



A Day with Brooklyn Technical High School Students



Shakespeare at the Dawn of a New Generation

By Eric Minton

Sumyia Razzak says she was upset when she learned that her drama teacher, Emily Tuckman, was going to make her class do a Shakespeare play. “I was like, uhhhh, I don’t like Shakespeare.” Now, the Brooklyn Technical High School senior in New York considers the experience of playing Desdemona in *Othello* not only fun but a mirror to her own life. “This is like my summer repeating itself,” she said—but without the murder.

Her castmate, Gabriel Morel who played Iago, had a similar change of heart. Admitting that he didn’t think the plots of Shakespeare’s tragedies were clever, Morel had even less regard for Shakespeare’s comedies, though he’d never read or seen any. “What we think is funny is definitely different from when Shakespeare was alive,” he said. But after watching another class’s production of *As You Like It*, Morel turned to me and said, “Having seen a comedy, I retract my last statement. Shakespeare is really funny.”

William Shakespeare, whose works had been for most of these students merely archaic or even meaningless words on a page, came to breathing life when they performed his plays on the stage before their peers. They got inside real characters fabricated by Shakespeare's pen and, when they did, they came to appreciate the language as "perfect," the adjective used by Shauntai Quinlon, who played the titular character of *Othello*, not as the Moor of Venice but as the Butch of Brooklyn.

What they learned becomes a learning experience for the rest of us, for out of their experience comes wisdom and their own special insights that allow us to appreciate Shakespeare and his plays even more.

Tuckman's five drama classes put on 30-minute versions of Shakespeare plays (adaptations by Nick Newlin) that she assigned to each class: *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The classes were to approach the plays as if they were bona fide productions; along with the actors, each play had set and costume designers, directors, and even dramaturgs. They were allowed to set the plays any way they chose, but they could not change Shakespeare's texts (allowances made for settings, like changing Denmark to Brooklyn as the locale of rottenness). They used the school's gorgeous 3,000-seat auditorium, and other classes attended the plays, as did a few stragglers during their lunch and free periods, resulting in audiences of about 200 for every show.



This was a big test. And I don't mean a test of whether high school students could appreciate Shakespeare (the 450-year-old Bard has consistently passed that test), nor was it merely a test of whether the students would "get" Shakespeare well enough to present it well enough for their peers to "get" Shakespeare, too. These productions literally were a test for the students, a final exam for which they collectively and individually received a grade. "Instead of a formal final where they sit down and do multiple choice, I wanted them to experience the theater in their bodies and in their minds; holistically," Tuckman said.

Brooklyn Tech is, per its name, a school that focuses on technical education. Nevertheless, it had a reputation for Shakespeare studies over the years and into this century up until a previous administration cut the program in the early 2000s. When Tuck-

man first started teaching at Brooklyn Tech eight years ago, it had no drama program, let alone Shakespeare outside the English curriculum, despite an auditorium that made Tuckman and her theater colleagues salivate when they see it. "When fellow actors see this stage they go, 'Oh my god! Do they realize what they have?'" she said.

Tuckman is a trained actress, founder and artistic director of the Estraña Theatre Company. Like many actresses, she supplemented her vocation by bartending and waitressing, but the hours were becoming too long and the fulfillment too little. "I wanted to do something where I could give back," she said, so she went to graduate school for a degree in theater education.

She started at Brooklyn Tech filling in for a teacher on pregnancy leave and stayed on as an English teacher. She got her students to petition the school to add drama to the curriculum, and that interest has grown to where, this year, she has five classes totaling 170 students.

The inspiration, as well as the courage, to do the daylong five-class presentation of five plays that she collectively called “The Play’s the Thing” grew out of her experience this summer attending the Folger Institute—the “Shakespeare Boot Camp”—on a National Endowment for the Humanities grant. “I did the Williamstown Theatre Festival many years ago, and next to that it was the most intense experience I’ve ever had. You’re totally immersed in Shakespeare all the time.” She returned to Brooklyn determined to focus more of her curriculum on Shakespeare “because I feel like I have an ownership of it in a different way because of the Folger.”

Her intent is to introduce Shakespeare theater not only to her students but to the school administration. In explaining the overall educational benefits of Shakespeare theater, she started with herself as an example. “I wasn’t taught much Shakespeare growing up, and I didn’t do as well on the English SATs as I would have liked to, and my peers who were taught Shakespeare did much better.” As this project progressed, she noticed how the students have flourished in the few weeks they’ve had to mount these productions (they even worked on them over their Christmas breaks). Once-painfully-shy kids are now “able to articulate themselves better” from doing Shakespeare, she says. “You naturally become more articulate when you have to articulate difficult prose or iambic pentameter. One of the kids said that it’s a very difficult language, so when you’re practicing it, you’re understanding it in a different way than when you’re just reading it. So I think it helps them grow as public speakers, it helps them grow in terms of readers, in terms of vocabulary.”

