

Shakespeare Shorts

Performing Arts Series

Grades 4-6

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Illustrated by David McAleese

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Teacher Guide

How to use This Book



Shakespeare. In most adults, the mention of his name causes a range of reactions, from enthusiasm to confusion as to why we ever bothered to study his works at all. I remember a teacher telling us that learning Shakespeare was “good for us”, but I don’t ever remember hearing why. Because of this, many have missed out on an appreciation of perhaps the greatest English writer of all time, a writer who understood what it means to be human, a recorder of the vast array of emotions that we all experience – joy, sorrow, love, hate, jealousy, forgiveness, fear, pride, and yet, at the most basic level, a teller of curious, horrifying, sad, and joyous tales that cause us to pause and reflect upon our own experiences and circumstances around us.

Imagine how your appreciation of Shakespeare would have been different if his plays had been introduced to you in simpler forms, much earlier in your school career, letting you experiment with his language, perform as his characters, learn about his historical context, reflect upon the meaning in his plays, and to have, albeit in easy-to-understand terms, an answer to the question “Why do we study Shakespeare?”

This resource attempts to do all of these things through a variety of activities that touch upon the major aspects of a complete Language Arts program: reading, writing, oral language, and drama. **Working with the plays provides students the opportunity to develop confidence with reading, writing, and oral language, as well as drama skills such as performing, rehearsing, mime, and tableau.** These activities support literacy in the most basic sense, in that they allow students to make sense of what they are doing (to understand), and allow them to express themselves in a variety of ways (to be understood). Importantly, the resource introduces children to characters and plotlines that they will encounter time and again, in both higher-grade English classes and in other authors’ work. A firm grounding in these enduring themes will allow students to relate one work to another, to find patterns and commonalities, and to construct meaning more effectively.

The eight adapted plays in this resource reflect Shakespeare’s plays in their entirety, and have been written using both modern and Shakespearean dialogue, and use narrators to tell the bulk of each story. Some changes, such as reorganizing a scene here and there, toning down violence, or rearranging some lines, have been made to enhance the students’ grasp of the story lines. Of note is the fact that the setting of many of these plays is in the distant past, in the ancient civilizations of Rome and Greece, and in both medieval and Renaissance Europe, time periods familiar to the students in these grades through their Social Studies classes.

Three of the plays in this book have also appeared in *Shakespeare Shorts, Grades 2 – 4*, but are presented here in more mature adaptations. *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* have proven to be the most popular adaptations among students at this age level, and adapted as they are for this book, are presented in greater depth, both in character and in plot. Characters who had few or no lines in the younger versions, have complete scenes here. For example, the actors preparing to perform a play for the duke in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* have more dialogue and a new scene from the original play to perform. So, too, do the witches in *Macbeth*, with more lines directly from Shakespeare’s original play.

The level of difficulty of the character roles in each play has been indicated as Non-Speaking (NS), Easy (E), Moderate (M), and Challenging (C), to provide teachers with a guideline that will assist in the distribution of roles. Each play is preceded by an introduction with hints on pronunciation, staging, costumes, and possible extension activities that allow children to express their opinions and feelings through a variety of writing activities. A generic comprehension activity is included (page 77) to check each child’s grasp of the material they are reading, and a Shakespeare Writing Project (page 78) allows students to take the knowledge and experiences they have acquired and apply them in creative ways.

Each of the plays can be performed with minimal props, costumes, and backgrounds. Most run between 10 and 25 minutes in length, and are very easy to stage. Ideas for a holding a Shakespeare Festival are also included (page 9) which promote the involvement of all members of the class, even those who are very nervous about appearing on stage, because in preparing for a Shakespeare Festival, invitations, programs, and tickets have to be made, as well as decorations, stage setting, props, music, and sound effects.

These plays are meant to be enjoyed by all. I hope that this resource introduces you and your students to them in an exciting way, and allows them to sow the seeds of a life-long appreciation of the works of William Shakespeare.

