Dear Educators,

When Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, there was a strong anti-semitic culture in England. There were very few Jews living in London, and most of those hid their beliefs. Jews were not trusted, they were not respected as equals, and they were not typically considered innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

While many things have changed since Shakespeare's time, the prevalence of prejudice — both toward the Jewish community and toward many other racial and religious communities — has not changed enough. *The Merchant of Venice* contains a surprisingly sympathetic portrayal of Shylock for the time and place it was written. He is clearly wronged and taken advantage of, and his anger is deeply rooted in a lifetime of discrimination. This is a story of a marginalized person trying to make their way in a world that is against them, and how they are punished for it anyway. And unfortunately, this is still a powerful and timely story for today.

This show has its light and fun moments, particularly in its love story, but it also will prompt discussion of prejudice, minority communities existing in cultures that are not their own, and a justice system that is the final word in discrimination. In these difficult times, these are the conversations we most need to have with our students. Thank you for starting this conversation.

Best,
Michelle Burce
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CONTENTS

Plot Synopsis ................................................. 1
Dramatis Personae ........................................... 1
   A description of the characters in the play.
Dates and Sources ......................................... 2
   Brief information about the play, and other writings that may have influenced Shakespeare.
Belmont as a Green World .................................. 2
   Shakespeare's characters often escape the city to travel to a “green world,” such as Belmont in The Merchant of Venice.
Giving Credit Where Credit is Due ...................... 3–4
   A brief history of credit and moneylending from the Renaissance until today.
A History of Jews in Venice ............................... 5
   A look at the historical context of The Merchant of Venice, and how the Jewish community was treated in Venice.
Closer to Home .............................................. 6
   An introduction to Seattle's own history of neighborhood segregation.
Reflection and Discussion Questions .................. 7
   Students consider themes in pre-show reflection questions, and think about the production in post-show discussion questions

ACTIVITY

Who is the Villain ............................................ 6
   Students stage a debate as to whether the real villain of the play is Shylock or Antonio.
PORTIA is the wealthy heiress of Belmont, and has attracted the attention of many suitors. Among these is Bassanio, a Venetian man who is too poor to woo her. He begs his friend Antonio, a merchant in Venice, for a loan of 3,000 ducats. All of Antonio’s money is tied up in his various merchant ships, and he won’t have any until one returns. Because he wants to help his friend, he asks the Jewish moneylender Shylock for a loan.

Shylock and Antonio are not on good terms. Antonio despises Shylock for charging interest on his loans — also known as usury — and would never have anything to do with Shylock were it not for Bassanio’s need. To his surprise, Shylock offers Antonio an interest-free loan on the condition that if it is not paid on time, he gets to extract a pound of Antonio’s flesh. Antonio is confident that his ships will return in time, so he agrees to the bond.

With money in hand, Bassanio and his friend Gratiano depart for Belmont to woo Portia. When they arrive, Bassanio discovers that there is a test for Portia’s suitors. Her deceased father wrote in his will that anyone who wished to marry her must choose one of three caskets (chests) — a gold casket, a silver casket, or a lead casket. If the suitor unlocks the casket with Portia’s portrait, he may marry her.

The Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Arragon both attempt the test and fail. Bassanio chooses the correct chest, with some hinting from Portia, and she agrees to marry him immediately. Gratiano meanwhile woos Portia’s lady-in-waiting, Nerissa, and they too are married. Nerissa and Portia give their new husbands rings as a sign of their love, and make them vow to wear forever and never lose.

Shylock’s daughter Jessica arrives in Belmont, having eloped with Bassanio’s friend Lorenzo. Lorenzo is a Christian, so Jessica converts to Christianity, turning her back on her father’s values.

News arrives from Venice that Antonio’s ships have all been lost, the due date for his loan has passed, and Shylock is appealing to the Venetian courts for a pound of Antonio’s flesh. Bassanio and Gratiano rush back to Venice to offer assistance. Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as a male lawyer and his clerk, and they head to Venice as well. Bassanio offers Shylock much more than the 3,000 ducats he loaned to Antonio, but Shylock, angered by the loss of his daughter, is intent on taking revenge on the Christians.

