

FUTURE SHAKESPEAREANS - CATZ AND SSF

19 NOVEMBER 2016

Introduction - seeing is believing

Delighted to be back at Catz today a mere couple of years since I left....

I want to tell you all about the organisation I lead, Shakespeare Schools Foundation, but seeing is believing as they say...[FILM]

Who we are and what we do - why Shakespeare?

At Shakespeare Schools Foundation our mission is to use the unique power of Shakespeare to transform lives.

We run an annual Festival - the largest youth drama Festival in the world - training teachers and young people in an active and ambitious way of working with Shakespeare.

Through a series of workshops and provision of resources, months of preparation culminate in performance evenings in professional theatres. In 2016 that's 30,000 young people from 1100 schools in 131 theatres from Aberdeen to Anglesey, Colchester to Carlisle. And a quarter of a million since the charity was founded in 2000.

In addition, we run standalone school & teacher professional development courses; giving active and experiential approaches to exam texts, promoting more creative and innovative teaching and using our rehearsal room techniques to improve teamwork and effective communication.

Social impact

Now, you might say that this has been an ideal year to run a Shakespearean charity and in a sense of course it has. Everyone who loves Shakespeare is excited about 2016 and its plethora of wonderful Shakespearean activity. But the question I've been asking myself - and challenging my organisation on - is, are we missing the point? Isn't there a real danger that we're all talking to ourselves?

Could it be that those of us who already love Shakespeare are just telling each other how much we love Shakespeare and how wonderful and life affirming his work is (much as I enjoy those conversations)?

So SSF set out on a campaign to show that our focus of 2016 should not be the past, but the future. That the true test of 2016 had to be whether the joy of Shakespeare is brought to everyone - and that means reaching those who at the moment think Shakespeare is not for them, who think it belongs to a different class, a different culture or a different age.

Why is this important?

Not just because Shakespeare is, of itself, a unique way to contemplate what it means to be human.

Not just because his language is at the root and heart of how we communicate, even four hundred years later.

But because actively engaging with these plays - as they were intended, said not read – dare I say it, in the SSF way, is the most astounding route to confidence that there is.

And I don't think any of those things should belong to the few. I think they're the birthright of every child.

So SSF's mission - to use the unique power of Shakespeare to transform lives - expresses how we want to deliver social change through this astounding vehicle. And this is where we have such a strong affinity with St Catharine's and our partnership idea was born.

The partnership and what we hope to achieve

Firstly, is that mission real? Or is it just rhetoric?

Before I became Chief Executive, I was a primary teacher in Tower Hamlets. My class, all of Bangladeshi or Somali heritage, all spoke English as an additional language and most were from backgrounds of significant poverty. Not one of my class had ever set foot in a theatre before - so it was a leap of trust to believe that they could take part in SSF - to believe that they could successfully produce a play written 400 years ago by a man from Warwickshire,

set in Ancient Rome, written in a language most of their teachers and parents struggle with.

And yet they did - and so I've seen at first-hand how SSF breaks those barriers down and how their reading and writing grades accelerated and their confidence soared.

After their *Julius Caesar* rarely a day went by without a child asking me when we'd be *doing* Shakespeare again. Because SSF's approach is active on your feet learning - authentic with making a play - it stretches the highest attaining and reaches those who struggle more. It's the *doing* Shakespeare - not watching a livestream or reading but *doing* that is the key.

"Joy's soul lies in the doing." Cressida says in *Troilus and Cressida*.

When you've discovered the joy of doing, when you've achieved something really difficult, cracked intricate language and conveyed that to others, and watched people applaud you for it, then you can go on to be an actor or an architect, an accountant or an astronaut – you can stride on to whatever stage life has for you.

Every one of us in this room understands success and how it feels. It's so easy to take for granted what that means. But the children I taught - and the children SSF wants to reach the most very often don't. But, given half a chance, they understand Shakespeare. Why? Because Shakespeare wrote for them. And children understand conspiracy and friendship, betrayal and hatred, ambition and failure. So put the two together and you engender success. And that sparks all sorts of exciting insights.

As one of this year's nine year olds put it *"In the future it helps you with a job, if you didn't do this you may not have the guts to do the job."*

And now I have my role as Chief Executive, I hear about what I experienced as a teacher repeated across the country. From school refusers whose attendance soars, reluctant readers who seek out the full texts in their school library, the boy who's decided to stay on to sixth form so he can do the Festival again, young people with autism who understand more about social interaction, and a child with deep depression whose teacher believes that the process literally saved his life. We transform young lives every year.

SSF and St Catharine's share an ambition to bring the benefits of the study of Shakespeare to young people, with a particularly focus on those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. And we want to use that ambition to promote the study and understanding of Shakespeare and aspiration to university study.

How will we do this?

SSF is delighted that Catz has agreed to run additional professional development for teachers and extra training for students taking part in the Festival - crucially taking place in college so that students add an experience of university to a deepened understanding of the play they are performing in the Festival. Using data from both organisations we will focus this extra provision on Cambridgeshire schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged young people.

And through generously sharing facilities with us, we are able to run our 2017 teacher workshops here - giving them access to our training in beautiful surroundings.

This is our first year and we'll be conducting an evaluation process so we can test the impact and look at how the partnership develops in the years to come.

Which brings me back to Cressida. *"What's won is done, joy's soul lies in the doing."*

I am so happy that Catz, which holds such an important place in my heart is going to be making such a fantastic contribution to another great love in my life - the Shakespeare Schools Festival.

Thank you for your time this afternoon - and please come and talk to me and my colleague Kate about our work.