THE JOURNEY OF SHAKESPEARE’S PERICLES: YOUNG PEOPLE DISCOVER PERSONAL MEANING THROUGH THE THEME OF DEATH AND RESURRECTION

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ABSTRACT

The Looking for Shakespeare program has evolved over a period of eight years at New York University and at Goldsmiths University in London. Its non-traditional rehearsal processes are designed to support young people by challenging them to deepen their understanding of one another and their engagement with Shakespeare. Since issues of identity are of paramount importance for young people, we explore the relationship between identity and character. We seek to challenge and extend the identities of adolescents, so that the Shakespeare characters they create will be authentic extensions of themselves.

In our Pericles rehearsal process, the theme of death and resurrection became a focus and catalyst of forging new identities from disruptive personal experiences. Our company of young people was challenged to examine the implications of Shakespeare’s narrative in their own lives: the play’s events, especially the resurrection of Thaisa from the dead, stimulated their awareness of their own death and resurrection experiences and helped them to work together as a team.

The Looking for Shakespeare programme has evolved over a period of eight years at New York University and the University of London. Its non-traditional rehearsal process is designed to support young people by challenging them to deepen their understanding of one another and their engagement with Shakespeare. In engaging the young people in the process of “looking for Shakespeare,” we have recreated some of the conditions that mirror Shakespeare’s creative process, such as the emphasis on collaborative improvisation, and creating a play within the play.

The study of Shakespeare is generally regarded as an essential element of young people’s education. Teachers work to ensure that young people’s knowledge of Shakespeare will help them to get good results in SATs exams; in Looking for Shakespeare we have the additional aim of making his work more accessible to them so that Shakespeare’s plays can inform their understanding of contemporary life, in order to assist them in their personal and career development. Since identity-building is of paramount importance for adolescents, in Looking for Shakespeare we explore the relationship between identity and character. We seek to challenge and extend the identities of adolescents, so that the Shakespeare characters they create will be authentic extensions of themselves.

We found that metaphor, which transfers meaning from one thing to another, worked very effectively in Shakespeare’s Pericles, and that exploring the literal and metaphoric aspects of death and resurrection in the play had a profound effect on the teenage participants. Musing on the power of metaphor in theatre, Dan Larner (2004) observes:
Dramatic fictions are particularly vivid in this respect, because they embody the imaginative reality they construct. By physicalizing a play in the theatre we set before ourselves in the baldest manner the fact that the elements of the dramatic fiction—the characters, the plot, the setting, and the action that they express—are only emblems. They stand for something else. And the more vividly they appear to be themselves, the more strongly they stand for something else, and ask us to “understand” that (Larner 2004, 71).

We used a contemporary metaphor to frame our play, since constructing a play within a play sets up a reflexive relationship between the actor and the character, so that the participants are encouraged to see themselves as actors playing a character, rather than just performing in a theatre event. This sets up a metacognitive relationship within the ensemble that positively transforms their adolescent identities in different ways.

The metaphoric setting we used for the Looking for Shakespeare production of Pericles was a contemporary river festival (loosely based on the Thames River Festival in London). Participants were members of an acting company that performed Pericles in honour of the goddess Diana, who also appears as a character in the play. The company of twenty young people explored Shakespeare’s late romance and their own identities through improvisation, visual art, creative writing and performance. They created Me Projects or self-images, wrote about their personal immigration journeys to London from Africa and the Caribbean, and created their River Festival and Shakespeare characters over a four-week rehearsal period, culminating in two performances for parents and friends.

Shakespeare’s play begins with Gower the medieval poet telling us about the incestuous relationship between King Antiochus and his daughter. Pericles is wise enough not to speak the truth he learns when he solves the riddle, unlike previous suitors whose severed heads are silent witnesses to their failure. The shock that Pericles experiences on solving the riddle not only makes him realise his love for Antiochus’ daughter will be short-lived, but he knows he is in danger of losing his life, since his secret would cost Antiochus his honour. He barely escapes back to Tyre, pursued by Antiochus’ assassin. This adventure marks the beginning of Pericles’ hero journey (Campbell 1949, 30). Pericles sets sail for Tharsus, arriving just in time to save the city from starvation and despair. Leaving Tharsus very much a hero, Pericles is shipwrecked in a storm at sea. Three fishermen discover Pericles washed ashore at Pentapolis, humbled by his near drowning and the loss of his ship and crew.

