

Virtual Seating in the Globe Theatre: Appreciating Film Adaptations of Shakespeare's Plays

Inviting students to watch a play from the pit, the gallery, or the balcony, Williamson encourages students to understand the multiple layers of meaning Shakespeare weaves through his works.

Poet and professor Peter Everwine once said: "If you poke Shakespeare, you can make him bleed any color." And while it may be true that different interpretations of Shakespeare's words elicit varied responses, Shakespeare's popularity in Renaissance England was due in large part to his ability to appeal to a socially and educationally diverse audience.

"Sit, worthy friends" (*Macbeth* 3.4.53)

Shakespeare knew what it took to fill the seats. To encourage appreciation of Shakespeare's universal appeal, I invite students to "take a virtual seat" in one of three locations—the pit, the gallery, or the balcony—as they view a film adaptation of one of Shakespeare's plays. Simulating the stratified seating of the Globe Theatre, students opt to take a seat in one of the following:

- The pit, where "groundlings" appreciate the special effects and watch for scenes of violence, gore, sex, and dirty jokes;
- The gallery, where educated members of the middle class appreciate the intricacies of the plot and watch for puns, riddles, ironies, and double entendres;
- The balcony seats above the stage, reserved for nobles and royalty who appreciate the political intrigue, the foibles of the rich and powerful, and pay close attention to the king's place in the Great Chain of Being.

I leave the choice of seats up to the students, and surprisingly, their choices mirror the typical audience at one of Shakespeare's original stagings. In a recent class of 33 students viewing Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*, the majority, 23, plopped in the pit; 6 sat in the gallery, and 4 opted for the balcony seats. While I've considered assigning seats, students' freedom to choose generally makes for a stronger commitment to their point of view and more authentic discussion at the end of the viewing.

"Pray you, keep your seats" (*Macbeth* 3.4.55)

Each time we view a segment of the film, students write a journal entry from the perspective of their virtual seat in the Globe Theatre. Their journals are collected at the culmination of the film. Students are graded on their ability to maintain a consistent point of view in their journals, to detail their accounts of the film, and to comment on the director's interpretation.

"You know your own degrees; sit down" (*Macbeth* 3.4.1)

After reading the first act of a play, I cue up the first act of a film adaptation. Since students are already familiar with the play's plot, they can now focus their viewing on the director's adaptation. Since film offers directors opportunities to orchestrate scenes that may be impossible on a stage (e.g., the battle scene in *Julius Caesar* or the marching on Dunsinane in Polanski's *Macbeth*), students will be

treated to pageantry and gore not found in Shakespeare's words but definitely found in his intent to appeal to all strata of society.

Here is a sampling of excerpts from students' journals after they viewed act 1 of Polanski's *Macbeth*:

From the pit:

Yeah! Bash'em with that mace! Hang the traitors. Dangle them by their necks—little feet a swingin'. Hey, that Macbeth's a hottie. But he needs to dump that chick with her power-hungry ideas. Damn king and his fancy fur cape. I'm so jealous . . .

From the gallery:

Fair is foul—brilliant paradox. But of course, every war is lost and won, Shakespeare, my boy. I'm quite fond of Banquo and his lines about planting and growing his seeds for the future. If you allow me to join in the punning, that Shakespeare has a fertile mind.

From the balcony:

I was thrilled to see the king ride valiantly in his first appearance: his cape flowing, his armor and

crown glittering. When the Thane of Cawdor was hanged, I was certain justice had been served, but then he yells, "God save the king!" before he willingly jumps to his death. Either Duncan's subjects are extremely loyal (which is as it should be) or there is ominous foreshadowing in his words.

