

# The Alabama Shakespeare Festival SchoolFest Activity Guide for



by William Shakespeare



Director  
Composer  
Scenic Designer  
Costume Designer  
Lighting Designer  
Fight Director

Geoffrey Sherman  
James Conely  
Elizabeth Novak  
Phil Monat  
Jason Armit  
Robert Wolin

Activity Guide written by Matt Renskers

Contact ASF: 1.800.241.4273, [www.asf.net](http://www.asf.net)



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# OTHELLO

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Tips for Reading Shakespeare	3
Pre-Performance Activities	4
Post-Performance Questions and Activities	5
Shakespeare Word Quest	6
More Activities: “Decoding” Shakespeare & Shakespeare’s Language	7
More Activities (cont.) Creating Characters Through Movement	8

## TIPS FOR READING SHAKESPEARE

### 1. Read the play **OUT LOUD**.

Shakespeare's plays were meant to be performed out loud, so they tend to make more sense when you hear the words.

### 2. Look up words you don't know.

Just skimming over unfamiliar words does not help you understand anything, so take the time to look things up.

### 3. Do **NOT** try to read the entire play in one sitting.

Break it into pieces (one scene at a time, for example) and make sure you understand each scene **BEFORE** you move on to the next one.

### 4. Use a play summary to **HELP** you.

Do **NOT** however, rely on play summaries. They are not always accurate, they leave out major details and they cannot be relied upon. A summary should **NEVER** be a substitute for reading the play itself.

### 5. Make a copy of the 'dramatis personae.'

Usually located at the beginning of the script, having a copy handy can help you remember who's who as you are reading. You can even write notes on the page to help keep the characters straight.

### 6. Keep a Reading Log.

Use the following outline to develop a reading log while you are reading Shakespeare's play.

This log will take some effort but in the end, you will understand Shakespeare **MUCH** more than before. Find a small notebook which you can devote to the play you are reading. You will be writing one journal entry for each scene of the play. **IMPORTANT:** Go scene by scene – make sure you understand a scene before you move on to the next.

**Step 1:** Read each scene at least once.

- i. Make a list of any words or phrases that you do not understand.
- ii. Look up words/phrases and be sure to write the definitions in your reading log. If you cannot find a definition, make a note of it so you can ask in class.
- iii. Write a **SHORT** summary of the scene.
- iv. Write down any questions you may have about the scene.
- v. Take a guess at what you think will happen next (or what you think the final 'solution' to the play's problem will be).

**Step 2:** Discuss the scene/play in class

- i. Discuss the scene/play with your classmates. If you are on your own, there are several discussion sites on the internet where you could "talk" to other people.
- ii. Ask the questions you wrote down in your reading log.

**Step 3:** Add the answers to your Reading Log

- i. Using a different colored pen, write the answers to your questions in your log.

# PRE-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITIES



**1. Read the play scene by scene.** Don't try to take on the whole play at once. Instead, try breaking it down into smaller chunks (which Shakespeare kindly provided for us in the form of Acts and Scenes). \*Have students complete a 'word quest' as they read the play (see page 6).

**2. Read a synopsis and character descriptions** (see Dr. Willis' study guide for more information). A synopsis should never take the place of reading the play itself, but should be used to assist in reading the play in its entirety.

**3. Study the sources of the play.** The primary source for OTHELLO was a short story in Giraldi Cinthio's Hecatommithi, published in 1565, entitled *The Venetian Moor*. Shakespeare retained most of the structure of Cinthio's tale, however, he took several artistic liberties in creating new characters, tangling the plot, and inventing a new ending.

**4. Discuss themes and symbols.**

A few examples are:

- \*Self /Loss of Self
- \*Proof/Judgment
- \*Reputation/Honor
- \*Love/Relationships
- \*Right/Wrong

**5. Create a Playbill.**

Have students create a modern day playbill, or cast of characters, by using the pictures of famous TV and FILM actors. Have them include a picture of each actor they choose to pair up with each character in the play. Students can share their cast of characters and design of their playbill, following up with a discussion of why they picked each particular actor.

