

Shakespeare Comes to Shieli

One day this April, as we sat in the library facing an especially dry textbook passage meant for 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 that, but there's nothing in this book."

At this, my heart burst into song — and not only at the possibility of freedom from Kazakhstan's ponderous standard-issue English textbook. I did, in fact, have some Shakespeare plays that had been adapted for children and 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 — though, to my surprise and delight, 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 and declared, "Ал, қоямыз ба?" ("Well, are we going to perform it?"), and in an instant the whole class was buzzing about how to divvy up the roles. My team teacher and I shared a look that said: *Well, since the ball's already rolling...*

So we spent another week using English in swordfights and love confessions 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 set votive candles around the lovers' tomb; and through it all, they stabbed each other and collapsed onstage with aplomb.

Our Juliet, so studious and soft-spoken in the classroom, turned out to have a flair for drama. She produced a gold and black gown for her costume, 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 tenth-graders 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 with it, and I hope my students left the stage with a memory of using English as they use their native tongue. The memory that's stayed with me, though, is of their excitement — how lavishly they bloomed in the sunlight of springtime, language, and story.