She selected plays according to each class’s personality or individuals in the class she thought would be ideal for certain roles. She tutored individuals and coached the teams. “For the first two weeks I was directing them myself, and the last week the kids took over, which was great. They have trouble bossing each other around, trouble knowing how to give good direction, but now I think I’ve seen enormous growth in that.” Another factor was a school culture of high achievement. “At this school, they’re afraid of doing it wrong, even though I tell them there is no wrong.”

Thus, it was the students who decided to play *Hamlet* in a Brooklyn mafia setting and turn Othello into a lesbian general. It was the student dramaturgs who researched the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell era of the 1990s for *Othello* and the counterculture activities of the late 1960s that inspired a hippy setting for *As You Like It*.

Then, it was the individual students taking part who made their own discoveries about their characters, their plays, and Shakespeare in general. Well, most did. Some students, like Justin Song, the set designer for *As You Like It*, had not become a Shakespeare convert by project’s end, but he appeared to be enjoying the experience of putting on a production, and his insights into Shakespeare are just as keen as those of his fellow students who are now fans of The Bard.

In addition to attending all the plays as a reviewer (in itself an enlightening Shakespeareance), I had the opportunity to interview some of these students, and came away a smarter Shakespearean as a result.

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We started with a roundtable interview in Tuckman's classroom with Pamela Ozga (she plays Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), Justin Song (set designer for *As You Like It*), Shakela Mitchell (Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), Shauntai Quinlon (Othello), Sumyia Razzak (Desdemona in *Othello*), and Tiffany Nguyen (Emilia in *Othello*). This interview took place before I had seen their productions.

Have any of you done Shakespeare before?

PAMELA: Not as a production, just in class. Like, in freshman year we read it and did little shows and in-class skits, but nothing like an actual production.

What is your experience with Shakespeare?

TIFFANY: Well, you kind of always know about it because he's like such a classic. But I first started studying him in fifth grade. We started studying *Romeo and Juliet*.

SUMYIA: It was actually really hard for me because I didn't have that much experience with Shakespeare. But as I learned what the lines meant, it was a lot easier to act them out. It was a lot of fun.

SHAUNTAI: Well, like Tiffany said, I always knew about it, but it was actually not until high school leading up to this year that I got in depth. We never really acted it out. We read it but just to read it for the class. We never put ourselves in the characters' shoes.

SHAKELA: The same thing for me. I've only like analyzed the text; I've never acted it in performance before.

JUSTIN: Same as everybody else.

PAMELA: Yeah, we've all read like *Macbeth* and we did little skits in classes, but never did a production.

So the only plays you guys have ever read have been *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Macbeth*. And you have read *Hamlet*.

PAMELA: We read *Othello* this year.

So, do you have an impression of Shakespeare? Did you like him or was it something you just had to get through?

SUMYIA: I feel like this class was when I first liked Shakespeare because before, it took a lot of time to really understand it. Once I got here, I was like, "Oh, so this is supposed to be acted this way," and that makes a lot more sense.

Did anybody like Shakespeare?

TIFFANY: I did.

Why did you like Shakespeare?

TIFFANY: I guess because I'm interested in theater and he influenced theater so much, and you don't really know theater until you actually immerse yourself in Shakespeare. I think it's still a challenge even if you like it. But that's half the fun of it because you push yourself to understand it. And it can be interpreted in so many ways. So I feel like this text is, I don't know, it's like it never gets old because the text can always be interpreted differently.

What they learned becomes a learning experience for the rest of us, for out of their experience comes wisdom and their own special insights that allow us to appreciate Shakespeare and his plays even more.

PAMELA: I definitely agree. I think it's challenging because it's old, it's not modern and how we do things now on Broadway and stuff. It's classical, but it's like Shakespeare will never die. We'll be doing Shakespeare a hundred years from now. And Shakespeare created words. It's something that can be interpreted as you want to do it. I think it's something you need to learn to appreciate theater, because even though theater is different now, a lot of theater today originated from Shakespeare.

SHAKELA: I've never read a Shakespeare comedy, so I'm really glad we're doing a comedy because I never knew it could be funny. I've only read sad stories where people die. So it's nice to see the reverse side of things.

PAMELA: I agree with that. I like that we're doing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. We always associated him with tragedy. They kill each for love kind of thing.

