

# simply shakespeare

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The historical plays are based on the lives of English kings, beginning with King John, and ending with Henry VIII, the father of Queen Elizabeth. It should be noted that the historical plays are not strictly accurate: it would have been dangerous for a playwright to openly criticize the actions of the reigning monarch's forbears. Some plays were not performed for many years. *Richard II*, which suggests that rebellion against a bad monarch is vindicated, was not performed because it was feared that it might encourage insurrection during a turbulent time. In fact, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, persuaded the actors at the Globe to perform this play before leading a rebellion against the Queen. The rebellion failed and Essex was executed. Richard III is portrayed as an evil monarch in the play of his name, yet the facts do not entirely support this view.

Some parts of the plays are written in blank verse. Blank verse has a rhythm, with a set number of syllables in a line, but doesn't rhyme. This format was partly because of the traditions of the time and also because it made it easier for the actors to learn their lines. It is easier to remember the word of a poem or a song, than a prose passage.

## Activities

The following activities are suggestions. Choose the ones that you feel your students will enjoy doing. The object is to foster a sense of enjoyment in performing as the students gain an understanding of Shakespeare's plays.

1. A play tells a story, and there are a variety of books that give the stories of the various plays. As a class activity read the story of one of Shakespeare's plays. Choose contrasting plays: a tragedy and a comedy. This will develop listening skills. Keep a list of characters on chart paper. Use coloured markers to group the characters to make it easier for the students to follow. Read the story over a period of time, and review what has happened before proceeding each day.
2. Students can read the stories of the plays independently. There are books available at all reading levels. Students should write a list of characters with a sentence about each one, and a brief plot overview about the story they have read.
3. Choose a play to read. It is a good idea to involve the students in this,. Select three or four plays that would meet the student's needs, give the students a brief overview of the plot and then let them choose which one to read. Take a vote if necessary. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth* are always popular. There are some simple abridged editions that are ideal for an initial experience. Other editions are longer, but shorter than the original. Older classes can tackle a full length play.

## The Theatres

Early plays were often performed in the courtyards of inns as they had a large area that was suitable for staging a play. This was very noisy since people and horses were coming and going and was not very satisfactory. Later playhouses were built in London.

The theatres, known as playhouses in Elizabethan times, were usually built by businessmen as a way of making money. Examples of this were The Swan and The Rose Playhouses. The Globe was built and owned by the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Shakespeare was an playwright, and actor and a shareholder in the Globe, having invested money when it was built.

Playhouses were circular in shape and usually three stories high, and the walls of the playhouse contained galleries, where people sat to watch the play. Only the galleries were covered with a thatched roof. Poor people sat or stood in the areas in front of the stage. This was known as the pit, and since the people had to sit or stand on the ground, they were known as *groundlings*.

The stage jutted out into the centre of the circle to give everyone a good view. There were dressing rooms and storage areas behind the stage. The stage usually contained a trapdoor, and a gallery over the stage was used for some scenes.

No lighting systems existed in these days, so the plays were staged during the day. A flag would be flown from the playhouse to signal that a performance would take place, and a trumpet would be blown just before the play began.

Audiences came from all walks of life. Sponsors and benefactors were usually wealthy and they would often bring their friends to see the playhouse company that they supported. Merchants and professional people such as doctors, teachers and lawyers would also come with their families. Since entrance to the pit was only one penny, this enabled the poor of London to attend.

Audiences ate and drank before the performance, and often during it as well. Actors were frequently heckled by the groundlings, too.

There were no special effects or elaborate scenery, such as we see in theatres today. The actors had to convey this by using words to create such ideas in the imagination of the audience.

There were many jobs in the playhouses besides acting. There were stage hands who cleaned up, raised the flag to tell when a performance was going to take place, put the simple props in place and operated special devices, such as a crane that might lower an actor to the stage to simulate flying.

The tiring man was in charge of the costumes. The same costumes would be used for different plays, and had to be carefully looked after as they were often expensive. The actors usually wore costumes that reflected the current fashion, although togas were worn in the Roman plays such as *Julius Caesar* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*.

### **Integrated Activities - 5**

Many people find Shakespeare's plays difficult to understand because the language used is not the same as that which we use today.

Make a list of twenty words that are not in common use today or that are used in a different way.

Create a dictionary to explain what these words mean.

You should include a definition, and use the words in a sentence.

You may also include a picture or diagram.

### **Integrated Activities - 6**

Board games were very popular in Shakespeare's day.

Work with a two friends to invent a game that is based on one of Shakespeare's plays.

You could use a game that is popular today, like *Snakes and Ladders* or a game like *Jeopardy* or *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* that is seen on TV.

Write down the directions for playing the game. Make sure that these are easy to understand.

Make the pieces necessary to play the game: a board or playing cards.

Teach another group of students to play your game.