Portia, disguised as the lawyer, makes an impassioned plea to Shylock to have mercy on Antonio. When he is unmoved, she tells Antonio to bear his breast to Shylock, and says that he can have his pound of flesh, but he is not to spill a single drop of Antonio’s blood, on pain of death. Shylock relents, admitting he has been outwitted. Portia then tells him that since he conspired to murder a Venetian citizen, he is to pay a large fine and give Antonio half his wealth, which will go to his disinherited daughter Jessica when Shylock dies. Furthermore, Shylock must convert to Christianity.

As a test to their husbands, the disguised Portia and Nerissa demand Bassanio and Gratiano’s rings as thanks for their legal services. After much persuasion, they agree and give the rings away. Portia and Nerissa hurry back to Belmont to await their husbands. When they arrive home, the women demand to see their rings, but soon reveal their disguises and give the rings back to their husbands. Word arrives that Antonio’s ships have finally returned. The play ends happily for everyone except a broken Shylock.
**DATES AND SOURCES**

*The Merchant of Venice* was written between 1596 and 1597, and first appeared in quarto form in 1600. Though it is listed as a comedy, it is a much more serious and problematic play than that designation would suggest. It is listed as a comedy because it contains three main plots that all get resolved in the end — the bond plot, the casket plot, and the ring plot — and because it has disguises, midnight escapes, and three marriages. Shakespeare's comedies also tend to tell the story of a society, in contrast to his tragedies which tend to tell the story of an individual.

One of Shakespeare's main sources for this play is the Italian tale, *Il Pecorone*, by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino. In this story, a young man Gionetto attempts to win the hand of a lady in the port of Belmont, but he must undergo a trial to do so. He tries three times before he succeeds, and must call on his god-father, the wealthy merchant Ansaldo, to provide the money for him. Ansaldo has to take out a loan to pay for Gionetto's third trip to Belmont, and in order to do so he borrows from a Jewish moneylender, promising a pound of flesh if he fails to repay the loan. Gionetto rushes to court to help Ansaldo, but the lady also goes, disguised as a lawyer. She declares that if the moneylender takes more or less than a pound of flesh, or spills any blood, his life is forfeit. The Jew tears up the bond, and the lawyer demands Gionetto's ring that his wife gave him. Gionetto and Ansaldo return to Belmont where the ring plot is revealed.

Shakespeare also may have been inspired by Antony Munday's *Zelauta*, in which two friends fall in love with two women, one of whom is the daughter of a rich moneylender and usurer. They pledge their right eyes to borrow from the usurer, and then the sum comes due, again the women disguise themselves as lawyers and come to court to argue against spilling any blood.

Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* was written about seven years before Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, and features a much less sympathetic portrayal of a Jewish main character. In it, the titular Barabas goes on a murderous streak, which is only intensified when his daughter Abigail runs off to become a Christian nun.

Neither Marlowe nor Shakespeare would have had any interaction with Jews or Judaism, as the religion and those who practiced it had been banished from England in 1290 with the Edict of Expulsion, and were not readmitted until 1655. Without any experience with real-life Jewish communities or individuals, English authors tended to be at the forefront of creating and propagating anti-Semitic stereotypes and tropes in their writing during this period. Shakespeare stood out by having one of the most sympathetic Jewish characters in Shylock, but that is only in comparison to his contemporaries.

**BELMONT AS A GREEN WORLD**

Shakespeare's characters often escape the city to travel to a “green world,” such a Belmont in *The Merchant of Venice*.

In many of Shakespeare's comedies, there is a literary concept outlined by Northrop Frye known as the “green world.” This is a place — usually a forest or a pastoral setting — where the characters in the play can go to escape their everyday lives in the city, and where conventional rules do not apply. In the green world, there is a pagan atmosphere in contrast to the city's Christian rule. There are rituals and festivals, utopian societies, and gender-bending that all happen in Shakespeare's green worlds. Often, characters escape to the green world to marry their forbidden love or flee the law that wants to constrain them.

We see examples of the green world in many of Shakespeare's comedies. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia and Lysander head to the woods where the Athenian law cannot follow, so that they may marry each other against Hermia's father's will. In *As You Like It*, Rosalind and Celia go to the Forest of Arden to meet with the banished Duke Senior, and Rosalind disguises herself as a man. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Valentine is banished to the forest, and it is only among the thieves there that the four lovers are sorted out and the page boy is revealed to be Julia disguised as a man.