SHAKELA: It's never been funny before, so...

And you find him funny now.

SHAKELA: Yeah, and I really love it.

SHAUNTAI: Like with me before, when I was reading Shakespeare, a lot of it was, like, I don't understand what he's saying, I don't understand what he's saying. But then when you put yourself in the character's shoes and get inside the person, you understand what he's saying. And we can say the same thing twice, but he says it in a million different ways, and each fits, it's perfect.

I've heard from all the actors; how does the set designer feel about that? You haven't put yourself in anybody's shoes, or have you?

JUSTIN: No, I haven't. I'm not really a big fan of Shakespeare. I've never seen his plays and I'm not sure I really ever will. I don't know, that's just me.

Why not?

JUSTIN: He's kind of like booringish.

Have you learned anything through doing set design? Have you gotten any more insights into what he's doing through set design?

JUSTIN: I mean, I'm doing a hippy set. It's kind of difficult to know what he wrote that has to do with that. I have no idea what's going on. They just said, "We want it like this, all these colors" and so I'm like OK.

[Turning to Shauntai] You talked about getting in the character's shoes, and you're playing Othello as a woman, as a gay woman. That's not what he wrote, so what are you gleaned from what he wrote that's in your character?

SHAUNTAI: I feel like no matter if you're a man or a woman, how well you love a person is the same. The love is going to be the same no matter what gender you are and who you're loving. So, I feel like I'm just as much in love as Othello because I feel a love for Desdemona the way Othello did, though I'm a woman.

When you put yourself in the character's shoes and get inside the person, you understand what he's saying. And we can say the same thing twice, but he says it in a million different ways, and each fits, it's perfect.

TIFFANY: Just to add to that, I feel like that's one of the things that makes Shakespeare's texts so versatile, because the underlying themes of all his work are still—like, yes, *Othello* has to do with the color of his skin, and that's the struggle. But that's not the focus. The point is that Desdemona and Othello are different, and it doesn't have to be the color of their skin, it could be their sexual orientation. It's just that there's a difference between them, and that's the real struggle in *Othello*.

And the difference between Othello and Iago, too.

TIFFANY: Yeah.

He wrote this stuff 400 years ago. Do you find it relevant?

[All the women say "yes"]

PAMELA: It's definitely relevant.

How? Where is Shakespeare happening in your lives, other than what you're doing here? Do you see it happening in the halls at all?

SHAKELA: He writes things that everyone goes through. Like in our play, there are these lovers and two guys want to have the same girl. That happens every day, that's not abnormal. Yeah, it's like magic potions and there aren't really fairies running around. But as a teenager, I think the relationship of the lovers is very common among my friends. And there's also how Oberon is kind of messing with his wife, Titania. I feel like that's just natural to me.

PAMELA: Yeah, it's like Hermia, my character. Both of the guys love her and then this spell

makes them stop loving her and she's vulnerable to feeling that now the guys don't want her and they don't care, and she has to pretend she's angry but really she's sad about it. I, as a girl, can relate to it. It sounds a little superficial but, yeah, it can really show teenage problems, so it is believable.

Been there, done that, huh?

PAMELA: Yeah, that kind of thing.

Without the potion.

PAMELA: Yeah.

Sumyia, you're playing Desdemona.

SUMYIA: I do think that *Othello* is very relevant to today's society. I come from an immigrant family so my parents were strict, so I see how Brabantio feels, and I see how Desdemona feels. This is like my summer repeating itself. It doesn't have to be about the color of someone's skin, but there's always a difference between two people that maybe a parent will not like. There's always something.

[Turning to Shakela] I'm interested that you found Titania so revelatory,

SHAKELA: I think Titania and Oberon's relationship is relevant because they have the typical husband-wife rivalry relationship. They are arguing and having this huge fight and it's funny and so credible.

How do you want to approach Shakespeare? Do you want to read him, do you want to act him, do you want to see him?

SUMYIA: Acting and seeing them is better. I think acting helps you understand each character and seeing them might help you see a different side of the character. But when reading it, I don't get as in-depth with it as I did this time when I acted it out. Now I understand the play to a different level.

PAMELA: Yeah, I definitely agree. Acting is so much better. I'm not an actor but I do perform in musicals in school and I do prefer acting as a choice because I can build the character better and I understand things better when I perform things. And seeing things because I'm a visual learner, so that's probably my best bet.

Anybody else want to jump in here?

SHAKELA: I'd like to see more comedies by Shakespeare because I really, really like *Midsummer*, and I want to see all that he has to offer. It's just interesting.