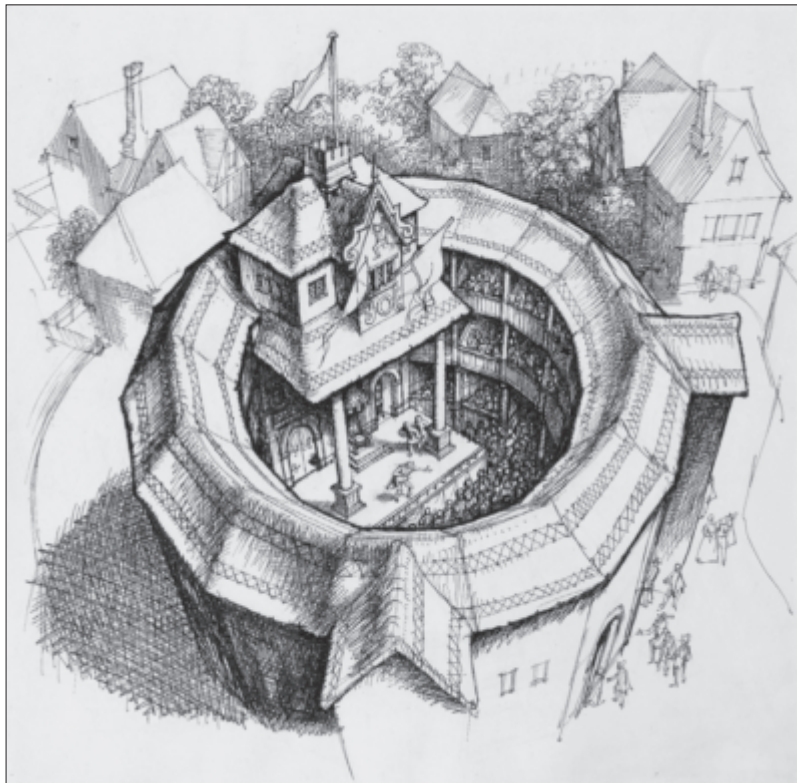
What I appreciate the most in reading the students' journals is the variety of observations from the same perspective. For instance, having shown Polanski's *Macbeth* to seniors since 1993, this was the first year, thanks to a student seated in "the gallery," that I appreciated how Polanski staged Macbeth's mad scene on the same platform where he staged the bloody bear-baiting scene, reinforcing Macbeth's desperate line, "They have tied me to a stake; I cannot fly, / But, bear-like, I must fight the course" (*Macbeth* 3.4.100–01). To be fair, it may be that for the first time the details of the scene's background were visible thanks to upgrading from a 22-inch TV to a LCD projector; however, the student's observation affirmed that when students take a virtual seat, they are practicing multiple layers of aesthetic appreciation: an appreciation for Shakespeare, an appreciation for film, and an appreciation for the artistic choices directors make.

**"Pray you, sit still"
(*Macbeth* 3.4.109)**

At first, I may interrupt the viewing of the film to announce something like, "Well, that comment just flew right over the groundlings' heads" or, "You'd have to be in the pit to appreciate that battle scene." My goal is to gently nudge students into remembering that they are viewing the film from a designated perspective.

**"May't please your
highness, sit" (*Macbeth*
3.4.40)**

Periodically, I hit the pause button to pose a discussion question to my multitiered audience. For instance, "Which seats found this



C. Walter Hodges. The Globe. Drawing, ca. 1973. Folger Shakespeare Library.

STUDENT HANDOUT

As you view a film adaptation of Shakespeare's play _____

Take a Virtual Seat . . .

in the pit

if you are a "groundling" who attends productions for their special effects. You should note scenes of violence, gore, sex, and dirty jokes.

in the gallery

if you are an educated member of the middle class who appreciates the intricacies of the plot. You should note puns, riddles, ironies, juxtapositions, and double entendres.

in the balcony seats above the stage

if you are a noble or member of royalty. You should note scenes of political intrigue, the foibles of the rich and powerful, and the royals' place in the Great Chain of Being.

Keep a journal from the perspective of your seat each time we view a segment of the film. You will be given time at the end of each viewing to write an entry in your journal. Your entries must be dated. Your journals will be graded on the following:

QUANTITY


10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Completion of all assigned entries

QUALITY

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Consistent point of view
 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Detailed references to the film
 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Commentary on director's interpretation
 / 40 **TOTAL SCORE**

scene controversial and why?" or "Which seats found this last scene entertaining? Boring?" Probably one of the most profound insights I've gleaned in my study of Shakespeare came when I asked a class of ninth graders viewing Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, "What do you think all the bawdy jokes and

puns in act 1 are doing in a play about teenage suicide?" A boy from the virtual gallery responded: "It intensifies the tragedy. The laughter softens up our belly muscles, and allows the dagger of tragedy to plunge deeper."

Yes, the class sat still for this breathtaking moment, and yes, eleven years later, I'm still citing this student's observation to my classes. The ninth-grade boy's comment embodies the worth of taking a virtual seat—not only does it force students into observing details, it also gives them permission to express themselves from a different perspective. Thus, Shakespeare, like his play *Julius Caesar*, bleeds many colors because we choose to look for the many hues—even when the film is only available in black and white. 

Works Cited

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- Romeo and Juliet*. Dir. Franco Zeffirelli. Perf. Leonard Whiting, Olivia Hussey. 1968. Paramount, 2003. DVD.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Boston: McDougal Littell, 1997. Print.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Joyce Bruett, RWT

Williamson says Shakespeare was so popular due "to his ability to appeal to a socially and educationally diverse audience" at the Globe Theatre. Williamson's students *become* that diverse audience by taking "a virtual seat" and viewing plays as members of the different social classes would have seen them. In "All's Well That Sells Well: A Creative Introduction to Shakespeare," students compare attending a performance at the Globe Theatre in Elizabethan London to attending a current professional production, such as a play on Broadway, or to viewing a movie at a local theater. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=1120

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