Two Adapted Scripts for December Holiday Concerts

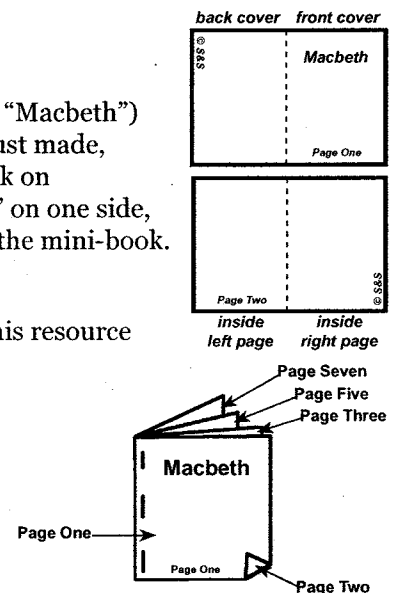
Two of the plays in this resource are suited to be used as seasonal adaptations, to help with the “What can my class do in our December Holiday concert?” dilemma. *The Comedy of Errors* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* have been chosen because they are lighter in tone than the tragedies and histories, and because they reflect the spirit common to many religious and secular traditions celebrated at that time of the year: family, reunion, forgiveness, joy, celebration, and peace. *The Comedy of Errors* concerns the separation and reunion of the members of a family from Syracuse, while *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a playful tale of tricks and love, ending in forgiveness. Both end on a joyous and celebratory note.

Both can be performed on a stage decorated to reflect your school’s focus at that time of year, with small lights used to decorate the scene, again reflecting one of the season’s more common traditions – a celebration of light.

How to Make the Mini-Book Scripts

The adapted scripts in this resource have been designed to be made quickly and easily into 5½”x 8½” folded booklets, in five steps:

1. Remove the mini-book script from this book.
2. Photocopy the single-sided page of the mini-book that the title of the play (i.e., “Macbeth”) appears on (“Page One”). Take the single-sided duplicate page that you have just made, and place it in the paper tray. Now, copy the single-sided page of the mini-book on which “Page Two” appears. You should have a two-sided page with “Page One” on one side, and “Page Two” on the other side. Repeat this step for the remaining pages of the mini-book. You may need to experiment with this step to achieve the proper alignment.
3. Place your duplicated mini-book pages in the same order that they appear in this resource (follow the page numbers in the footer next to “© S&S Learning Materials”).
4. Fold in half along the dotted line and staple along the center fold.
5. Model for your students how to assemble the mini-book.



Suggestions for Performing the Plays

As in Shakespeare’s day, the best way to prepare for your festival is to keep things simple. Costumes can be put together from things the students already have at home, props should be kept to a minimum (i.e., all weapons are mimed), and the sets/stage decoration can be completed effectively and simply.

Costumes:

Boys’ costumes:

Their dad’s or their own dress shirt, not tucked in, with belt around the waist; dark pants.

Girls’ costumes:

Any kind of longer dress or skirt; if playing a male role, follow the boys’ suggestions.

Special costume suggestions:

Nick Bottom's donkey head – please see the special instructions below

Fairies – browns and greens, perhaps with wands and wings

Kings/queens – simply-made crowns, a robe, and a staff; warrior kings could wear a vest to set them apart

Ghosts – white or gray clothing

Witches – witch's hat, dark clothing, pointy nose, etc.

The apparition (*Macbeth*) – ghostly white or gray clothing, or red and black to suggest having risen from the fire and the cauldron

The Comedy of Errors:

To keep the idea that the Ephesus twins are identical, yet have grown up in different towns, try this: have Ephesus of Syracuse wear, for example, a red hat and a blue shirt, and have his brother wear a blue hat and a red shirt. The colors chosen really don't matter, just the fact that they are similar enough that they look alike, and yet are different enough for the audience to tell them apart. For the Dromio twins, choose two other colors (i.e., green and orange) and follow the same pattern as the Ephesus twins.

Props:

Keep the props to a minimum: a letter here and there to be read aloud, and the branches of Birnham Wood and a cauldron for *Macbeth*. These are effective because there aren't too many others to distract from them. Props that are part of a costume (see above) are especially effective. A good rule of thumb: mime props where possible (i.e., swords, knives, etc.).

Sets and Stage Decoration:

Sets can range from none at all, to as detailed as you wish. I have always been fortunate enough to have access to large (approximately 84" x 84") cardboard sheets, donated by a local corrugated paper company. On these sheets, we glue 12" x 18" pieces of construction paper to represent large stones, and decorate them with paper flowers. Some chairs and a decorated bench (or as I have used: stacked gym mats, covered with an old floral shower curtain) usually provide enough decoration. In Shakespeare's day, the stage was enough: the mind, through the words of the characters, created the settings.