SHAUNTAI: I like to act it just because reading it, like Sumyia said, you're not forced to feel anything, you just have to understand it. But then, when you're acting it, you want to relate to

the audience as much as you can so you're forced to feel the emotion of that character.

Does it have to be acting or can you read it out loud? Does that help?

PAMELA: It's not the same.

TIFFANY: When you're forced to play a character or just forced to be in a play you really try to understand. Like, you may be trying to understand from one person's point of view, but that helps you understand the play as a whole because maybe you only have one line but that one line affects something in the play and you have to be aware of what it does to the play and how it's relevant no matter how big or small your part is. And when you read it, it's just words on a page. You don't have to really understand why a character thinks this way, what's going through the character's mind, or what's really the driving force behind the character.

Justin?

JUSTIN: Like I said, I don't really care about Shakespeare, so...

But if you could watch it, does it help at all?

JUSTIN: Uhhh, yeah, I guess. If I were to watch other people act out the books then maybe I could enjoy it more than just not enjoying it at all from reading it.

Have you seen any movies or have you seen Shakespeare before?

JUSTIN: [long pause] No. Well I did see part of a modern take on *Othello*. I forgot what it was called, though.

[Everybody else says *O*.]

JUSTIN: Yeah.

And how was that?

JUSTIN: Well, I only saw like five to 10 minutes of it so I still have no idea what was going on.

Shauntai, he just brought up *O*, and there's a lot of *Othellos* out there on the screen. Did you do any research?

SHAUNTAI: I actually watched the 1995 version with Laurence Fishburne as Othello.

That's a good one.

He writes things that everyone goes through. Like in our play, there are these lovers and two guys want to have the same girl. That happens every day, that's not abnormal.

SHAUNTAI: Yeah. That one I really liked because, although we did watch a piece of *O* in class, that was more of a modern take, and I wanted to see how Shakespeare wanted it to be, that was more in his time. Since I'm acting a woman—since I am a woman—and seeing a man's take with Laurence Fishburne, seeing a man actually kill himself and how he would walk around and how he would talk to his wife kind of helped me realize how I would talk to my wife and how I would walk around and how I would kill myself.

Ms. Tuckman was telling me, don't be just "Ah, Oh, I'm dead," but have the gore and have the anguish on your face to let the audience know I'm in pain, I'm killing myself. And Laurence Fishburne helped me in *Othello*.

Othello, and I take it Othella, is a warrior.

SHAUNTAI: Yes.

Where'd you get that from.

SHAUNTAI: We settled on moving from just a military general to I am gay and I am a woman, so it was more of a—

TIFFANY: Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

SHAUNTAI: —Yeah, that kind of thing. People knew, but...

Is it a modern take?

SHAUNTAI: 1990s.

Ooh, cool.

JUSTIN: On the other hand, my setting is just hippies, oh god. [Laughter] I don't know how my class came to the conclusion that they wanted a hippy feel to it.

I've seen a hippy version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the rude mechanicals came in on a VW bus colored in flower power.

PAMELA: I think that's what Mrs. Tuckman wanted, like, she showed us *Across the Universe*.

TIFFANY: I love that movie.

JUSTIN: Actually, my class wanted a mystery machine.

PAMELA: Like *Scooby-Doo*?

JUSTIN: Yeah, *Scooby-Doo* because it was a hippy-like thing.

So where are you setting *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

SHAKELA: Oh, we're doing it just like in the play. It's in the forest and the castle.

So at that time frame?

SHAKELA: Yeah, it's awesome. [Laughter]

[To Shauntai] When you watched Laurence Fishburne, you said you wanted to see how Shakespeare intended it in his time.

SHAUNTAI: Yeah.

But here we've got three different versions of Shakespeare in different times. Do you think he intended it to be timeless or not?

SHAUNTAI: Probably at that moment he wasn't thinking, "Ah centuries from now high school students will be performing this." [Laughter] But I'm pretty sure he was thinking this should be something that everyone should be able to relate to no matter how young they are, no matter how old they are. So, he probably wasn't thinking as far off as hundreds of years, but he was probably thinking, "Maybe a few years from now the younger generation could understand this and relate to it." And, technically, we are a younger generation, so, yeah.

How do you feel about that on *Dream*?

SHAKELA: I feel like it's so fun that you can put it in any time period. I really love our play. I think it's awesome.

PAMELA: We could have put it in a different time period, but we wanted to keep it as it is. I don't feel it really has a time period.

SHAKELA: Yeah. It's so distinct and so unique the way Shakespeare wrote it that we didn't want to change that. As a class, we liked it that way.