For Pericles, identity transformation occurs initially as a result of having lost his ship and crew, yet deciding to woo Princess Thaisa without the status of a rich prince. He is the underdog; yet in risking derision he discovers that he is worthy as the man he is, not just because he is a prince. Soon after marrying Thaisa, Pericles sets sail with his new bride to return to Tyre and take up his rightful place on the throne. Sadly, Thaisa dies in childbirth in another storm at sea; she is sealed in a coffin and thrown overboard. Baby Marina
survives and is left with her nurse to grow up in Tharsus. Thaisa undergoes a literal resurrection when her coffin is recovered at Ephesus, and she is awoken from the dead by Cerimon. She thereupon decides to devote her life to serving there as a priestess in the Temple of Diana. But literal death and resurrection is only part of Shakespeare’s story.

Metaphoric death and resurrection occur when Princess Marina, having been raised from infancy and schooled in the arts by her nurse, is captured by pirates and sold into sexual slavery in a brothel in Mitalene. There she suffers a loss of identity that can only be described as metaphoric death. In the brothel she meets Lysimachus, the governor of Mitalene, who is intent on having his way with her. Instead of accepting her role as a prostitute in the brothel, Marina shames Lysimachus into giving her money with which to purchase her freedom and to establish a school of the arts. She is resurrected metaphorically as the governor’s wife.

The scene between Lysimachus and Marina has often been noted as an example of a strong female role model for young people. It is remarkable not only because Marina resists Lysimachus’ attempts to categorise her as a bawd, but because she refuses to succumb to his objective gaze. As he presses her, asking how long she has been a prostitute, she shocks him by saying that she has been of that profession “Ere since I can remember”(Act IV, Sc 5, 68-71):

Lys: Did you go to’t so young, were you a gamester at five or at seven?
Mar: Earlier too, sir, if I now be one.

Audiences today may be shocked at the reference to child prostitution in Shakespeare’s plays, but *Pericles* mixes high and low genres of writing and characterization in a way that commentators have described as shockingly experimental:

*Pericles* is ... a play of extremities, of foul and fair closely joined. The most lubricious and bawdy prose is placed beside some of Shakespeare’s most plangent verse, so that all seems to cohere as if by miracle. The great dirge to the sea deeps gives way to an image of prostitutes that ‘with continual action, are even as good as rotten.’ (Ackroyd 2006, 432).

The loss of intersubjectivity in young people can caused by a shock in the course of the child’s development, whether caused by loss or separation from parents, by war, or by the betrayal of trust. In as the scene between Lysimachus and Marina, Marina shocks Lysimachus into recognising that he was seeing her as the object of his sexual desires and not as a person:

I did not think
Thou could’st have spoke so well,
Ne’er dreamed thou coulds’t.
Had I brought hither a corrupted mind,
Thy speech had altered it. (Act IV, Sc.5, 94-97)

Marina possesses, through her education in the arts at the hands of her nurse Lychorida, an unassailable intersubjectivity that withstood the loss of her father, her stepmother’s attempt on her life, and her kidnapping by pirates. It must be noted that her absolute
faith in the goddess Diana helps Marina to be resolute in the face of adversity:

If fires be hot, knives sharp, or waters deep, United I still my virgin knot will keep. Diana aid my purpose. (Act IV, Sc.2, 119-21)

Throughout our lives, we die many metaphorical deaths and shed our old selves, in order to be resurrected in a new and wiser self. But we do not lose the earlier versions of the self, they are discontinuous, and always available to us, so that we can spiral downwards in life as well as upwards.

Young people especially need spiritual stories to guide them, especially in this material world, in which corporate messages compete to imprint their narrow commercial messages on young people's minds. In contrast, Shakespeare's Pericles, possibly influenced by the medieval Digby saint's play St Mary Magdalene, suggests that death is merely an illusion: resurrection follows death as certainly as day follows night:

For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection (Romans 6, 5):

As Marina must survive a series of metaphoric deaths before maturity, so young people experience the challenges are in their lives as literal and metaphoric deaths to make them stronger before reaching maturity. The metaphoric deaths in childhood, and the literal deaths of grandparents and parents prepare young people to cope with adult crises. Paradoxically, when well-meaning parents try to protect their children from these inner rites of passage they can prevent them from developing into strong, independent adults. Looking for Shakespeare encouraged participants to reflect on their metaphoric deaths by developing an inner dialogue and reflecting on the struggles they had already faced in their lives.