Shakespeare also uses this concept of a green world in *The Merchant of Venice*, and its idyllic world of Belmont. Venice is set up to be the city — a place where rules and laws prevail, order is maintained, men are in charge, and commerce rules the land. It is this strict place where Antonio and Bassanio make their deal with Shylock, and Shylock’s daughter Jessica is kept indoors. In contrast, Belmont is a world where Portia is the most powerful person (though her dead father is present through his will), where Bassanio and Jessica travel to seek love, and where Portia transforms herself and Nerissa into men for their journey to Venice.

It is in this green world where Shakespeare resolves the action of his plays, and where things are set right before the characters return to the city. Jessica and Lorenzo, Jew and Christian, are married, and Jessica converts to Christianity. Portia and Bassanio are married, as are Nerissa and Gratiano, and at the end of the play the ring plot between the four of them is resolved in a comedic manner. These light hearted events in Belmont contrast the tense and emotional scenes in Venice — those of the contract, trial, and the downfall of Shylock.

**SEATTLE SHAKESPEARE COMPANY: EDUCATOR RESOURCE GUIDE**
A Brief History on Money Lending, Usury, and Credit and its connection to Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* and *Merchant of Venice* — By Zandi Carlson, 2017

In the Book of Ezekiel, usury is listed alongside rape, murder, and robbery (Ezekiel 18:19-13). In Dante’s *Inferno*, a 14th-century epic poem about the nine circles of hell, usurers are placed at the lowest ledge of the seventh circle of hell — lower than murderers.

The original definition of usury was simply interest on a loan, interest being money charged for borrowed money. Usury later became the practice of lending money and charging the borrower interest, especially at an exorbitant interest rate.

In the eighth century under Charlemagne, first recognized Emperor of Western Europe, usury was declared a general criminal offence. In England, during the reign of Queen Mary, English Parliament disallowed the collection of interest. In 1570, Queen Mary’s successor, Queen Elizabeth I set legal interest rates as limited to less than 10% and this law lasted about 284 years, up until 1854.

“Bounty is magical: in his eye, it needs no replenishment, it cannot be depleted, it has no limits.”
— Coppélia Kahn.

Money Lending in *Timon of Athens*

While many governments throughout history have had regulations and laws regarding usury, Ancient Greece had no special legislation in regards to it. This makes Shakespeare’s setting of *Timon of Athens* removed enough from the contemporary perceptions of usury and money lending at that time. It’s easier for an audience to see a story highlighting a current issue when it is set in a different time period, which creates a distancing effect on the material. For example, this is the same strategy implemented by Author Miller to examine the witch-hunt mentality of McCarthyism through *The Crucible*.

While Aristotle may have written extensively against usury and commerce (to him money was barren, and should only be used to buy goods, not increase wealth), the Greek language itself has a multiplying view on money. The Greek word for interest is *tokos*, which meant “offspring” or “child,” meaning that money was meant to grow. This helps put Timon’s actions into the play into perspective — to him, giving could produce abundance. Timon’s extravagant gifts act to secure his position as a dominant member of society, creating the illusion of friendship. By refusing his beneficiaries the opportunity to reciprocate his gifts he keeps them at a distance and keeps himself in a position of power.

*Timon:*

You mistake my love;
I gave it freely ever, and there’s none
Can truly say he gives, if he receives.

*Timon of Athens* I.ii.

When he learns that he is in debt, not only due to his borrowing, but the interest he’s accrued on the gifts he’s purchased, no one is willing to help him out, because his power was created from this one-sided economy, not a circular gift economy. Or as Kahn puts it, “Giving is a one-way street on which only Timon can travel.”

In Act IIi, when the servants come to Timon with their master’s bills, Apemantus calls the servants; “Poor rogues, and usurers’ men!” He taunts them with the term, “usurer.” Yet they answer that they are indeed that which he speaks of. Apemantus may represent the voice of Shakespeare’s contemporaries who were against usury.

