third wave feminists' fight for equality is no longer just about voting and reproductive rights; it's about the subtler significance of cultural identity and the place of biology in gender roles. Young trans people are looking closer at the parts of our lives that most of us assume are scientifically predetermined. (Greenway)

Transgender people are biologically born one sex yet they choose to identify themselves as the other sex. This is done through dress, manner and social norms. Like Viola, many young female teens feel more comfortable as males (FTM – female to male transgender). Transgender has become a huge political issue on many college campuses forcing administrations to legally take notice.

What Are Transgender Issues?

Personal Issues

Much like coming to terms with one's identity as lesbian gay or bisexual, coming to terms with one's identity as a transgendered person often involves a tremendous inner struggle for self-acceptance. Personal issues include the following:

- Shame, fear, and internalized transphobia and homophobia.
- Disclosure and coming out.
- Adjusting, adapting, or not adapting to social pressure to conform.
- Fear of relationships or loss of relationships.
- Self-imposed limitations on expressions or aspirations.

(Currah, Minter, and Green)

Once a female student chooses to transgender and wishes to be viewed by society as a male, does she then lose all rights of being a female even though she is biologically a female? Schools

and educational institutions must become ready to prepare themselves for the delicate questions and debates that are sure to arise once a transgender student has to do something as simple as use the restroom. Are schools and teachers prepared to allow a female transgender into the boy's restroom and/or locker room? Are the male students prepared to accept him once he enters? Are schools prepared to acknowledge a transgender teen in the manner he wishes to be acknowledged in regards to their own personal name changes? What if the student's identity choices conflict with those of the parent? On whose 'side' does an educator support? As an educator, should I support the parent because they are the legal guardian (please recall that I teach middle school)? Or, do I support the student whose future and self-esteem during this ultimate quest for identity are at stake? It is my opinion that school districts across this nation must begin to take a proactive role in this discussion in order to support their educators who must answer the call of educating *all* children.

IMPLEMENTATION

What Would Viola Do is designed to be as a three-week curriculum study. Though this curriculum is created primarily for the purposes of my advanced theatre arts students, it contains strong cross-curricula content that will benefit several different courses of study from English, reading, and creative writing to history, social studies, and political science. My teaching strategy is to begin with a compelling introduction of William Shakespeare and The Globe Theatre. My primary goal is to *humanize* Shakespeare by drawing comparisons between his life and art with that of *The Jerry Springer Show*. With this being said, I will introduce the fact that he married a woman much older than he was and, it can be assumed, primarily because she was pregnant. Continuing on with such fashion, once I have my students completely engaged in the gossip of Shakespeare, I will then support my 'Springer theory' by drawing comparisons from our present urban inner-city ghettos and the ghettos which were the environment of The Globe Theatre. My students will quickly and effectively learn that although the dress, manners of speech and particular toxic, intoxicating agents have changed; our ghettos have miserably remained the same throughout history. Thus begins my unit of study. This engaging conversation can easily be achieved in one class lecture because you don't want to get your students too bogged down with vocabulary and such initially. You only want their interest. Once you have them sold on Shakespeare, the class is definitely yours!

My students will then begin reading *Twelfth Night* on a pause and return basis. We will pause at certain moments throughout the reading for discussion, project planning, role-play and the implementation of the lesson plans. I will extend this unit of study for one full semester for the purpose of rehearsal and performance of the full text.

Throughout this curriculum, various film selections will be viewed to enhance my students' learning of this subject matter. During each film selection, students will be encouraged to use their critical thinking and understanding skills to analyze each film for its relevance to the arts, the subject matter, and to them. It is my desire for my students to begin to judge when a film maker has not performed to expectations through their interpretations, casting, set locations, etc. For the purposes of this curriculum, I have created a list of films that are categorized by the sub-topics covered in this curriculum. For each film, I have given a brief opinion on why I have chosen to include it into our course of study. Please view each film prior to showing your students because some have a few scenes that may need you to edit manually a few scenes by simply fast forwarding during class viewing.

FILM SERIES

William Shakespeare

***In Search of Shakespeare* (DVD)**

Wonderful documentary hosted by Michael Wood takes viewers on an exploration of Shakespeare's life against the dramatic backdrop of his times – militarism, domestic surveillance, and wars. I truly enjoyed this documentary because Wood actually goes into Shakespeare's private drama such as the controversy surrounding his sudden marriage to Anne Hathaway. This is surely a documentary to include in any Shakespeare lesson.

