

Alanna Beeken



drama games

FOR EXPLORING
SHAKESPEARE

Foreword by Paterson Joseph

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FOREWORD

The first time I ever directed a play was for a television documentary called *My Shakespeare*. I had been asked to tackle one of Shakespeare's plays in a place I knew well from my past. I chose *Romeo and Juliet*, and I controversially chose Harlesden in North West London, an area most known at the time for poverty, crime and social deprivation. As with almost all media assessments of places that are supposedly 'notorious', that picture, I knew, was altogether wrong, based largely on easy clichés and old tropes of urban degeneration.

And, true enough, what I found in those four short weeks of rehearsals and performance was quite the opposite of the myth. My band of eighteen brothers and sisters, all first-time actors and, most challengingly, first-time Shakespeareans, came through the period of introduction, rehearsal and eventual performance of Shakespeare at RADA with flying colours; as easily witnessed by everyone who watched the Channel 4 broadcast in 2005. This group of eighteen- to fifty-two-year-olds blew many people away with their commitment and understanding of Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers and the world they inhabited; transposed to their own area and made real for them because it spoke to the issues of division and love that mirrored their lives. It was an experience that transformed a number of lives, including my own.

One of the missing ingredients at that time, however, was a blueprint for attempting what was an almost impossible task, freighted with many traps and snares. To teach people who were mildly terrified, a little hostile and deeply underconfident about their ability to understand, learn and perform the works of

the world's most important and influential playwright, that Shakespeare was for them, too. What I would have dearly loved was a book like Coram Shakespeare Schools Foundation's *Drama Games for Exploring Shakespeare*.

This wonderful book will be an invaluable resource for anyone approaching the teaching or directing of Shakespeare, whether novice or veteran.

Whenever I've tried to introduce Shakespeare to a new group of people, I get out a file of loose leaves of paper with various exercises, notes and modifications. At last, here is a ready-made resource in one helpful package. CSSF manages to make the introduction of Shakespearean language and attitudes, stagecraft and themes seem effortless and simple for anyone. With the easy-to-read, at-a-glance format, CSSF has provided a survival manual for any teacher or director attempting to coax a shy group into letting rip on some four-hundred-year-old text. Quite the feat.

I can readily imagine using these easy-to-follow exercises in a setting that requires a lot of flexibility due to the players' age and ability. It can be tricky getting children engaged in Shakespeare, for example, if they feel the language is beyond them; this book neatly swerves this potential obstacle by making the use of everyday phrases sound as if Shakespeare were our contemporary.

The sections where we are given the aim of each game is brilliant. So often what is already a daunting and seemingly mysterious world is made more, not less, scary by exercises that seem complex and equally obscure. That is not the case with this book. CSSF's approach will allow anyone to tackle Shakespeare's myriad themes and phrases, poetry and prose as easily as reeling off a list of things you had for breakfast. Iambic pentameter, caesuras, thought changes during long speeches and even the complex physicality of stagecraft, are so woven into these games that players will have mastered much of these previously alien concepts before they are even aware. And they'll be laughing and most importantly *playing* while they do this. 'The *play*'s the thing...': an invaluable lesson that my rather

glamorous mentor on *My Shakespeare*, Baz Luhrmann, reminded me during a tricky section of that rehearsal process.

Some exercises will make for hilarity, some will move us with their simple truth, but all of them will help ignite the imagination of the players, no matter what their ability and experience. I wish I had this to hand when I was first teaching students about the accessibility of William Shakespeare's stories and words. But, better late than never, in my case.

Paterson Joseph
London, 2023

Paterson Joseph is a Patron of Coram Shakespeare Schools Foundation and is well known for his Shakespearean roles, including Troilus in *Troilus and Cressida*, Oswald in *King Lear*, Dumaine in *Love's Labour's Lost* and Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, all for the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Paterson's theatre credits include Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* (The Old Vic), Tshembe Matoseh in *Les Blancs* (Best Actor, Barclays TMA Awards, Royal Exchange, Manchester) and Brutus Jones in *The Emperor Jones* (National Theatre). His TV and film credits include *Peep Show* (Objective), *Green Wing* (BAFTA Winner Pioneer Award, Talkback), *Noughts + Crosses* and *Vigil* (BBC), *The Beach* (Figment Films) and *Wonka* (Warner Bros).