**6. Ask questions.**

\*Why do you think Shakespeare's plays have been performed for over 400 years?

\*What lessons do you think Shakespeare wanted us to learn from this play?

\*What characters did you like in the play? Which characters did you dislike? Why?

\*If Shakespeare were in our classroom, what one question would you ask him?

\*If you had the option to re-write part of the play, what would you change and why?

\*Do you see anything in the play that would be hard to perform onstage? How could you "solve" this?

Esau Pritchett as Othello and Kaytie Morris as Desdemona in ASF's 2009 production of *Othello*



# POST-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITIES



## 1. Ask more questions.

- \*How would you characterize the difference between the way Othello and Iago talk, both in their subject matter and their style?
- \*How does Iago dishonor Cassio?
- \*Why is the handkerchief that Desdemona lost so important to Othello?
- \*What does Cassio do with the handkerchief he found?
- \*Why doesn't Emilia speak up sooner about the handkerchief?
- \*Who is Bianca and how does she compare to Desdemona and Emilia?
- \*Why doesn't Othello believe Desdemona?
- \*How innocent is Othello?

## 2. Draw conclusions from the text.

Iago says, "Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners" (Act 1, Scene 3). Draw a picture of the character gardens of Othello, Iago, Emilia, and Desdemona. Items in the garden should represent the character's ideals. What do you want to plant in yourself? Draw your garden with items representing characteristics you would like to grow in your own life.

## 3. Become the author.

Choose one detail of action from the play and change it. Imagine Rodrigo gives up on Desdemona and leaves Cyprus without telling Iago, or that Desdemona never dropped her handkerchief. How does this affect the ending of the play? (this doesn't mean that everyone is happily ever after) How would you tell the story?



Esau Pritchett as Othello and Matt D'Amico as Iago in ASF's 2009 production of *Othello*



## SHAKESPEAREAN WORD QUEST

*OTHELLO* is full of literary devices that make the play more ‘colorful’ and dramatic! As you read the play, search for each of the following literary devices. Write down your answers as well as their locations in the script (Act and Scene numbers).

1. A rhymed couplet in a scene.
2. An Elizabethan word no longer in use.
3. A metaphor or simile.
4. A clever insult.
5. A phrase we still use today.
6. A reference to each sense:
  - a. Sight:
  - b. Sound:
  - c. Smell:
  - d. Taste:
  - e. Touch:
7. A word that has a double meaning.

## DECODING SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare is not as “old fashioned” as you may think -- it just takes a moment to get used to his language, and the more you do it, the easier it gets! And when you’re done, you’ll see his beautiful language laid out for you and hopefully understand why his plays have been so popular for over 400 years!

### OTHELLO:

Work through speeches, line by line, found in the play and attempt to ‘translate’ the meaning into ‘modern’ English. A few lines from Act 3, Scene 3 have been done for you to get you started.

*Here’s an example:*

#### SHAKESPEARE WROTE:

I will deny thee nothing!  
Whereon I do beseech thee, grant me this,  
To leave me but a little to myself

#### SHAKESPEARE PARAPHRASED:

I won’t deny you anything! But in return, please, do one thing for me: leave me alone for a little while.

## SHAKESPEARE’S LANGUAGE

Many students – and adults, for that matter – find Shakespeare difficult to read and hard to understand. They accuse him of not speaking English and refuse to believe that ordinary people spoke the way his characters do. However, if you understand more about his language, it is easier to understand.

Understanding the following can be especially helpful:

## SOLILOQUIES AND ASIDES

Shakespeare’s characters often make comments to each other, or to the audience, which the other characters never hear. These asides usually comment on the action. Also, characters sometimes think out loud, alone on stage, for the benefit of the audience. Sometimes the character talks directly to the audience, sometimes not. These speeches are called soliloquies.

