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# Introduction

I have been teaching high school theater for over eighteen years, and like other theater arts instructors, I am always looking for a better way to get my students excited about acting. I especially found it difficult covering Shakespeare or building a successful Shakespeare unit. Granted, several students would do very well and grasp the concepts, tone, subplots, and subtext, while others would struggle through the reading of an entire play.

A few years ago, I wrote *Scenes from Shakespeare: Fifteen Cuttings for the Classroom* to create a more successful (and more enjoyable) approach to Shakespeare. In the past, my drama classes would read an entire play, analyze the text, and select certain scenes to perform in class; this would take four to six weeks to complete, and, in the end, my students were “burned out.” However, when I broke the plays into small, workable scenes, the students performed better, were more enthusiastic, and felt genuine success with the unit.

Here’s how this book, like my previous one, works: I have chosen several scenes from various plays, making sure that they were relatively small in cast size. Each scene contains between two and seven characters. At the beginning of each scene, there is a list of characters (both lead and supporting), and, most importantly, a brief description of what has occurred thus far in the play. In other words, if a student is cast as Lady Macbeth, she can grasp the setting, the motivation, and the basic character development. Then, after enough rehearsal time, these scenes can be performed either in class or in competition. (Many of these scenes are excellent contest material.)

I did not, in this book, go into specific detail about the elements of subtext, such as tone, timing, pacing, actions, movement, and emphasis and progression; I feel that each teacher has his or her methods for doing so. I did give certain suggestions for character development, action, and scene dynamics, but if you are looking for sources on subtext, some excellent books are *How Tall Is this Ghost, John?*, by David Mallick and *Shakescenes*, by Russell Brown.

I have heard from several drama teachers who used my first book, and I was pleased to hear that they had better success teaching Shakespeare in this way than the conventional way of analyzing just one play.

I also met a professional Shakespearean actress from Ashland who told me she has used the book for “tune up” and acting practice.

Honestly, I feel the scenes from this book are more exciting to play and more interesting to watch than those in the first book. Shakespeare is truly amazing: the conflicts, the emotions, the jealousies, and the passions make his work exciting, and, realistically, quite relevant in today’s world.

## **A Note to the Acting Student**

For those who are relative beginners, let me give you some quick helpful hints on how to approach the acting of Shakespeare:

- First of all, don’t let the language intimidate you. Remember, these lines were written for actors to perform. Some of my students have taken their characters and broken them down into small sections, analyzing each section for movement, motivation, and character development.

- Make sure you fully understand each phrase and each word. As you read your lines, it is imperative to comprehend the meaning of what you are saying and why you are saying it.

- When committing lines to memory, again, work in sections, memorizing each separately and piecing them together as you go. One way to memorize easier is to write your lines out in paragraph form; this will also help you get over the barrier of saying your lines in poetic verse. By doing this, you will also start to see a definite rhythm, a meter, and you will see the logical places for emphasis and for pausing.

- When rehearsing, make notes in the margins of your script. Write any blocking and movement notes, underline words that need to be emphasized, make notes for pausing. These notes will also help you memorize your lines more quickly, because you will begin to associate your lines with your movement: it becomes logical, understandable, and easier to develop your character to an honest and believable depth.

- When speaking your lines, speak them honestly. Pacing and dynamics are crucial; if you say your lines too flatly, you will lose interest and the interest of your audience; if you overact and approach your character with too much intensity, there is no place for your character to go. Remember this: justified pausing is a great way to create tension and tone. However, pausing must be used sparingly and in the exact context.

Once you have discovered Shakespeare’s characters and their conflicts, passions, and lives, I hope you will develop an appreciation for the genius of the Bard. As previously stated, his work is as relevant today as it was 300 years ago, and students will, no doubt, be analyzing his work for centuries to come.