In the first week of the Looking for Shakespeare rehearsal process, participants began by drawing their full body silhouettes, trusting a relative stranger to trace their body's outline in chalk. They then wrote descriptive text on their own virtual skins. They filled their body outlines with hidden inner qualities, dreams and desires. They explored water metaphors, and added more layers inside and out, which described their Shakespeare characters and their contemporary characters, actors performing Pericles at a river festival. This process helped them to create a dialogue that they could extend to better understand the inner lives of their characters in the play.

At the beginning of the third week of the Looking for Shakespeare process, each participant shared their Me Project with the ensemble, while they listened. No one was allowed to comment during the five minute sharing, though anyone could ask a question of the presenter at the end. We observed the physical comfort participants had with one another as they sat in a circle around the Me Project being shared. This level of trust was built over the first two weeks through drama games and improvisations around Shakespeare's text.
During the first two weeks, each young person was asked to write the story of how he or she came to live in London. This journey writing functioned as a bridge from the adolescents’ personal lives to the character journeys they encountered in *Pericles*. We edited the journey stories and incorporated them in the final performances as stories of how the participant’s contemporary character came to be part of the acting ensemble at the River Festival. In performance, as they shifted back and forth from their Shakespeare characters to their River Festival characters, their personal journey stories stood shoulder to shoulder with Shakespeare’s story of Pericles’ journey.

According to Paul Ricoeur, a person’s identity narrative can tell us about the connections that unify the various key events in their lives and their assessments of the significance of those events. “The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character” (OAA, 147-48). Ricoeur also points to the importance of community for a person in creating their own identity:

> Because my personal identity is a narrative identity, I can make sense of myself only in and through my involvement with others (Ricoeur 1992).

This helps to explain why the ensemble approach in *Looking for Shakespeare* supported the young people to explore their narrative identities. While the adolescent’s first loyalty may be to himself or herself, they developed a belief in supporting one another to tell Pericles’ story by helping one another to learn lines, change the set, listen to personal stories and to improvise when lines are forgotten during performance. For many adolescents, pulling together during the four-week intensive theatre experience is one of the most demanding and rewarding experiences of their lives.

We will now examine five of the participants in turn, to understand how the dynamics of the *Looking for Shakespeare* process enabled their personal transformations. For each, we will offer an example of a participant’s Me Project and reflect on how the young person extended their inner and outer selves in order to create their Shakespeare character. We will also reflect on connections between their Shakespeare character and their personal narrative. Each character undergoes a change during the play, which the young actors need to make clear to the audience. In addition, since the larger roles in Shakespeare are divided among several young actors, each actor can choose to play their shared character differently. Each young person also plays a contemporary character that is a member of the River Festival Ensemble that is performing Shakespeare’s play, *Pericles*. Thinking, reflecting and talking about all their character changes provides the vocabulary for reflecting about their own personal changes, which is recorded in the Me Projects.

In *Passages*, Gail Sheehy described the series of crises that attend adult life. Similarly, Shakespeare’s *Pericles* describes the crises that befall the Prince of Tyre and what he learns from them. When the young people in *Look-
ing for Shakespeare learn about Pericles’ story, and accept the challenge of telling the story to an audience, it becomes their story. Engaging with this fictional narrative of Pericles’ journey is juxtaposed with their own journey narratives and they can create their own personal meaning at the locus where the fictional and personal narratives meet. This is how their adolescent identities are transformed. When John Gower appears on the stage of the Globe Theatre, the Elizabethan audience must have been astonished to see a famous medieval poet come back from the dead to tell the story of Pericles. They would have known that Gower’s tomb was in St Mary Overie’s Church nearby. So when Gower appears to narrate Pericles’ story,

To sing a song that old was sung,
From ashes, ancient Gower is come,
Assuming man’s infirmities,
To glad your ear and please your eyes
Act I, 1-4.

the audience would have experienced the shock of Gower’s resurrection from the dead.