PAMELA: To me it doesn't have a time period, that's how I interpreted it. It just feels like a timeless time. [Laughter]

You talked about the husband-wife aspect of Titania and Oberon. Is that a timeless thing to you?

PAMELA: Absolutely.

SHAKELA: Yeah. Husbands and wives are still going to be arguing a million years from now. And the whole Hermia, the lovers thing, I feel like that's timeless, too, like with teenage love and stuff.

PAMELA: The rude mechanicals.

SHAKELA: And then her father wants to keep them apart.

JUSTIN: I think we're all just overanalyzing Shakespeare. You never know, but he didn't go, "Hey, maybe a few years from now this could be relevant," maybe he just went, "Hey, you know what? My life sucks. I'm going to write all these tragedies and put my feelings down on paper and make people read them later."

PAMELA: Really? You're so pessimistic. [Laughter]

JUSTIN: I'm not pessimistic, I'm just saying...

SHAKELA: He wrote comedies, too.

JUSTIN: ... "Here's what happened in my day, I'll write about that."

PAMELA: Were you aware that we were going to be doing Shakespeare when you entered drama?

TIFFANY: I wasn't aware. I wasn't sure what we were doing.

JUSTIN: I thought in drama we were going to be able to make our own skits and then do all this stupid stuff and get a grade on that, but it turns out we have to do Shakespeare and I'm like, Ohhh.

PAMELA: Really?

SUMYIA: I was actually upset when I heard about Shakespeare, I was like, "Uhhhh I don't like Shakespeare." But I've definitely had a different—I like it now. It's fun. And we have so much fun together, like [she motions to Tiffany], we're not the main characters, but we're just ready for our debut, and we're backstage going, "Yes, let's go! Let's go! Let's go look for the handkerchief now."

SHAKELA: We had the option of doing the play or the monologues, and every class happened to choose the play. I think we just wanted to have fun with it. The monologues? I personally said, "Oh my god, it's so many lines. Why is she making us do this?" But then, that was really fun, and now we get to do a play, and actually it's turned out really well, so, I'm excited.

[To Sumyia] You said you're not a main character, but you're Desdemona. I mean, it all revolves around you, lady.

SUMYIA: I don't know. I kind of feel like I am a main character, but at the same time I made my character so that she's naïve and she thinks small of herself. And she has like an older sister, Emilia, because we're very close and she guides me through.

Did you come up with all of that yourself?

TIFFANY: We came up with that together.

Because, of course, he's a donkey and my fairies are all scratching him, and I was like, "If this is real life, I would not let other fairies scratch my boyfriend."

SUMYIA: Yeah, we talked about it and we were looking at the lines and we were just like, “Wow, it would be so awkward if you’re my maid talking to me like that.” And she was like, “Yeah, I kind of think we should be an older-younger sister/best friend kind of people,” and it was a lot easier to portray the characters that way. And when we were on stage, it was more natural and it was fun.

And as for Emilia, it’s still a pretty hefty role. I’ve seen some great Emilias who carry that play.

SHAUNTAI: She’s one of them. She’s one of them.

Does Emilia bring something to the play?

TIFFANY: Yeah, I mean she kind of, accidentally of course, sparks the catalyst to the reason why Othello wants to kill Desdemona.

SUMYIA: [whispering] It’s all your fault.

TIFFANY: Yeah, unknowingly she does it for her husband’s approval. Me and the guy who plays Iago, Gabriel, we discussed our relationship and how we should be, and even though our play’s really short—it’s a condensed version of *Othello*—we wanted to really show how their relationship changes in the seven scenes that we have. We wanted the audience to see how at first Emilia is head over heels for Iago and really just swept off her feet by him. And then when she finally gives him what he wants, the handkerchief, for his approval, how vicious and how ugly his reaction is and who he really is as a person.

Emilia really does kind of respond to everyone, especially for Desdemona. I think our characters are really polar opposites, and that’s how we wanted to play it, and we bring out the best or most in each other.

Hermia—I know, Pamela—did you have that same kind of thing going on in *Dream*? Did you work with Helena especially or with Lysander?

PAMELA: I was the outsider. No one wanted me. I felt like they were all fighting over Helena, so I kind of built my own character. We had to make these prompt books to build our characters, so I’d be writing how I was insecure, how I was angry or I was really sad because Helena was prettier than me and they wanted her and all this stuff. So, I would portray that I was angry but inside I was sad. It appears to be that I’m angry at Helena but really I’m sad. She was close to me and it hurt that she was taking the man that I love, Lysander, and he wants her. So I did build most of the character by myself.

[To Shakela] Did you work very closely with your Oberon?

