

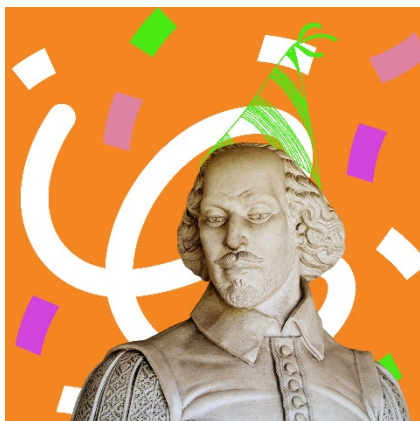
The page is decorated with several large, overlapping circles in purple and yellow. A large purple circle is in the top left, a yellow circle is in the top right, a yellow circle is on the left side, a large purple circle is on the right side, a purple circle is in the bottom left, and a purple circle is in the bottom right. The main title is centered in the upper half.

UNDERSTANDING SHAKESPEARE:

Breaking Down Barriers To The Bard



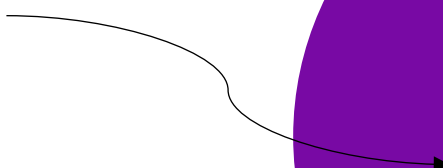
**QUEENSLAND
SHAKESPEARE
ENSEMBLE**



3 Top Tips For Breaking Down Barriers To The Bard:

- **Read the play aloud!** These plays were written down only in order to be spoken, not to be read silently from a page. There is no evidence that Shakespeare ever sought to have his plays published – and were it not for two actors from his company scrounging together all the papers they could, half of his plays would have been lost. Speak the words – it makes it much easier to understand. Ideally, get a bunch of people together and share out the parts. Stop and help each other understand what’s going on, but don’t get bogged down in detail too much on a first read.
- **Enjoy the language!** Once you read Shakespeare aloud, you will find that the physical stuff of speaking, the sounds and rhythms, often convey as much as the meaning of the words themselves. When you get a line like the Friar’s “*and flecked darkness like a drunkard reels*”, enjoy those ‘s’ sounds and the pops of the ‘k’, ‘t’, and ‘d’. Enjoy the energy of the rhythms, which demand a certain degree of quickness and lightness, and carry the argument forward in terms of energy and intention.
- **Get Literal!** We all know that Shakespeare’s plays are loaded with metaphors. Rather than rushing to translate the images into what they stand for, take time to imagine the images as literally true. For example, don’t replace the phrase “*the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune*” with the thought “*unpredictable disasters*”. Instead, imagine being pelted with actual sling stones and arrows, ideally fired by the goddess Fortune (look her up if you have no idea what she looks like), and what the word ‘*outrageous*’ does to this image. One way in to this is to actually physicalise the images, make your body into the shapes of the images, as you speak the words.

FORTUNA



Activity: Literalising The Image

Early on in our rehearsal process we encourage actors to physicalise the literal images their characters are describing as they speak the words. This work can be taken further to develop choreography to be applied to devising and performance (depending on the style or aesthetic of the production) or it can be used to encourage an embodied understanding and personal connection to the text.

The below monologue could be explored by one actor with the whole class assisting or audiencing, or the activity could be undertaken in small groups, as a practical student led exploration of the text.

- Have one actor read through Juliet's monologue (below).
- As a class / group, work through the images in the monologue, discussing briefly what they entail (it can be useful to research or print out images that relate to those described, especially for specific mythical references such as Phoebus' lodging).
- Have the actor read through the monologue again, this time standing on a 'stage' space; as the actor speaks each new image, invite other group members to enter the stage and create a freeze-frame of that image. E.g. bring a group of actors into the space to literally become the fiery footed steeds, sober suited matron etc.
- Encourage large, heightened shapes, incorporating levels, and using the full breadth of the stage space available.
- Have the actor playing Juliet speak the speech a third time, this time directly to the relevant images created by their peers. E.g. on the line "*Gallop apace you fiery footed steeds*" can you make the horses move across the sky?! Encourage 'Juliet' to move freely among, towards or away from the images / freeze-frames. Invite them to respond with movement if Juliet's words or actions inspire this.
- Finally, have the image-actors return to the audience and invite the actor playing Juliet to share the speech with the audience one more time, allowing the literalised imagery to colour their movement and vocal delivery.
- Discuss with the class whether (and where) this increased the clarity (and their understanding) of the speech, and how it changed their perception of Juliet's emotional state and / or the scene's mood.