Jacob, who played Gower in our play, is similarly shocked to recognize the death and resurrection theme in his own life:

This is a journey where no one else can follow even if they tried. One day when I was struggling on what to write for a short story, my memories kicked in and I found myself not at home writing a short story… nor am I seventeen…I am six hundred years old …, a medieval poet named John Gower.

Jacob’s identity becomes fluid in reflection, as he reaches back into his early memories to connect to a time in childhood when the world appeared mysterious:

One of my first memories is set in my father’s garden. I am three years old. There is a small pond that is now large compared to me. The pond was peaceful but bleakly mysterious due to the dark water. We only knew what was in there by word. I can’t see anything though. This is a pond I usually avoid, but now it calls to me…

The pond is a metaphor that is symbolic of the unknown, the mysterious. As Larner (2004) observes:

In this way metaphor becomes embroiled in mystery, the large primal mystery of identity. What is the world, my life, nature, death? Who am I, who are you, and what is our fate? And who or what is God? Each of these requires a transfer of meaning from one thing to another, one set of ideas or conceptions to another, to “mean” anything at all (Larner 2004, 70-71).

In his Me Project, Jacob incorporates the water imagery into his personal narrative and Shakespeare character. His adolescent loss of physical control helps him to identify with Gower’s coming back from the dead and “assuming man’s infirmities” to tell the story of the play:

If I was a body of water I would be a river because I can be calm and tense, provoking and settling.
I am at the mercy of a rising sea as Peri-
cles is.
The sea can make you small.
The sea and wind can abandon you.
This ‘Pericles’ is Gower’s creation.
The body can float on water.
Water is powerful like Gower is over the play.

In each activity of Looking for Shakespeare, taking acceptable risks was an essential phrase in our vocabulary. Whether it was taking a risk playing a game, using your voice, connecting with the audience, sharing your Me Project, or creating your characters, participants were always encouraged to be risk-takers. It was understood that the quality of the risk you took was always your own decision, and the risk was different for each participant.

When, encouraged by the recovery of a piece of his armour and the news that King Simonides’ daughter, Thaisa, is to choose her favourite from among the knights, Pericles presents himself to the court. Instead of a painted shield, he is able to offer Thaisa only a pitiful branch. Yet his brash courage soon sets him apart from the other knights, and he becomes Thaisa’s favourite. In our performance, after the knight’s dance, which has the rhythm of a Maori warrior haka, Pericles dances with Thaisa to a rock song, ‘Premonition’. As the drummer drums the techno beat, the two metre cube that is our set moves, and the timelessness of the play calls to us from the past metaphorically to illuminate our future. After Thaisa and Pericles’ wedding, the first Pericles passes his armour to the second Pericles to take his place. The final scene in the first half of the play, in which Thaisa dies in a storm giving birth to Marina aboard Pericles’ ship is truly moving. The company sang Motherless Child to the baby Marina, as Thaisa was sealed in her coffin and thrown overboard. In her personal narrative, Danni, who played Thaisa, revealed that she had lost her mother at an early age:

What journey did I undertake I hear you cry,
the journey of the average life?
From young girl to young woman I have come without the helping hand of my mum,
And proud without her I stand wondering
if she’ll ever really get to know who I am.

Similarly, her character Thaisa must have wondered whether her lost husband Pericles would ever get to know her. In her Me Project she observes,

Like the ocean I appear to be free. [I] am constantly restricted by islands but like the ocean I will soon react and form a tsunami.

One day during the rehearsal process, Danni’s handbag went missing. Although she did not at first want to join in the Me Project session, we encouraged her to put her strong feelings of anger onto her silhouette. She was able to transfer some of her feelings to her self-image, writing the words “violent”, “passionate”, “feisty”, “angry”. When exploring the water metaphor, she expressed that she felt the power of a tsunami within. During her reflexive exploration of identity, she observed: “I find myself and myself doesn’t like me.” This is an excellent example of the op-
portunity and risk involved for adolescents in reflexive identity building. Instead of turning her anger on the other participants, Danni was able to channel her anger into an exploration of her own identity.