SHAKELA: Yeah, I actually did, and also the person who plays Bottom. Since it’s cut, my scenes are mostly with Bottom, so we had to figure out a way to make our relationship seem really hilarious. Because, of course, he’s a donkey and my fairies are all scratching him, and I was like, “If this is real life, I would not let other fairies scratch my boyfriend.” So, we had to

figure out a way to make that funny and I'm just this really happy fairy queen even though her fairies are scratching her boyfriend and stuff. And then with Oberon, I finally realized that he cast a spell on me. I was talking to [Harris Van Alterman playing Oberon] and I said, "Shouldn't I be really angry at you? I think I would be upset." So, we decided to make it kind of hilarious like, "Yeah, you did pull a prank on me but that was a good prank, so we're still friends. We're still married." We just decided to take everything in a silly way.

Justin. [Everybody laughs.] Actually, I'm going to support Justin here. Shakespeare was a commercial playwright, he had a business, he owned shares in the theater, and he made his money by how many people came to the theater. And that's all he cared about.

JUSTIN: Money?

Money. Yeah.

JUSTIN: That's all a lot of people care about these days.

So, when you say that he probably didn't look ahead 400 years from then and say kids were going to be reading him, he probably didn't. He had to write fast, and he was an actor, too.

JUSTIN: And even then it wasn't really original because didn't he get his ideas from other play, right?

A modern day comparison to Shakespeare would be Stephen Spielberg, somebody who had stories from other places, plays, books, other movies. Shakespeare—there was another *Hamlet* before Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*—would do what Spielberg does, he'd take this idea and do his own magic. Spielberg does some great movies. He does some dogs, too, but he does these really great movies. *Saving Private Ryan* and *Schindler's List* are two of the greatest movies, and then he'd do action yarns like *Indiana Jones* and *War of the Worlds*. That's who I would compare Shakespeare to in the modern day, somebody who was a commercial artist. But he had an amazing ability to write. And he had tremendous insights, which is where I'm going next. Do you guys feel that Shakespeare touches all sides of humans?

SHAUNTAI: Yeah.

TIFFANY: I think that's one of the reasons why his work is timeless because, yeah, he was a commercial writer, and I don't think he was writing so that he'd be immortalized. I think he wrote about what he knew, which was human relationships, and he was really able to understand people. Because the thing about his characters is that they're not just one-sided; maybe if you read it they seem one-sided or kind of shallow, but when you really try to explore the character, you see that there's more to them than just what the text says.

Comedy guys want to add to that?

PAMELA: Obviously he wasn't a saint, he was looking for money like all writers and playwrights, but he definitely wrote beautiful plays, and he wrote things that maybe he didn't know at the time would be amazing, but, turns out it was amazing.

[After the presentation of *Othello*, I sat down in the auditorium with Gabriel Morel, who played Iago.]

Answering a question from the audience after the play, you said, “It’s not just memorizing the words it’s knowing the words.”

GABRIEL: Right.

Expound on that.

GABRIEL: Well, Shakespeare is very difficult language, so if you just say the words it sounds like you’re reciting a poem. It doesn’t sound like you’re talking. It doesn’t sound like you’re saying the words in character. So, I think knowing what the words mean, knowing when they question, when they pause, when they raise their voices, or something like that, that is what matters.

How much experience with Shakespeare have you had?

GABRIEL: As much as any high school student. [Laughs]

Which is what these days?

GABRIEL: Which is probably one book a year. I’ve read *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*.

What is your take on Shakespeare?

GABRIEL: I like the way he puts things, but the plots, the way he executes them, the endings, the surprise twists are really not that clever, like the way characters respond to things and how gullible some of the characters are.

So you think Othello, in this case, was awfully gullible?

GABRIEL: Yes, awfully gullible. It was like a sitcom on TV where the person is so gullible that they don’t even take the time to ask what’s going on and instead act irrationally. Like killing your wife for cheating on you, that’s pretty extreme.

Do you like the language?

GABRIEL: The language is very difficult to understand, but after you understand it, it’s incredible. It’s very well put.

Did you find it easier acting it than just reading it? Did it come alive more?

GABRIEL: Yes. Because, when you read it, you have to come up with what’s actually going on—like gestures and what action is going on—in your head. But when you’re doing it, you get to make it up and actually do them. So, I understand if I’m angry or if I’m happy, because

I'm the one that's deciding that.

You mentioned the gullibility of Othello, but what about Iago? You know how Iago really plays mental games.

GABRIEL: He does.

This passive aggressive crap.