Paterson is the Chancellor of Oxford Brookes University and his debut novel, *The Secret Diaries of Charles Ignatius Sancho* (Dialogue), was published in 2022.

CONTENTS

Foreword by Paterson Joseph

Introduction

How to Use This Book

Notes and Glossary

Acknowledgements

Part One:

WARM-UPS AND GENERAL GAMES

1. I Am...
2. The King's Coming
3. The Clapping Game
4. Who's the Leader?
5. Shakespeare Sign Names
6. Zounds!
7. Clap, Stamp, Shimmy
8. Venga Venga
9. Ban Ban Caliban
10. Character Swaps
11. Who's the Boss?
12. Can I Stay at Your House?

Part Two:

STORY AND WORLD-BUILDING

13. Round Here We...
14. Ten Events
15. Moodboarding
16. See It, Be It

17. Character Cards
18. Story Bag
19. Once There Was...
20. Tell It, See It, Map It

Part Three: INTRODUCING SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE

21. Double Double
22. Diddly Dee
23. One-line Express
24. Tactics Circle
25. One Word Add
26. Iambic Pentameter Made Easy
27. Don't Stress, Just Stress

Part Four: ACTIVATING SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE

28. Mapping
29. Chair Swap
30. Punctuation Walk
31. Sentence Types
32. Antithesis
33. Most Rare Vision
34. Image-Makers
35. Ghosting
36. This is for You
37. Yes It Is, No It Isn't
38. Punching the Line
39. Improv Layers
40. Barriers and Posse
41. Last Word Repeat

Part Five: CHARACTER

42. Mystery Party Guest
43. Archetypes
44. Wants and Fears
45. Leading with Body Parts
46. Role on the Wall

47. Floor Surfaces
48. Shakespeare Zoo
49. Shakespeare Status Games
50. The Court Makes the King
51. Reaction Box
52. Oh Yes!
53. Strings
54. Character Profiles

Part Six: STAGING

55. The Game of Power
56. Attract/Repel
57. Stop-Go
58. Three Gestures
59. Mirroring
60. Round, Across, Under
61. Join the Dots
62. Flock of Birds
63. Shakespeare's Footsteps
64. Cat and Mouse
65. Sound Orchestra
66. Hot Spots

Appendices

Ten-point Summary: *Macbeth*

Character Cards: *Macbeth*

Index of Games

Skills

Alphabetical List

About the Authors

Copyright Information

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare sticks. His words are more than four hundred years old, but his stories continue to be told on stages and in classrooms, on screens and in books across the world. No matter the time and distance between us and when he was writing, Shakespeare's work says something about the human condition that keeps us coming back for more. He wrote characters grappling with life's biggest questions and the myriad complications of relationships, emotion and power. He created language so beautiful, funny and interesting that it has been assimilated into our everyday speech – when is the last time you were in a pickle? Or on a wild goose chase? What about swaggering, puking or ranting? Since he first put quill to page, in every era, all over the world, Shakespeare sticks.

'They started to love the Shakespearean language – lines like, "turn hell-hound turn" and "Out damn spot." I think they liked that the language is a bit naughty. They enjoyed the way Shakespeare played with the language.'

Laura Hodgkiss, teacher, St Anne's Catholic Primary School, Knowsley

Coram Shakespeare Schools Foundation

Coram Shakespeare Schools Foundation (CSSF) uses these iconic stories and brilliant words to inspire new generations. We are a cultural education charity that uses Shakespeare to empower children of all abilities through workshops, classroom resources and the unique opportunity to perform on a professional stage. CSSF runs the world's largest youth drama festival, the annual Shakespeare Schools Festival. Founded

in 2000 with just eight schools, we have grown to work with hundreds of schools across the UK each year, training teachers to direct abridged Shakespeare plays for performance in a professional theatre.