Two conceptions of time, external temporal order and zones of personal time (Giddens 1994), co-existed in Looking for Shakespeare. While there was a tight schedule for the four weeks, the planning for the next day took place at the end of each day, based on what the young people had accomplished. We planned time for playing games, improvisation, visual art, music, movement, writing journey stories, learning lines, rehearsal and field trips. The last half-hour of each day incorporated the “check-out”, during which each participant had an opportunity to say what was working for her or him, or was not working. No one could comment on what each person said. During some check-outs, the young people could only ask questions about the play or the process, which were recorded for reflection. So, while tightly structured, each day’s schedule provided personal time for play and socialisation, as well as for rehearsal. We thought of the different conceptions of time as integrative, like the strands of a rope woven together, rather than additive. This view of time allowed for the countdown to opening night, while simultaneously encouraging the young people to take responsibility for their own character development and costume design. In short, we encouraged them to take ownership of their character development and helped them to establish zones of personal time to do so. In these zones of personal time, participants could explore how their life memories could connect to their characters.

Emma, who played both Cerimon, the Lord who raises Thaisa from the dead after her coffin washes up on the shore in Ephesus, and Bawd, who ran the brothel in Mitalene, was skilled at shifting from one character to the other. In her personal narrative, she demonstrates a remarkable ability to imaginatively establish several characters in the distanced time of World War Two. She demonstrates her ability to shift character fluidly, playing all the roles in her story from her grandmother as a child to her great grandmother:

My grandmother told me she was evacuated to Wales in World War Two. Hundreds of children squashed aboard, hundreds of mothers dying inside, but still appearing as strong and powerful as ever. The whistle blew, two tears fell from my grandmother’s eyes, yet still she smiled. Mothers reached out from the platform, children from the train, hands met, but just as soon as their fingertips had met, they were torn apart.

“When are we going home?” It was the simplest question, yet the hardest I have ever had to answer. I told her that when all the bad people have gone and the war had stopped, we would be able to go home, but until then it wasn’t safe. The look in her eyes was that of confusion and hurt. As the tears started to roll from her hazel eyes, it was as if time itself had stopped.

Before we were sent away, I’d been wondering who I really was, trying to find the
real me, what was my purpose in life? I thought I was weak, and only now did I see the true strength in me. Only now did I truly understand the meaning of home.

Similarly, in her Me Project, she demonstrates the same role flexibility, representing herself as a waterfall:

I can be high or low. I can be the calm pool at the bottom or the rapids before the fall. Or I can be the free flowing water which is fun, crazy and free!

Emma’s career plan is to pursue an acting career, which would allow her to continue to explore this fluidity of self through role. She is prepared to accept the metaphorical death represented by the loss of job opportunities at auditions, as long as she is resurrected metaphorically with each new role:

I need to get proper singing lessons, continue acting and dancing, lose weight and get fit. And I need to get ready for a lot of knockbacks and rejections from jobs.

From the beginning in *Looking for Shakespeare*, we engaged the adolescents physically in games, Me Projects, and improvisations. We showed them how to breathe using their diaphragms so they could develop more powerful voices. In the Me Projects, the adolescents engaged in active reflection with their own body images. The purpose of these activities was in anticipation of a performance of the play in which each participant would play several characters, physicalizing each expressively.

After Thaisa is resurrected from the dead by Cerimon in Ephesus, she becomes a priestess in the temple of Diana. The scene then shifts to Mitalene in Act IV, where the teenage princess Marina is sold by pirates into sexual slavery. Boult, a pimp in the brothel in Mitalene was ordered to advertise the new arrival for the brothel’s clients. Rachel undertook her character’s task with physical commitment and vocal power:

I warrant you mistress, thunder shall not so awake the beds of eels, as my giving out her beauty stirs up the lewdly inclined.

(Act IV, Sc 2)

In Rachel’s Me Project, we can see she has drawn pink, white and blue butterfly wings, and the word “flying” on her arm next to them. The metamorphosis of the butterfly from seeming death in the cocoon to new identity parallels the change in her character, Boult. At the beginning of Act IV, Scene 5, Boult wants to have his way with Marina, inducting her into the life of the prostitute. However, by the end of the scene he agrees to help her win her freedom so she can open a school for the arts. As she writes on her Me Project:

I am spontaneous.
I go with the flow of my internal river.