GABRIEL: Absolutely. He's somewhat immature in the way he evaluates situations, like, the fact that Othello gave the position to Lt. Cassio instead of himself. Ms. Tuckman made us create our own backgrounds for our characters. So, I'm thinking someone that would do something so evil and manipulative must have come from a bad background, a broken father—an abusive father—neglect, and all of that to be so emotionally unstable.

Do you know any Iagos?

GABRIEL: Oh, no, I don't know any Iagos, and it was hard to play Iago because of that. I feel like playing a bad person, a legitimately bad person, is hard because of the motive. I have to find my own motive instead of Iago's motive to be bad. Like, I have to actually hate [Othello] for those moments on the stage.

One of the people I interviewed was Tiffany, and she said the two of you worked together on what your relationship was like. Let me hear your version, what your relationship with your wife is like.

GABRIEL: Well, the relationship is pretty clear. I don't think Iago loves her. I think Iago has his wife to have a wife. We tried to show the audience that by, in the background, when we're alone and we're not talking, the other characters are talking, we play the lovey-dovey couple. And then in the scenes where I am extremely angry at her, and a good example is when she had the handkerchief, I'm grateful to her for having the handkerchief, and what she wants is my attention, but I still don't give it to her. We love each other, but we hate each other sometimes.

I think it's interesting when you say he has a wife to have a wife. You've not read any of the comedies. Do you want to?

GABRIEL: Um, I don't know how Shakespeare does his jokes. If the humor is as good as the opposite, the tragedy, then I don't have high expectations for the comedy. Humor is timeless, but jokes are definitely different. What we think is funny is definitely different from when Shakespeare was alive.

Was this your first acting experience?

GABRIEL: No.

It was like a sitcom on TV where the person is so gullible that they don't even take the time to ask what's going on and instead act irrationally. Like killing your wife for cheating on you, that's pretty extreme.

What have you done before?

GABRIEL: The biggest play I've done on stage was *The Crucible*. I played the judge, who was also a very aggressive role. I had to be very uptight.

Do you want to do acting?

GABRIEL: I like acting, it's fun. But I don't see it being a career. I can see it being a side thing. I don't know how that would happen. Acting is useful in life.

Do you think Shakespeare is useful in life in any way?

GABRIEL: I think Shakespeare teaches a lot of lessons, a lot of different notions, things that wouldn't happen in real life but you would want to know how things occur.

Did you experience any of that in this?

GABRIEL: Yeah. I mean, *Othello* is, out of all the plays, probably most modern, I believe, because it's less concentrated on what's actually going on and more concentrated on the conflict of Iago and Othello and Desdemona. It could be easily translated into modern times. It would still make sense if you put it in any year.

I found it funny that in the play, during the time of Shakespeare, it wasn't the same notion of racism that we have today, that we had before. It was more that he was Arabian than that he was black. I thought that was interesting. It was more that he was a foreigner than it was his color.

I've seen Ben Kingsly play him, and he played it, while he is a man of color, very much Middle Eastern, played him in a turban. But Iago calls him a black ram.

GABRIEL: He does.

So there is a racial tint to it. You guys translated it to a gay relationship, and you've read the play. Do you think Iago was racist and in this case do you think Iago was homophobic in any way? Or do you think it had nothing to do with his motive?

GABRIEL: In my opinion it had nothing to do with racism. I think the racism was just adding on, like fuel to the fire, but it wasn't what sparked it. I think the fact that Iago is emotionally unstable, the fact that when he wants something and doesn't get it, like the position of lieutenant, I think he really gets creepy.

[Gabriel sat next to me for the next play, *As You Like It*. As the cast was taking its bows, Gabriel turned to me and said, "Having seen a comedy, I retract my last statement. Shakespeare is really funny." After the presentation of *As You Like It*, I sat down in the auditorium with Maria Gershuni, who played Rosalind.]

In the Q&A at the end of the play, you mentioned some things about your character. Explain again why you went with the Russian accent

MARIA: Well, I figured she's a very sheltered person, and she has this chance to be absolutely anybody. So why would she choose to be another British man when she can be anybody after—she's, like 17, so—17 years of being a conservative woman. So, she picks this crazy name, and why not have a crazy accent to go along with it? Exotic, you know, something different.

But you did it for technical reasons, too.

MARIA: Oh, well, it's also because my voice is kind of naturally high, so if I spoke in a Russian accent [here she does] it naturally brings it down lower, and that sounds more like a guy [which it does].

And I thought it was really interesting when you said you didn't try to play a guy, you played a girl pretending to be a guy. Expound on that.

