

Shakespeare Comes to Shieli

One day this April, as we sat in the library facing an especially dry textbook passage that was supposed to form the basis of the next day's lesson, my team teacher turned to me and said:

"Carrie, do you have any stories or literature? I'd like to read it, but there's nothing in this book."

At this, my heart burst into song — and not only at the prospect of freedom from Kazakhstan's ponderous standard-issue English textbook: I did, in fact, have some Shakespeare plays that had been condensed and adapted for children and which were just about at our students' reading level.

We decided on *Romeo and Juliet*, and over the course of four or five class periods the students read through the shortened play. I also downloaded and brought in clips from Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* to show them; to my surprise and delight, however, the students were into it even before they saw the movie. After all, you have to hand it to Shakespeare: family feuds, love at first sight, clandestine marriage, murder, banishment, a faked death, a fatal miscommunication, double suicide — the man knew how to pack in the action.

When we had finished reading, one of the students stood up and said, "Ал, қоямыз ба?" ("Well, are we going to perform it?"), and his classmates immediately started discussing how they were going to divvy up the roles. While they spoke amongst themselves, my team teacher and I exchanged a look that said: *Well, since the ball's already rolling...*

So we spent another week using English in swordfights and confessions of love instead of reading dense essays on British animal rights law, and on Saturday the 30th the students performed the play in the school auditorium.

It's not ready for Broadway yet — a few of them still had scripts in their hands — but it was wholly theirs. They found a waltz to play at the ball; they

painted a flower-twined balcony on butcher paper and taped it to the front of a table so Juliet could stand on it; they constructed a black cape with a red cross for Friar Lawrence; they set votive candles around Juliet's tomb; and through it all they stabbed each other and collapsed onstage with great aplomb. Our Juliet wore a gold and black gown, spat a spirited "I don't want to" at her nurse when told she had to marry Paris, and wept convincingly over Romeo's corpse — except for the few giggles that escaped when Romeo didn't quite kill himself in time, and she had to throw herself back down on the stage as if she hadn't woken up yet.

The rest of the students' tenth-grade classmates were in the audience. They might not have caught every English word of the play, but the body language onstage was clear enough, and when Juliet shouted, "No! No!" over Romeo's body, they responded with a chorus of "Yes! Yes!" (They're not the most sentimental class in the school.)

The best way to learn a language is to use it, to do or make something valuable with it, and I hope my students left their performance with an inkling of how it feels to use English as they use their native tongue. For me, though, their excitement is what I'll never forget — how language and story drew them out of themselves and then gave them the means to make something that was still their own, something from which they could take such joy.