Rachel imagines her River Festival character dancing, celebrating, reflecting her identity as “happy, energetic, giggling, pretty”. Yet she is also aware of her darker side, describing herself as “annoying, cunning, manipulative,
freaky and loud”, qualities she enjoyed exploring when playing her character, Boul.

For all the participants, Pericles’ journey in the play became a metaphor for the trajectory of the self, assisting them to connect their past with their anticipated future. When they wrote stories of their own individual journeys to London from Europe or Africa or the Americas, they could reflect on their own self-trajectories and think about how sharing their personal journey stories as part of their performance in the play would become a moment in their anticipated future. We also discussed their anticipated real-life career choices with them, and these dreams were often incorporated into their Me Projects.

After suffering many losses, Pericles is finally reunited with his wife Thaisa and his daughter Marina at the Temple of Diana at Ephesus. Now they can begin a new life, Marina and Lysimachus as the Queen and King of Tyre, and Pericles and Thaisa as rulers in Pentapolis. Angela, who played Pericles in Act V, went through her own metaphoric death and resurrection when she was a young child, as she relates in her personal narrative:

Throughout my life I’ve felt that I am one of the luckiest children alive, because during my life I have been subjected to dreadful and horrific things that a child should not experience. It was not long ago when a civil war took place in Sierra Leone. The rich and the poor were separated because of greed for land and power; innocent people were tortured because of political conventions. Two months into the war we were not allowed to go outside, we were forced to stay inside with very little food. At that time I was about five years old …

Both my parents and little sister were in London. However, the war was still raging in Sierra Leone. I was taken to the airport in the dead of night so we were not captured nor seen. I got on the plane safely and set off to see my family. I was full of excitement and curious to meet my family, even though a part of me was scared because I had never left my homeland before...

Seeing my parents brought tears upon my eyes, even theirs, because we were reunited again after many years. I was really shocked by the love and warmth I received.

As we examine her Me Project, she appears to have learned a life lesson from the death and resurrection theme in her personal narrative:

I have learnt [that] to get what I want I have to work hard believe in myself and nothing is impossible.

Angela physicalized this determination in her strong portrayal of Pericles in Act V.

So far this year in London, more than thirty young people have been stabbed to death in the recent wave of knife crime that has afflicted the UK capital. How are we to make sense of this fact when overall statistics for violent crime in our cities is down? As comforting as it might be to suggest that we
should get tough on teens that carry knives and put them in jail, there is no simple answer to this problem. I have argued that the twin themes of death and resurrection are as essential for today’s teenagers as they were for Elizabethans in Shakespeare’s day.

Pericles lived at the boundary between self and nothingness. He lost his identity as Prince of Tyre, his marriage to Princess Thaisa and their child Marina. In his life he experienced these events as deaths. Yet, though he fell into despair, God, represented by the goddess Diana in the play, had not abandoned him. Eventually, through a vision he saw after a self-imposed regime of fasting and silence, he was reunited with his daughter Marina and his wife Thaisa. He evokes the death and resurrection theme at Ephesus when he greets his long lost wife with the words, “O come, be buried a second time within these arms (Act V, Scene 3).” Ayo, one young person who played Pericles, also understands both the literal and metaphoric aspects of death and resurrection. In her personal narrative she observes:

I think journeys are mental as well as physical... Leaving people behind can make you dwell on the past. However, I don’t think dwelling on the past is such a negative thing as long as you don’t let your past become your future.

Young people need the narratives provided by theatre and the arts to learn how to distance themselves from and to reflect on their own lives. Armed with the language of others instead of knives, they are inspired to write their own personal narratives, the sharing of which empower them to generate community and reciprocity. The Looking for Shakespeare rehearsal process of Pericles enabled its teenage participants to grapple with both the literal and metaphoric aspects of death and resurrection in their own lives. They experienced the identity changing dynamics of distancing and reflection, the construction of zones of personal time, engagement with their minds and bodies, and living in community with their peers. Increased government funding for the arts would allow more young people to experience death and resurrection and other life themes metaphorically, so they are less tempted to despair at the literal deaths they witness on a daily basis in the media and in their streets.
REFERENCES


