For the middle school teacher

**Dear teachers in grades 4-8.** As you may have noticed, the material in our Teacher’s section is primarily designed for upper elementary educators. This is because most of our Shakespeare at Winedale Outreach work is done in elementary classrooms in grades 4-6. Elementary teachers with self-contained classrooms usually have the flexibility of schedule needed to work on a long-term Shakespeare performance project; they can move the work time around as needed, and squeeze in little pockets of practice here and there. Your situation, with classes of 25-30 kids every 50 or so minutes, is obviously much different.

In addition, we have found that children in grades 4-6 are much more open to the idea of performing together than students who are just a few years older. There are so many difficult and awkward changes in adolescence that the idea of being on a stage can be deeply painful to some 7th and 8th graders.

On the other hand, even these reluctant students, with a gentle and gradual set of classroom activities, can be encouraged to take the plunge and be part of a performance.

Each summer the graduating 8th graders of the Breakthrough Collaborative program, housed on the UT campus in the College of Liberal Arts, visit Winedale for a day of exploring Shakespeare under the trees and on the stage. Students perform sections of scenes, texts in hand, then watch the summer UT Shakespeare at Winedale class perform an entire play at night. It’s a wonderful outing, and for two years has been a highlight of Breakthrough’s summer UT school. And many of those students really relish their moments on the Barn stage.

Students at Kealing Middle School, in both the regular and magnet classes, can study Shakespeare scenes and an entire play through performance. Students love these classes and enter 9th grade very prepared for high school Shakespeare.

So sometimes it just takes the right setting, a daring teacher, and a supportive group atmosphere.

Many of the exercises and activities we offer here for upper-elementary students work quite well for older students. If you search our activities section -- Act 1, Scene 1 -- and our Resources section, you’ll find plenty of ideas, tips, and materials that you can adapt for your age group.

The exercises can easily be “scaled up” for more mature students; for example, if you see how the Puck activity works (“I’ll follow you!”), you can see how any piece of Shakespeare’s verse can be taken apart, slowly developed as a group performance, then put back together again. We have found that the Prologue to Romeo and Juliet is excellent for this. Students work on phrases or lines in groups of four, and have 10 minutes to create an energetic performance for their section; then we flow from one section to the next and see how each group brought something different to the speech.

Before you begin exploring, a few thoughts on doing Shakespeare with middle school students:

We have found that the plays that work well for students in grades 4-6 — *Midsummer Night’s Dream, Tempest, Comedy of Errors* — seem less appealing for the older kids. It’s hard for them to find that innocent delight in play that the younger kids bring to the Fairies in *Midsummer* or the comic trio of Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban in *Tempest.*
But they do know – or think they know – something about passion.

Romeo and Juliet, though it is “supposed” to be saved for 9th grade, works very well at this age. The swordfights and action are appealing, and the more mature students are ready for the complexities of love and relationship explored in the play. The way we see it, if students can do one really inspired performance of a scene from R & J, then they will have their curiosity stoked for a fuller study in high school. They will also have a first-hand understanding of the theatrical nature of the Shakespearean text – which can be rare at that age.

One sixth grade student we worked with on the balcony scene from R & J was so taken with the role that he made “Romeo” his new nickname, and even called himself by that name on his home answering machine!

We have also had good experiences with scenes that explore conflict within a family, such as the opening scenes of King Lear, the fight between Kate and Bianca in Taming of the Shrew, or the moment in R & J where Juliet and her father clash over her refusal to marry Paris.

Given that you only have the students for a short time, and that you work with so many, scene study – rather than attempting to explore an entire play over time – is probably the best way to go.