

# Shakespeare Girls Camp

Shakespeare is often the first exposure to acting that high school students get in a traditional educational setting. However, young women often miss out on meaty and satisfying roles in these earliest experiences with drama. There are just more roles that are rich, diverse, deep, and, frankly, better for men than there are for women. This is true inherently in theater, but especially in classical theater where even female roles were originally written to be played by men, and men are predominantly the main characters. As a result, the roles that high school girls get to play are not as challenging to them as those played by men in high school. If women were allowed to play the roles that were created originally for men, what kind of self-actualization and exploration is possible for these young artists and young women? What happens if we turn the ancient practice of all-male casts around to all-female casts?

We decided to run a two-week camp over the summer where girls could come together from different schools and backgrounds, and explore themselves through the lens of the deep, rich, often male characters of classic Shakespeare.



By giving young women the opportunity to play these roles, it removes the barrier between them and leading roles in classical theater. It also provides them with a safe space, being with all

other females, to play roles without being compared to how a man would play that role. Within the safety net of a bunch of young women, there is freedom for risk taking and discovering more about yourself as an artist. The full range of emotional depth you can reach through these more well-rounded characters, those in a position of power, is significantly more challenging and satisfying to actors. So often girls have to play the damsel in distress or the ingénue, why can't women also be in positions of power in classical theater and explore their leadership capabilities? If they can do that in the imaginary world, we suspect, they can have a foundation from which to explore their leadership in the real world.

What we found was that gender does not necessarily play a part in the characters that are built. Other than the expectations inherent in sexual relationships and conventional understandings of how those function, gender can be interchanged without much disruption to the characters. However, our audience wound up being very receptive and friendly to the all-female cast. We found that the heart of the character can live in either gender, and that, actually, a lot of the female characters that Shakespeare wrote have stereotypically male-like qualities, or qualities that resemble those in the male characters, which presents interesting challenges and opportunities to young female actors. Likewise, some of the male characters have traits similar to his female characters. So ultimately, it wasn't about males having more powerful, rich or diverse roles, it was that some roles are just more powerful for the actor to play than others regardless of gender. Ultimately, the students finding which characters were more important and accessible to them became the most valuable teaching opportunity for that self-exploration.

The most important part was selecting a character to which students felt connected. We fine-tuned the gender stereotypes those characters exhibited until we could project into the characters. Actors would walk about the space using body language they attributed to either gender and when prompted, they would either heighten that body language or make it more subtle.



After we morphed the actor and character together, we put them into a unique roleplay scenario to build familiarity with the roles and how they respond to challenging situations. The actors (in character) were sent into the woods and told they needed to find shelter and that an enemy was coming. The actors, regardless of character biases, began to band together to consider solutions. Some were defiant and stood up to fight, others ran. Ultimately, all the women stopped the fractioning, and together overtook the enemy, but one of them was “slain” in the process. The whole experience was a moment of fear for the characters. They were in the woods and when a Roman general told them that he would burn down the woods if they didn’t come out. There was a girl playing a servant who stood up to the general and was the barrier between him and the rest of the characters. One of the girls playing Romeo gave herself over to the general. He was a lover, not a fighter. He was captured and held. In any event, it was exciting to see how the students took these roles out of their traditional lines and plays, and experimented with characters typically played by men.

Finally, students would interact with each other based on their assumptions of how the genders would act. The students playing female characters exhibited shyer body language and signs of competition with other females. When playing male characters, on the other hand, they saw each other as buddies and friends, but the flipside was that they were more aggressive in general.



The discussions that came from this sort of experimentation were very powerful and moving. As the camp went on, and the actors became more comfortable, the conversations showed more vulnerability and more young women were chiming in towards the end of the week when we were discussing plays. We read the synopses and themes from a majority of Shakespeare's plays and would talk about the themes and the roles of gender within them. From the first day to the last day, the level of discussion was just more intellectual, vulnerable and confident. The women had obviously bonded together through this experience and were willing to open themselves to both each other and a new spectrum of characters.

For students who are just starting, in an education setting, we would encourage the leaders to consider allowing students of any gender to play any of the roles, determined more by their connection to the heart of the character than their gender or other superficial qualities. These are timeless and rich plays, with deep characters that all deserve to be played by the actor that connects the most with them. Can't we overlook gender in the effort to create an environment for young artists to explore their voice and their capabilities as an actor? So often in educational theater, we have a ratio of ten women to one or two men, and just because those two men are men they get to play Macbeth and Macduff. However, the girl who is 14 going on 30 and wants to be in theater for her profession, why can't she have the challenge of playing MacBeth if she would capture the soul of the character?

#### **QUOTES AND PHOTOS BELOW:**

**"Not only has this camp changed the way I see Shakespeare (as it turns out, his plays are intriguing, relatable to all generations, and much less confusing than I initially thought), but it has also taught me the vital skill of not just playing the character, but actually becoming the character." –Natalie Rand**

**"Shakespeare Girls is a great opportunity and the only of its kind. I grew up reading the works of William Shakespeare but when I participated in this camp I found there was still much to learn. I took so much away about my abilities as an actor and audience member alike and explored areas I hadn't touched on before when it came to interpreting the subtle nuances of the text and stories and characters. It was so fulfilling and definitely one of the fondest memories I have. I highly recommend the program." – Azalea Eve Rummler**

**"I [don't think of myself as] a Shakespeare person, but this camp made me appreciate the text he gave us as actors. It also showed me that Shakespeare doesn't have to be done in a traditional fashion, it can be modern and fun! I loved this class and learned so much more than I expected." -Alex Robinson**