*Timon of Athens* was written sometime between 1605 and 1608. It was in 1608 that Robert Cecil was appointed Lord Treasurer, in an attempt to resolve King James’ financial crisis. One recommendation Cecil gave: limit gift giving. James had inherited debts from Queen Elizabeth, but unlike Elizabeth, had not been frugal in his spending. The Jacobean patronage system’s spiral into financial crisis could have influenced Shakespeare in the telling of the tragedy of Timon.
Money Lending in The Merchant of Venice

Now, let’s look at Shakespeare and Shylock. As stated above, the Torah forbids charging interest on loans between members of the Jewish faith (Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25:35-37). Charging interest on loans made to foreigners, who in the context of the Iron Age theocracy of Judah were assumed to practice other religions, is permitted (Deuteronomy 23:19–20).

We already learned that under Queen Elizabeth, the strict anti-usury laws had been lifted. By the late sixteenth century, lending with interest was commonplace according to Keith Wrightson, author of English Society 1580–1680. Throughout the Renaissance age and beyond it, many were uncomfortable with the concept of usury. Antonio, a capitalist merchant (and the title character in The Merchant of Venice) is in need of financial credit for business ventures, yet he is judgmental of the moneylenders who demand interest. Antonio usually is in a position to lend to friends free of interest. But Antonio’s business ventures are failing, and when his friend Bassanio comes to him for a loan, he is forced to go to Shylock for help.

Shylock resents Antonio’s practice of lending without interest. In an aside to the audience he says;

Shylock:
He lends out money gratis and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.

Merchant of Venice I.iii

Shylock’s choice to loan Antonio money is not only tempered by Antonio’s struggling business ventures (his bad credit, if you will), but also by Antonio’s former treatment (spitting on him, calling him a dog) and accusing Shylock of usury. The contrast between the two men and their opinion on money lending practices makes them enemies. Shylock strikes a deal in order to smooth things over and be kind, as he puts it. He’ll agree to the loan, with zero interest, with the simple agreement that if Antonio cannot pay the loan in three months, Shylock gets a pound of Antonio’s flesh.

Today, credit bureaus pull your information for banks and businesses to use when analyzing how much of a risk you are, or how “creditworthy” you are. This can eventually determine what kinds of jobs you can get, where you can rent, and how much interest you will be charged on a home loan.

Charging interest on loans — such as interest on a mortgage, credit card bill, or student loan — is no longer considered a distasteful practice, but is commonplace and expected. Charging extremely high interest, such as on payday loans, is often viewed as distasteful and exploitative, but it is not illegal. Our attitude toward predatory lending may be the closest analogy to help us understand the Elizabethan attitude toward charging interest on loans at all.

Sources


Timon of Athens: Biological Finance. By Michael Flachmann From Souvenir Program, 1993


A HISTORY OF JEWS IN VENICE

A look at the historical context of *The Merchant of Venice*, and how the Jewish community was treated in Venice in comparison to the rest of Europe.

Venice was probably first settled as a refuge for people fleeing mainland Italy in the wake of Germanic and Hun invasions in the 3rd and 4th century CE. The official founding of the city of Venice was March 25, 421 CE. Over the next few centuries, Venice became a very important trade hub, dominating European access to commodities from the Middle East, Asia, and Oceania.

During the 12th and 13th centuries, antisemitism had reached a lethal fervor across much of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Terrorized by massacres or facing blanket deportation from entire kingdoms, Jewish refugees searched for new homes where they could safely exist. Many Jewish merchants and moneylenders began working in Venice in the 10th century, but did not begin to settle in the city until the 13th century.

Banned from residing in the main part of Venice, many of the Jewish newcomers settled on a nearby, separate island. In 1290, a 5% tax was imposed on all import and export transactions by Jewish merchants and moneylenders. In 1385, they were given permission to settle within Venice and soon after were allocated a piece of land to use as a cemetery. However, less than a decade later the Senate of Venice voted to deport Jews from the city in 1894, in an attempt to stunt their growing economic influence. At that point, Jewish moneylenders were permitted temporary residence in the city for two weeks at a time. Those who were not moneylenders were allowed to live in the city on the condition that they wore an identifying article of clothing — at one point a yellow badge, at another a yellow hat. Sex workers in Venice were also mandated to wear yellow, and the color was associated with severe social stigma at the time. A number of other discriminatory laws targeting Jews were passed during this time, including laws that prohibited Jews from owning real estate or building a synagogue, as well as forced participation in Christian religious services.