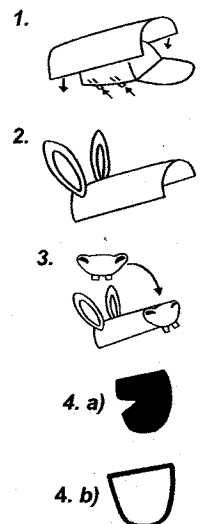
How to Make Nick Bottom's Donkey Head (A Midsummer Night's Dream)

Required Materials

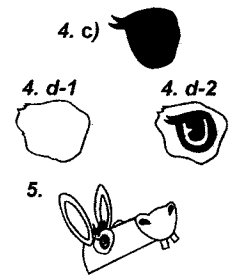
- 11" x 18" construction paper (3 sheets each of brown or gray, black, and yellow)
- 8.5" x 11" blank white paper (2 sheets)
- glue
- stapler
- baseball cap

Steps

1. Curl lengthwise, without a crease, one sheet of brown or gray construction paper, and attach it to a baseball hat with staples. Staple from the inside out, so staples do not scratch the student playing Nick Bottom. This forms the head of the donkey.
2. To make the donkey ears, cut out two long tear drop-shaped ears from the brown or gray paper. Cut out two similarly shaped, but smaller pieces, from the yellow construction paper to make details for the ears. Glue together, and attach to the rear of the donkey's head.
3. To make the donkey's mouth (upper lip only), cut out a piece of yellow in a shape similar to the one shown in the illustration. Add two, white bucked teeth, and nostrils cut from the black construction paper. Attach to the front of the head.
4. To make the donkey's eyes, repeat each of the following steps twice:
 - a) Cut out a notched semi-circle using black construction paper for the pupil;
 - b) Cut out a rounded white shape as shown, larger than the shape in part a);



- c) Cut out a black shape as shown at right. This is for the eyelid and eyelashes. Make sure it is slightly larger than the white shape in part b);
 - d) Cut out a slightly jagged, yellow circle, larger than the other shapes; glue them together in order, with a) being the top, and d) being the bottom.
 - e) Attach to either side of the donkey's head.
5. Add a bushy mane of black construction paper, and enjoy the mask.



Preparing for a Shakespeare Festival

A Shakespeare Festival, the special time when all your efforts are put on display, is really quite easy to prepare. There are two basic components: 1) the plays, and 2) an after-the-plays "feast": a get-together time after the plays have been performed, where snacks are shared, and everyone gets to discuss what they have just seen. It's a nice way to wind down after the excitement of the plays.

Because each play in this resource has so many characters, you may wish to share the plays among an entire grade or division, with one play per class, or as I have done, have students from different classes take on a few roles in a variety of plays.

The time needed to perform all the plays in this book at one time is approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes to 2 hours and 20 minutes. You may choose to perform only four or five of them to meet time constraints.

Here are some of the things to do to prepare for your Shakespeare Festival:

1. **Choose a Date and a Time:** Is the afternoon best, or early in the evening? You may wish, as I have done in the past, to poll the parents for their preferred time.
2. **Letter to Parents:** Create a letter and return form to send to parents to inform them about the upcoming festival. Also ask for their support in the form of donated treats for the after-the-plays "feast".
3. **Invitations:** I have used invitations in the past on a few occasions. They are generally made by folding an 8.5" x 11" piece of paper in half, with the words "You Are Invited..." on the outside, and with a special message from each individual student addressed to his or her parent(s). Individual students decorate their own invitations.
4. **Programs:** The programs I have used have featured the following:
 - a title page
 - a list of the order of performances
 - one page for each play showing the cast, and illustrations made by the students
 - some examples of student writing (i.e., Shakespeare biography, a letter to Shakespeare, etc.)
 - a "The Critics Write" section – a single-page collection of opinions and feelings about the plays written by the classes who attended our dress rehearsals
 - a credits page, thanking all those involved (i.e., the company donating the cardboard for backgrounds, other staff, etc.)