Explore More:

- Our image based activities are inspired by the work of Augusto Boal. His book 'Games for Actors and Non-Actors' is an excellent resource.
- Go to qldshakespeare.org/education-resources/ to watch actor Frances Marrington explore this Juliet speech.

Cheeky plug – QSE runs an annual Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) workshop during the June/ July school holidays. This workshop is led by Rob Pensalfini who is a highly experienced 'joker' (TO facilitator) and co-founder of Australia's first Shakespeare Prison Project.

Romeo and Juliet Act 2, Scene 2

Juliet:

Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
Towards Phoebus' lodging: such a waggoner
As Phaethon would whip you to the west,
And bring in cloudy night immediately.
Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night,
That runaway's eyes may wink and Romeo
Leap to these arms, untalk'd of and unseen.
Lovers can see to do their amorous rites
By their own beauties; or, if love be blind,
It best agrees with night. Come, civil night,
Thou sober-suited matron, all in black,
And learn me how to lose a winning match,
Play'd for a pair of stainless maidenhoods.
Hood my unmann'd blood bating in my cheeks
With thy black mantle, till strange love grown bold
Think true love acted simple modesty.
Come, night, come, Romeo, come, thou day in night;
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night
Whiter than new snow on a raven's back.
Come, gentle night, come, loving, black-brow'd night,
Give me my Romeo; and, when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun.

Speaking Shakespeare's Verse...

Shakespeare wrote a lot of his plays in verse – some are entirely in verse, some contain little or no verse, and most are a mix of both verse and prose.

What is the difference between prose and verse?

Verse is heightened – denser in imagery, connected to the speaker at a deeper, more visceral level. Think about the times that people (maybe even you?) are moved to write poetry or song. Is it for a shopping list or maths assignment? Probably not. It is when they are experiencing/ processing big feelings/ thoughts – love, death, hate, the overwhelming beauty of the natural world etc.



Shakespeare inherited the tradition of writing in dramatic verse. He wrote in a particular kind of verse known as 'iambic pentameter', which had been the norm in English poetry for about 300 hundred years by the time Shakespeare was writing.

What is Iambic Pentameter?

In a line of verse an '*iamb*' is a beat made up of 1 unstressed syllable followed by 1 stressed syllable. E.g. 'aWAY', 'reLEASE', 'and LEARN'.

Where do we find this weak-strong rhythm in the world?

Think of the clip-clop of a horse or a child skipping (we do lots of skipping in our rehearsal rooms). Listen to/ feel your heartbeat, notice the rhythm, try clapping it out... your body is creating an iambic rhythm! Iambic Pentameter is the literary encoding of our bodily rhythms.

'Penta' means 5, so pentameter basically means 5 meters.

Putting these 2 terms together, iambic pentameter is a line of verse that consists of 5 x weak-strong (or 10 syllables in the specific patterns of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable).

Now let's see what we find when we take this from the page/ our brain into our voice and body...

Try speaking these lines from Shakespeare's Sonnet 18:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.

Now try speaking them while skipping through the space!

These 4 lines are an example of regular verse i.e., they follow the established or expected rhythm. If we embrace the rhythm when performing Shakespeare (always without letting it override the sense and meaning of the words) we find that it can help build the intention and drive the energy of a scene.

What about when Shakespeare gets jazzy (or the rhythm is 'wrong')?

Once iambic Pentameter is established as the basic ground of being, it is/ becomes the norm. When you have a norm, and deviate from it, what is the effect?

As actors we could choose to believe that Shakespeare has messed up, but a more interesting option is to use these deviations from the norm as clues or opportunities. There are no right or wrong answers, it's all about being curious about the text...

"Now is the **winter** of **our discontent**

Made **glorious summer** **by** this **son** of **York**"

(Richard III)



We were expecting a lovely weak-strong rhythm and this guy has come out and hit us with a strong-weak in the very first line. What does this say about him?!

"I left no **ring** with **her**: what **means** this **lady**?

Could this change in the rhythm suggest a lightbulb moment for Viola or an "Oh my gosh!"?



Fortune forbid my **outside** **have** not **charm'd** her?"