Shakespeare is an inspiration and an icon, but he is not the whole point of what we do. We use Shakespeare's work as a vehicle for fostering the skills needed to survive in an ever-changing world – communication, resilience, confidence and teamwork. In my eight years of working with the charity I have borne witness to hundreds of young lives transformed by the challenge of performing Shakespeare.

'Our school is situated in a hard community. There is gun crime, knife crime and problems with drugs. Children's home lives can be chaotic and many of them see quite negative things. By taking part in the festival, children realise they can achieve. They aspire to greater things and have the ambition to pursue their dreams. The confidence and communication skills they gain equip them for life in the big wide world.'

Joanna Mously, head teacher, Saints Peter and Paul Roman Catholic Primary School, Kirkby

Our Principles

Decades of working with students and teachers of every background and ability has shaped CSSF's approach to theatremaking and learning, and given us a fantastic catalogue of games. We know how to use Shakespeare to inspire and challenge everyone. These are our guiding principles, which underpin the design of the games and exercises in this book:

1. Shakespeare is for everyone

'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.' *As You Like It*

At the heart of our philosophy is our belief that Shakespeare is for everyone, no matter their age or culture, background or ability. In his time, Shakespeare wrote for all of society – his casts of

characters range from commoner to king, and his words worked as well (if not better) for the groundlings at the actors' feet as for the lords and ladies in the seats. CSSF has reimagined this spirit of inclusion for the modern age, working with a diverse array of people including those with profound physical and educational needs.

'For children with life-limiting conditions at our school, every second counts. We want to give them every drop of joy that life can bring. The fact that they are up on a professional stage performing Shakespeare is incredible. You see their faces light up. It's something that most parents would never have dreamed possible.'

Gail Pascoe, teacher, Knockevin Special School, County Down

Often the most inspired and creative choices in performance are born from the challenges faced in the rehearsal room – what could be perceived as a disability inspires a brilliant piece of stagecraft, or a very large cast creates a fantastic ensemble world together. I have lost count of the nights I have sat in the CSSF audience, captivated by a piece of theatre that was fantastic because of (and not in spite of) the challenges faced by its actors. If you have any doubts about your actors' ability to tackle Shakespeare, or indeed your own, use this book to banish them. Shakespeare gives us the opportunity to surprise ourselves and everyone else with what we can do.

2. *The power of play and kinaesthetic learning*

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

Shakespeare's stories resonate with young people (and everyone) because they are playful, magical, funny and silly, as well as moving and thought-provoking. So many are turned off Shakespeare because they first encounter his work on the page, silently read and never spoken. Shakespeare wrote for actors and audiences, not scholars and academics, and his words were meant to be spoken aloud and played with. His spirit of mischief and play dances through even his most serious

tragedies – and play is the most important part of our process too. Every game in this book puts fun first, and Shakespeare naturally follows.

‘I never knew that I could do Shakespeare! It was so fun, I enjoyed the warm-ups and dancing to music. But my favourite part was performing on stage. Now I am more confident to try something new.’

Alesha, 9, student, Old Catton Junior School, Norwich

Years of working with actors of all ages has showed us that most people learn best through doing. Moving, speaking and playing with Shakespeare brings it to life in a way that sitting at a desk, struggling to read the unfamiliar and complex language never could. Every game in this book is designed to be played actively, making use of space and bodies and learning from the outside in.

3. Shared ownership

‘Now let’s go hand in hand, not one before another.’ *The Comedy of Errors*

Our years of trial and error in classrooms and on stages have led us to our own definition of a director – we see a director as a facilitator. This is how we hope you will approach these games too. A facilitator will inspire and harness the creativity of their actors, rather than create a show to serve their own vision. These games are designed in this spirit – to create a sense of group ownership and ignite the imaginations of the participants.