***Frontline: Much Ado About Something* (VHS)**

As a theatre arts teacher I have a tendency to lean towards the controversy and drama surrounding historical figures, and this documentary surely satisfies my appetite. *Frontline* explores the controversy surrounding whether Shakespeare actually wrote all of the literature he is credited for, or was it his contemporary Christopher Marlowe.

***Shakespeare In Love* (1998)**

This film selection actually fits into two of my categories – William Shakespeare and Transgender. I have chosen to place it here, after *Frontline*, because this film also touches upon the controversy of William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. Brilliantly directed by John Madden and starring Judi Dench, Joseph Finnes, and Gwyneth Paltrow, this film shows Shakespeare as an ordinary man whose passions overwhelm him while he is struggling to produce *Romeo and Juliet*. Please note that this film has a restricted rating due to about two bedroom scenes. You can simply note these scenes and skip over them; your students will not miss a beat.

TWELFTH NIGHT

Twelfth Night

Wonderfully directed by Trevor Nunn with an outstanding classical cast of actors (Helena Bonham Carter, Ben Kinsley, Imogen Stubbs, Nigel Hawthorne and produced by Fine Line Features), this film is a pleasure to see. During my search a good *Twelfth Night* film to show my class, I saw a few that I knew would reinforce negative perspectives of studying Shakespeare in the classroom. Yet, I feel this film will keep my students entertained with fine acting and production elements.

GANGS

***Redemption: The Stan "Tookie" Williams Story* (2004)**

Starring critically acclaimed actor Jamie Fox, this film is the life story of Stanley "Tookie" Williams, the co-founder of the infamous CRIPS street gang. I especially appreciate the DVD version of this film because it has a recorded message from Stanley Williams himself speaking directly to young people discouraging them from joining gangs.

TRANSGENDER

***Boys Don't Cry* (1999)**

Unfortunately, you will not be able to show this movie to your classes due to the restricted rating. It does have strong violence and language. Yet, filmmaker Kimberly Pierce has directed a fine feature film that drives to the heart of transgender issues amongst young ladies. *Boys Don't Cry* is the true story of the life of Teena Brandon, a cross dressing youth who preferred life as her male identity of Brandon Teena. The film stars Oscar winner, Hillary Swank. I would advise teachers to view this film as a means of gaining a greater sensitivity towards this delicate issue.

LESSON PLAN ONE

What Would You Do?

Topics

Theatre, Performance, Psychology, and Current Events

Sub-Topics

Creative Writing, English, and History

After the class has read just begun reading *Twelfth Night*, begin this lesson by asking students several probing questions about death and loss. “Have you ever experienced loss in your lives?” “Was the loss the result of a heartbreak, betrayal, or death?” “How did you feel and respond to this loss?” After an in-depth discussion, have students break into small cooperative groups.

- 1) Students are to rehearse a short improvisation of a person(s) who have just experienced a great loss. Afterwards, have the students fast forward the scene a few days later. Lastly, a year after the initial loss.
- 2) Have students discuss the various choices that their person may have taken and why they chose what they did.
- 3) Students are now to perform the opposite choice from the one their person chose in the first assignment. The purpose in doing so is to clearly define the difference for both the performers and their audience of peers.

LESSON PLAN TWO

Who Are You?

Topics

Theatre, Performance, Costume Design, Photography and Current Events

Sub Topics

Visual Arts, Creative Writing, and History

After students have completed an in-depth study and discussion of the environment of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, ask them to decide where they would be if they were to attend The Globe during Shakespeare’s time. Would they be a groundling or would they be a thug hanging on the streets outside of the theatre?

- 1) Students are to draw a sketch of their chosen character paying close attention to the period costumes and dress for this time period.
- 2) Students are to draw a sketch and gather photos of a modern representation of their character in our current society.
- 3) Schedule a day where the entire class recreates the environment of The Globe as each of their chosen characters.

LESSON PLAN THREE

What Would Viola Do?

After students have begun reading *Twelfth Night*, begin discussing Viola’s choices. Allow students to moralize her choices, if they wish. Ask them if Shakespeare could have written Viola’s choices differently. If so, what would those new choices be and what might be their outcomes?

- 1) Have students perform the opening scene from *Twelfth Night* through improvisation.

- 2) Through improvisation, have the actors change the opening scene of *Twelfth Night* by changing the various choices of its characters.
- 3) Have students discuss the performance choices of their fellow actors in relation to the script.

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