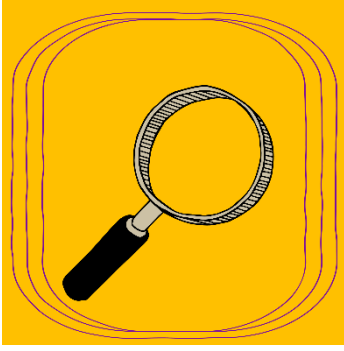
(Twelfth Night)

"It is my **lady** **O** **it is** my **love** **O** **that** she **knew** she **were**"

(Romeo & Juliet)



Romeo has some VERY BIG FEELINGS. 5 stressed syllables in a line a simply not enough for him in this moment!



Finding Clues In The Text:

Here are some other poetic and stylistic devices to keep an eye out for.

Shared lines

This is where 1 line of Iambic Pentameter is shared by 2 characters:

ISABELLA: Sir, make me not your story.

LUCIO: It is true.

From Measure for Measure

Changes In Rhythm

In plays such as *Macbeth* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the fairies and witches ('non-human' characters) speak in verse, but it isn't Iambic Pentameter. For example:

PUCK: Now the hungry lion roars,
And the wolf howls the moon;
Whilst the heavy ploughman snores,
All with weary task fordone.
Now the wasted brands do glow,
Whilst the screech-owl, screeching loud,
Puts the wretch that lies in woe
In remembrance of a shroud.

As an actor or director how could you use these changes to highlight and explore the different characters and worlds within the play?

The Sounds of Poetry

Try speaking these lines from *The Tempest* really enjoying each of the consonant sounds:

CALIBAN: All the infections that the sun sucks up
From bogs, fens, flats, on Prosper fall and make him
By inch-meal a disease.

Internal Stage Directions

Unlike many contemporary playwrights Shakespeare didn't write many stage directions in his scripts (most of the ones you see have been added by editors). But often a stage direction or suggested staging will be in the line itself. Do not let your character just describe an action that they are doing – incorporate this into your blocking or movement score for the scene.

ROSS: Gentlemen, rise. His highness is not well.

This line suggests that at this point the gentlemen are all seated. It would be weird for the actor playing Ross if their fellow actors hadn't followed the internal stage directions and were already standing.

BRUTUS: Sheathe your dagger.

Be angry when you will, it shall have scope.

If the scene hasn't escalated to the point that Cassius's dagger is out this line won't make sense!

Metatheatricality

The aspects of the play that draw attention to its nature as drama or theatre, or to the circumstances of its performance. When performing Shakespeare, we are invited to be 100% the character in the location and time of the scene while also being 100% ourselves in the here and now. Consider this soliloquy from Macbeth:

"Life's but a walking shadow, a **poor player**,
That **struts and frets his hour upon the stage**,
And then is heard no more. It is a **tale**
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing."

Direct Address

Remember there is no 4th wall in Shakespeare! The audience is there with you. Can you find ways to involve and implicate them in the story?

Questions - *"I left no ring with her: what means this lady?"* There is no one else on stage so Viola can try really asking the audience thereby creating a moment of genuine connection.

Asides – can be an opportunity to empower the audience. When we share an aside directly with them, they know more about the events on stage than most of the characters do. For example, in Macbeth Act 1 Scene 3 he observes to the audience, *"If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me without my stir."* If only Macbeth had stuck with this thought... the dramatic irony should not be wasted on any audience.

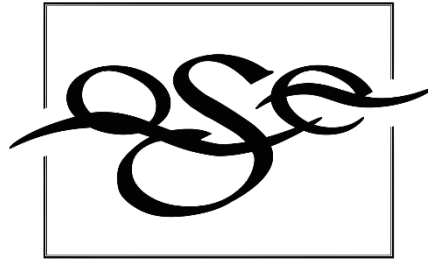
Instructions – in the prologue to Henry V (below) the audience is given specific tasks and directions. The chorus is telling them they'll need to get involved and bring their imaginations and experiences to the table to make this experience of putting on a play work!

“O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
Attest in little place a million;
And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
On your imaginary forces work.
Suppose within the girdle of these walls
Are now confined two mighty monarchies,
Whose high upreared and abutting fronts
The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder:



Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;
Into a thousand parts divide on man,
And make imaginary puissance;
Think when we talk of horses, that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth;
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings”

The prologue's words suggest that minimal or symbolic staging could be appropriate. Consider exploring Brechtian conventions or Grotowski's Poor Theatre techniques.



**QUEENSLAND
SHAKESPEARE
ENSEMBLE**

Get in touch

**QSE website: qldshakespeare.org
Email: education@qldshakespeare.org**