For example, Iago during his scheming confronts the audience to address what they just saw happen:

*And what’s he then that says I play the villain?*

*When this advice is free I give and honest,  
Probal to thinking and indeed the course  
To win the Moor again?*



Matt D’Amico as Iago in ASF’s 2009 production of *Othello*

# MORE ACTIVITIES (cont.)



## IMAGERY

In addition, Shakespeare uses imagery as he speaks with metaphors, similes, and personification. Recognizing when his characters are doing this helps in understanding the play. In this metaphor, Iago tells Othello that jealousy is monstrous:

*O! beware, my lord, of jealousy;  
It is the green-ey'd monster which doth mock  
The meat it feeds on.*

Another great example can be found in Act 1, Scene 3. In this metaphor, Iago compares current events to food. He predicts that the sweetness of Othello's life will soon turn bitter. (Coloquintida is an alternate name for colocynth, a vine that bears a tart fruit resembling a lemon.)

*The food that to him now is as luscious as  
locusts, shall be to him  
shortly as bitter as coloquintida.*

## CREATING CHARACTERS THROUGH MOVEMENT

Brainstorm about common archetypes of stock character types with your students, along with current popular figures who might fulfill these archetypes. Types frequently found in Shakespeare include:

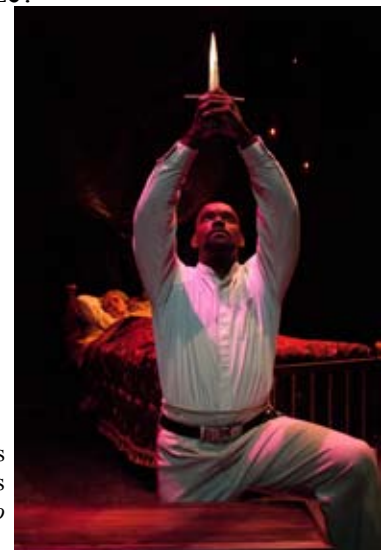
- \*The Ruler/President/King
- \*The Sweetheart
- \*The Jokester/Clown
- \*The Fallen Woman
- \*The Sage/Wise Person/Mystic
- \*The Money Maker

Next, clear a space in the room and ask students to walk around the room. Ask students to mill around the room keeping the room balanced, not clumping up in the center. Then call out situations listed below and ask them to walk like a person in these circumstances.

- Walk like a queen or a king.
- Walk like you have just been rejected by the one you love.
- Walk like you are just about to play a very fun prank.
- Walk like you have received free gifts.
- Walk like you have just been given orders by your master.
- Walk like you have just seen someone who looks just like you.
- Walk like you are going to cure some one's sickness.
- Walk like you are being imprisoned.
- Walk like you have just discovered your long lost twin.

## POST-ACTIVITY DISCUSSION

What choices might the people in these situations face? How did you use your body to communicate the situation? What parts of your body did you emphasize?



Esau Pritchett as Othello and Kaytie Morris as Desdemona in ASF's 2009 production of *Othello*

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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## WEBSITES

<http://www-tech.mit.edu/Shakespeare/>

Read/print any of Shakespeare's plays scene by scene or in its entirety.

<http://absoluteshakespeare.com/>

Absolute Shakespeare, the essential resource for William Shakespeare's plays, sonnets, poems, quotes, biography, and the legendary Globe Theatre

<http://www.folger.edu/index.cfm>

The Folger Library's internet guide to Shakespeare for Teachers and Students

<http://www.pbs.org/shakespeare/educators/index.html>

PBS's Guide to Shakespeare in the Classroom

<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/>

Shakespeare and the Internet -- easy navigation for students.

<http://www.shakespearehigh.com/classroom/index.shtml>

"Shakespeare High in the Classroom" -- easy navigation for students.

## BOOKS

A Shakespeare Glossary by CT Onions

ISBN: 978-0198125211

A short, easy-to-use glossary that can be very valuable for the Beginner.

Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary by Alexander Schmidt

Vol 1 ISBN: 978-0486227269 VOL 2 ISBN: 978-0486227276

This book provides full definitions, locations, and shades of meaning in every word in Shakespeare's plays and poems. The 2 volumes contain more than 50,000 exact quotations, each precisely located.

The Oxford English Dictionary

ISBN for Compact Edition 978-0198612582

The Age of Shakespeare by Francois Laroque

ISBN: 0-8109-2890-6

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