‘Some people say Shakespeare is challenging. I say, life in general is challenging. If you don’t give young people a challenge, how are they ever going to learn? Even if you find it difficult, even if you make a mistake, you’re always learning. All the big themes – death and love and conflict – are there. There’s no point hiding them from young people. We’re going to discover them anyway for ourselves, so you might as well give us the chance to think them through in a safe space.’

Ibrahim, 16, student, Morpeth School, Bethnal Green

We want young people to feel that Shakespeare belongs to them, and to find a connection to the words that resonates for them in their own time. This means that we are often irreverent in our approach, cutting up scripts (sometimes literally), experimenting with language and playing with characters and ideas. Many of our games focus on this, mining the script for connections to the players and seeking opportunities to inspire them.

Who is This Book For?

The games in this book make Shakespeare fun and accessible for anyone, no matter their knowledge of Shakespeare. At Coram Shakespeare Schools Foundation, we work with teachers and students aged 8 to 18, but these games can be used and adapted for most ages and abilities. You might be a director or a teacher, a student or an actor. You might be tackling Shakespeare for the very first time or be well-versed in his works. You could use this book to support your direction of a Shakespeare play, bringing playfulness to your rehearsal room, or you might be an English teacher wanting to bring the text to life in the classroom.

CSSF trains directors and we have structured the book as though you are working towards a performance. If you are directing a Shakespeare play, with a cast of any age and experience, we hope it will give you a structure and momentum for your rehearsals.

However, you could just as easily pick it up and flick through it for one-off games to enliven a lesson, support a monologue or introduce Shakespeare to your drama club. We have tried to make our games as inclusive as possible, and in some cases have suggested variations or extensions to suit different ages and abilities. However, every company is unique, and you know your actors best, so feel free to find your own adaptations.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The games are grouped into the following chapters:

- **Warm-ups and General Games** are the perfect place to start a session or rehearsal process. They will create all the conditions you need to establish a way of working and playing together.
- **Story and World-building** includes games to explore the events, environments and societies of Shakespeare's plays.
- **Introducing Shakespeare's Language** will help you break down the text, supporting players to find their own connection to the words.
- **Activating Shakespeare's Language** goes further, to liberate actors from the script and connect the words on the page to their movement and voice.
- **Character** illuminates actors' choices to develop interesting, believable performances.
- **Staging** focuses on big ensemble moments that might be challenging to stage, offering simple games that empower every performer.

Within each section, the games build on each other, and each section follows naturally from the last. However, we advocate a cyclical rehearsal process with experimentation and play at its core, so don't feel bound by the structure that we have chosen. You can dip in and out of sections as you need, and we recommend returning regularly to the general games.

You do not need to be a Shakespeare expert to facilitate the games here, but some of them will require a bit of preparation. Even if you don't have

time to read a whole play, knowing the story you are focusing on, understanding your characters, remembering some key lines and preparing some resources will help you make the most of the games. We will let you know when and how much preparation is necessary. Each game in this book also comes with a panel including the minimum number of players, the youngest age that we feel can play the game, the length of time it might take to play, and the key skills it explores. All of this information is offered as a guide only; you know your group and what is appropriate for them.

We encourage you to approach every game in a spirit of play and collaboration. Our work is non-competitive, and we have carried that principle through in the design of our rehearsal games. Where the games have an element of competition, we encourage you to harness this spirit for positive ends and not focus on winning and losing. It may be helpful to facilitate a discussion about the meaning of collaboration and ensemble work.

26. Iambic Pentameter Made Easy

A clear, physical introduction to iambic pentameter.

How to Play

A line in iambic pentameter has ten syllables and creates a rhythmic pattern that sounds like this:

we STRESS the WORDS we WANT the WORLD
to HEAR.