In 1516, the doges of Venice (its ruling council) proclaimed that Jews could live a specific area of Venice that had formerly been a copper foundry. This was the establishment of the Jewish ghetto of Venice. The Jewish community negotiated for this, and it marked a big step in the Jews being accepted in Venice (despite being ghettoized). Jews from across Europe moved to the ghetto to escape persecution in their own communities, and so the Jewish community in Venice was made up of Jews from Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and the Levant.

The ghetto acted as a place to contain the Jewish community. At night, the gates to the ghetto were closed, and it acted as a sort of prison. Jews were only allowed outside of the ghetto during the day. Nevertheless, the establishment of this community attracted Jews to Venice, and they began building their synagogues and congregations. They were allowed to work as moneylenders, at pawn shops and printing presses, trade textiles, or practice medicine. As more people arrived, the ghetto built upward to accommodate them. While most citizens of Venice were Roman Catholics, the city was famously free from religious fanaticism. The commercial basis of the city made it practical to deal with merchants from all over the world, and so the Jews — along with other merchants — were tolerated. They were both included and excluded from Venetian life.

It is on this historical background that Shakespeare tells the story of Shylock and *The Merchant of Venice*. While Shakespeare never visited Venice, his writing demonstrates familiarity with the social arrangement of Jews and Christians in the city, as created by the existence of the Jewish ghetto.

Sources
http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/venice-italy-jewish-history-tour

An aerial photo of Venice's historic Jewish ghetto today.
CLOSER TO HOME

We may think of the establishment of the Jewish ghetto in Venice as ancient history, but the US and Seattle in particular have their own history of formal segregation. African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Latinx Americans, and Jews were excluded from jobs, neighborhoods, schools, and even some restaurants, hotels, and hospitals!

Seattle has a long history of racial restrictive covenants, which bar the sale or rental of homes in certain neighborhoods to people of non-white or Jewish descent. In the 1920’s, these covenants began popping up all around Seattle, enacted in Capitol Hill, Montlake, Madrona, Queen Anne, and other neighborhoods. These were declared unenforceable in a 1948 Supreme Court case, but landlords still resisted renting and selling homes to non-white people until the 1968 Fair Housing Act, which banned all forms of housing discrimination. Racial restrictive covenants have a lingering effect on Seattle, as even today a majority of the African American residents of Seattle live south of the Ship Canal, largely in the Central District and the Rainier Valley. The Seattle Office of Civil Rights runs fair housing tests every year, looking for evidence if illegal discrimination in the rental of apartments. In 2014, 124 properties were tested and two-third failed, “showing evidence of disparate and illegal treatment of prospective renters on the basis of race, national origins, gender, or sexual orientation.” (Segregated Seattle, Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project)

ACTIVITY: WHO IS THE VILLAIN?

Overview

In this play, Antonio is the title character, the “Merchant of Venice,” and most of the other characters are on his side and try to help him out. However, in contrast to his contemporaries Shakespeare made the character of Shylock unusually sympathetic, despite being Antonio’s main antagonist. If we look at the play as a whole, both characters antagonize each other throughout, but Shylock ends up losing out in the end.

Instructions

Divide the class into two halves. One half of the class will take the side of Antonio, arguing that Shylock is the villain of the play. The other half of the class will take the side of Shylock, arguing that Antonio is the villain of the play. Give both sides about ten minutes to come up with their arguments, and then stage a debate.

Use the following questions to guide each side’s thinking:

• Do these characters keep their words? Are they honest? Do they change their arrangement without consent from the other character?
• Who has support from other people in the play? Who has support from institutions in the play? How do they wield that support / power?
• If these two characters signed the same contract today, who would be “in the wrong”?
• How much does the anti-semitism of the Elizabethan period play into the treatment of these characters?
• How do these two characters treat each other before they sign a contract? How do they treat each other after Antonio defaults on the loan? What about at the end of the play?
• Why do these characters act the way they do? Is it out of spite? Desperation? Generosity? Why does Antonio need to borrow money in the first place?

After the debate, ask students if they changed their mind during the course of the debate.
The Merchant of Venice is all about bonds and debts. What sort of bonds and debts are present in the play? Cite specific examples, both monetary and abstract.