That's why I like Shakespeare, becomes sometimes it's like star spotting. It's like, "Wow! This is where it's from. I'm reading the original text."

MARIA: Well, there are moments, even in the script, especially with that one interaction with Orlando, where she runs out and she loves him so she can't—she forgets, almost, that she is a guy because she loves this guy so much. She doesn't have a lot of experience with guys, she's grown up in a very strict household. So for her, it was a new experience, so she can't be very good at it but she has to be convincing enough for everybody else.

Do you think Orlando falls in love with her?

MARIA: Yes.

With Ganymede?

MARIA: I think he's very very confused, I don't think he's smart enough to really understand.

Have you done any Shakespeare before?

MARIA: I have done Shakespeare recitation, which is just monologues in Shakespeare, and I did *Richard III*. I did Lady Anne.

Oooh. What did you think of Lady Anne?

MARIA: I actually really liked Lady Anne.

Did you figure her out?

MARIA: Well, I tried. My thing with her was in the second act, when we first see her and she enters with the funeral procession. So it's the scene just before she meets Richard, so that one was just her grief.

Have you read much Shakespeare?

MARIA: I have read some. I did not read the entire *Richard III*, I read the first few scenes in it. I've read *Romeo and Juliet*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*.

Do you like Shakespeare?

MARIA: I like Shakespeare a lot. I really love it.

Why?

MARIA: I like Shakespeare because—OK, there are certain lines in Shakespeare that I feel completely starstruck by. You know, there are certain things that I hear all the time, for example there's this one line from *Hamlet*, and I read it a couple of years ago and I had no idea that "The lady doth protest too much" was from *Hamlet*, and I've heard it somewhere before and I thought that was a very interesting thing to say, and then I read it and I'm like, "Oh my god, this is where it's from." And that's why I like Shakespeare, becomes sometimes it's like star spotting. It's like, "Wow! This is where it's from. I'm reading the original text."

So, other than Lady Anne, this is the first time you've played Shakespeare.

MARIA: I played Lady Macbeth, but that was in a smaller, classroom thing.

Do you think it comes alive more or, do you think it's good enough reading it or do you think it...?

MARIA: No, I completely don't think it's good enough reading it. I hate when teachers tell us to just read it, and I'm saying, "No, you can't, you completely can't." I love performing it. I think the only way to read Shakespeare is to perform it. You don't have to stand up, but at least try to perform it. And I really feel the best medium for Shakespeare is on the stage. I've seen several adaptations of Shakespeare meant for the screen and it didn't feel as alive to me as it is presented on stage.

What's your take on *As You Like It*?

MARIA: I like this play. I think it's very funny. I think it's universally funny. Like, cross-dressing is always going to get at least one laugh. And even if you don't really understand—even if some of the dialogue gets lost—the script, with the way the characters gesture and their expressions, it will get a reaction.

And Rosalind, of course, is one of Shakespeare's great heroines...

MARIA: I have a question, is it Rosalīnd [short i sound] or Rosalīnd [long i sound]? Because the poems rhyme with Rosalīnd.

Uh, actually both.

MARIA: OK

If you follow the rhyme it should be Rosalind, but at one point they make a joke of it.

MARIA: To make it, like, poetry.

Right. And I think it's Touchstone who kind of touches on that. And when the [Royal Shakespeare Company] did it up here, they really played up that joke. I really don't know.

MARIA: Yeah. I was really confused. Because everyone was saying Rosalind, and I felt like I was the only one saying like Rosalind.

So, do you think Rosalind/Rosalind is a great character?

MARIA: I think she is.

Why?

MARIA: Because I think she represents everything—like, the fantasy of every single girl is to become somebody completely different. You always, always dream of doing exciting things, especially when you're a teenager and you've grown up your entire life with your family, you always want to run away, you always want to have exciting adventures, but you still want to keep part of your old life, just bring all your friends into a whole new setting. So, she sees the opportunity, and it's a very hard opportunity because she's been banished, which is terrible. But she makes the best of it.

Do you think Celia is important in the play?

MARIA: I think Celia is more important in the whole play. In this one, she was decently important. That was the one thing I felt wasn't emphasized enough.

Yeah. A good Celia makes a great Rosalind.

MARIA: Yeah.

Is this a career for you? Do you want to go into acting or is it just fun?

MARIA: I want to go into politics, which is really a form of acting, you know. That's all it is. So, [she laughs] I guess, yes, I do.

Bottom's head, used in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, came from teacher Emily Tuckman's personal stock of old theater props. The student set designers made the flowers, which were scattered across the Brooklyn Technical High auditorium's stage for their production.
Photos by Eric Minton.