Ask students to tap this sentence like a heartbeat rhythm on their bodies – a light tap on the shoulder is followed by a firm one on the chest. Ask them if it reminds them of anything? Reflect that the rhythm is like a heartbeat beating through the text.

de-DUM, de-DUM, de-DUM, de-DUM, de-DUM.

As a group say this line in time with your tapped-out rhythm. Ask your students what they noticed, where does the heavy beat fall?

Present this line of text to your cast visually by arranging five participants into a line.

Quietly give two words to each participant and then get them to say them out loud down the line:

Student 1: We stress

Student 2: the words

Student 3: we want

Student 4: the world

Student 5: to hear.

Get them to stress the 'wrong' way first: Ask them to stamp their foot and stress their FIRST word and speak the second word normally. Reflect on how this sounds, and how it seems unnatural.

Next, create the 'right' (iambic) stresses: Repeat the line, this time stressing their second word. What do they notice? You will find that it sounds much more natural – the way the stress falls is the way we naturally speak in English. Notice also that the stressed words are the important ones – these are the words that carry the meaning and need to be clear to an audience.

Ask the line of players to only say the stressed words – you can get the sense of the line from this alone, e.g. ‘Stress – words – want – world – hear’.

Try the same exercise with a Shakespearean line that fits the iambic pentameter, e.g. ‘a HORSE, a HORSE, my KINGdom FOR a HORSE’. This should show your cast that Shakespeare’s verse structures sound quite natural – the way that we would naturally stress the words in everyday speech is also the way that the poetic stress falls.

The Aim of the Game

The words ‘iambic pentameter’ strike fear into the hearts of many young actors (and adults too). This simple exercise will demystify the verse form, proving to your cast that it will actually help them decode and perform Shakespeare’s texts.

Players 5+	Age 10+	Time 10
<i>Comprehension, Focus, Rhythm</i>		

42. Mystery Party Guest

A fun improvisation game to help actors get into character.

How to Play

Tell your cast that they are going to a party. Ask them what they do at a party and take some suggestions, e.g. have drinks, dance, eat, chat to friends, play games. Now tell them that on the count of three you want them to turn the rehearsal room into a brilliant party. Let that play out for a few seconds and congratulate them on their work.

Divide the group in half. One half of the group will stay in the room and continue to enjoy the 'party' – they don't have to stick to one action, they can just move around as they would if they were at a real party. The other half will leave the room and enter the party, one by one, in character as someone from a Shakespeare play. They can choose any character they like – they should not tell the others their choice and it doesn't matter if several people choose the same character. Tell players to think about what their character might say and do on entering a party.

When they are ready, the first person should knock on the door, enter and greet the other guests. Give them about ten seconds to improvise their character's behaviour at a party, e.g. Malvolio may start to serve drinks to others, but in a very haughty and imperious manner; Lady Macbeth may start to behave as though she is the hostess and go around graciously greeting guests (while staring murderously behind their backs). The group in the room have three guesses as to which character it is. If they are stumped, they could ask the actor to perform a specific action in character, e.g. could you pour yourself a drink in character?

Once they have guessed correctly, the actor should stay at the party in character. The next actor to enter the room does the same thing but can also interact with the first character. The game continues until everyone is in the room.

Swap the groups over so that everyone has a chance to enter in character.

The Aim of the Game

Shakespeare wrote some of the most iconic and recognisable characters in literature. This game is a playful, low-stakes way for the actors to engage with these characters and identify their defining characteristics, honing their body language and mannerisms.

Variations and Extensions

If players are nervous about being the centre of attention, you could try asking actors to get into pairs and agree a character between them. They would then enter the room together, both in character.

Alternatively, all the guests at the party could mirror the character coming in – not copy exactly what they are doing but take on the vocal quality and characteristics, e.g. Iago comes in and greets everyone in a shifty manner, everyone in the room will become shifty.

Players 8+	Age 10+	Time 30
<i>Characterisation, Imagination, Improvisation, Teamwork</i>		