- Antonio is in debt to Shylock, and is bonded to give him a pound of flesh if he defaults on his loan.
- All three marriages are legal bonds between characters.
- Bassanio owes a major debt of friendship to Antonio for the money in his time of need.
- Antonio owes a debt to Portia for her defense of his life.
- The rings represent a bond of marriage, but are used to pay a debt to the “lawyer.”

The Merchant of Venice is classified as a comedy. Do you agree with that? How would you classify this play?

- The play is a comedy in the Shakespearean sense. It tells the story of a society, and ends in marriages, which is all you need.
- The play is a drama. It’s not comedic, but rather addresses big issues and comes to a climax during the trial scene.
- The play is a problem play. The casket plot and the ring plot are both comedic, but the bond plot between Antonio and Shylock could almost be a tragedy. Shylock loses everything by the end of the play.
- In some ways, the play is a romance. Shakespeare’s romances typically feature strained relationships between parents and their children, and we see that in Portia’s relationship to her dead father and Jessica’s desertion of Shylock.

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- The rings represent a bond of marriage, but are used to pay a debt to the “lawyer.”

How do you define mercy? When is it appropriate and/or necessary to show mercy, and when is it not?

- Shylock does not show mercy, as he is too intent on extracting his pound of flesh from Antonio.
- Portia does not show mercy. She threatens Shylock with death, and then seizes his wealth and forces him to convert. He loses everything he holds dear.
- Portia does, in fact, show mercy. She does not recommend sentencing Shylock to death, even though she could.
- Antonio shows mercy by giving back Shylock’s wealth, on the condition that it goes to Jessica upon Shylock’s death.

How do you define justice? What do you think of when you hear the phrase, “bring someone to justice”? What about when you hear the phrase, “social justice”?

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How do you define fairness? Is it “treating everyone the same,” or is there more nuance than that?

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What do you already know about the perception and persecution of Jews during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Europe?
Mission Statement
With the plays of William Shakespeare at our core, Seattle Shakespeare Company engages our audiences, our artists and our community in the universal human experience inherent in classic drama through the vitality, immediacy and intimacy of live performance and dynamic outreach programs.

ABOUT US
Seattle Shakespeare Company is the Puget Sound region’s year-round, professional, classical theatre. The company’s growing success stems from a deep belief in the power and vibrancy of the time-tested words and ideas of Shakespeare and other classical playwrights along with a commitment to artistic excellence on stage. The results have been provocative performances that both challenge and delight audiences while fostering an appreciation for great stage works.

Our combined programs — which include indoor performances, free outdoor productions, regional tours, educator and youth programs — reach across barriers of income, geography, and education to bring classical theatre to Washington State.

EDUCATION PROGRAMS
In-School Residencies, Matinees, and Workshops

• In-School Residencies bring active, customized curriculum into schools across Washington State. Professional teaching artists plan with teachers to tailor each residency to fit the needs and objectives of the classroom. Seattle Shakespeare Company residencies inject vibrant, active exercises into lessons that unlock the text, themes, and actions of a Shakespeare play.

• Student Matinees bring over 3,000 students annually to our mainstage productions in the Seattle Center. Teachers are provided free study guides, and student groups are invited to stay after the show for a free Q&A session with the cast.

• Pre-show and post-show workshops can be booked to accompany mainstage matinees. These workshops include an introduction to the play itself, student activities, and insights into direction and design choices of our specific production.

Touring Productions

• Fresh and accessible 90-minute productions tour across Washington State each Spring, reaching more than 14,000 students and adults. These nimble productions perform as easily in school gymnasiums as professional theatre facilities. Teachers are provided free study guides and students enjoy free post-show Q&A sessions with the cast.

• Schools have the opportunity to book accompanying in-school residencies with touring productions, led by members of the touring cast and additional teaching artists.

Camps and Classes

• Our summer “Camp Bill” series in Seattle and Edmonds offers young actors a variety of camps to choose from or combine. Camps range from a One-Week Introduction to a Three-Week Production Intensive, with many options in between.

• In our Fall and Spring after-school “Short Shakes” programs, young actors develop their skills and gain hands-on performance and production experience.

• Seattle Shakespeare Company occasionally offers adult classes and workshops to our community featuring guest artists who work on our stage.

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