

# Shakespearean Slide Shows

ROSALIND M. FLYNN

The best theatre teacher I ever had used to say that the written text of a piece of dramatic literature is just a script. It does not become a play until it is performed. Performing a Shakespearean play, however, requires hundreds of hours of work—not practical as an English class activity. Even the time required to prepare just one scene is far more than most teachers can allot within a semester. As an educational drama specialist, I work with teachers and students all over the United States who are eager to incorporate drama activities into classroom learning. They have reacted enthusiastically to a condensed

method for involving students in the kind of theatrical problem-solving that transforms a script into a play. It's a simple theatrical technique called a "human slide show."

To prepare for human slide shows, students first learn how to create a tableau, a grouping of silent, motionless actors that represents an incident and presents an artistic spectacle (Mobley 149). A human slide show is a number of tableaux shown one at a time to depict the sequence of an event.

Consider these events from the beginning of Act 3, Scene 4 of *Macbeth*:

1. Lady Macbeth, Ross, Lennox, lords, and attendants sit at a banquet table. The First Murderer informs Macbeth of Banquo's death and Fleance's escape.
2. The First Murderer leaves. Lady Macbeth bids Macbeth to welcome his guests.
3. Banquo's Ghost, seen only by Macbeth, takes Macbeth's seat at the table. Macbeth is unnerved and reacts strangely. Lady Macbeth tries to cover for him and calm the guests.
4. Lady Macbeth scolds Macbeth for his fearful behavior. The Ghost leaves.
5. Macbeth regains his composure and proposes a toast to Banquo and his guests.

To move this sequence of events from the page to the stage, here are the directions I give students:

In your groups, choose actors to create five silent frozen pictures (tableaux), one for each of the moments of the scene described above. Decide who will play each character and how you will be positioned in each frozen picture. Remember to keep your audience's perspective in mind when you choose your positions. Decide whether your group wants a director. Refer to the script for useful details. No props or costumes. You have twenty minutes to plan and rehearse before presenting your human slide show to the class.

While the students plan their human slide shows, they must think like actors and directors who read plays not just to understand events, but to make artistic choices about how to stage the action so that an audience understands what happens. In a human slide show activity, students make decisions about interpretations, blocking, character motivations, and subtext just as theatre professionals do.

## Interpretations

Interpretations refer to "the discovery and determination of meaning in a literary work" (Mobley 75). Different sets of actors and directors interpret the

same scripts in a wide variety of ways, and their interpretations directly influence the artistic choices they make. No one interpretation is necessarily more correct than another.

Given the same human slide show sequence, different groups of students will make different artistic choices: *Is the First Murderer played as a thug or a cool professional?* *Is the Ghost played by an actor or is it unseen?* *Are the banquet guests dignified and proper or casual and playful?* *In what time period does the action occur?*

## Blocking

The theatrical term for the basic movements of the actors during a play is "blocking." When staging a scene, directors and actors consider the characters involved, where they will be positioned on stage, how they will appear (sitting, standing, kneeling, crouching . . . ), and when and where they will move. Some blocking is provided by the playwright in stage directions, and some is developed by actors and director through a close reading of the lines. Blocking includes entrances, exits, and crosses—stage directions meaning to move across the stage from one side to another (Mobley 16).

Planning, rehearsing, and presenting a human slide show require students to examine a portion of the script for plot (What happened? To whom? In what order?) and setting (Where did this action occur and how can we use our bodies and the classroom space and furniture to suggest this location?) and to make decisions about blocking: *On which side of the stage will Macbeth stand? Is his back to the other characters, or is he watching them as the First Murderer delivers his news? How does Lady Macbeth look and gesture when she scolds Macbeth for his fearful behavior? Where are they in relation to the other characters?*

Especially interesting for actors and directors, and therefore for students, is the challenge of how to block characters who have few or no lines in the scene. Although during a reading of the dialogue these characters may go unnoticed, their



The three witches from a student production of *Macbeth*. Photo by Gayle Krughoff for the Folger Shakespeare Library.

presence on stage in the frozen picture can contribute greatly to the overall dramatic effect and understanding of the scene: *Do any of the lords notice that Macbeth is talking with the First Murderer? How do they react when Macbeth behaves so strangely? Are they sitting, standing, or whispering to one another?*

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Especially valuable for teachers is the potential involvement of a large number of students in such scenes. Theatre professionals know that every character on stage contributes to the dynamic look of a scene. Teachers know that students who are shy or less confident in their ability to speak or read English aloud are more likely to participate successfully in an activity that requires simply their silent frozen poses within a large group. Observers of human slide shows testify to the powerful impact that the poses of even minor characters have within a frozen picture.

### Character Motivations

Since human slide shows are performed in silence, students cannot rely on language or sound to communicate meaning. Because they must show rather than tell, students need to examine the script closely and think like actors who consider character motivations—the reasons characters behave as they do. “Audiences expect sufficient reasons, plausible for the character’s personality and experiences, for each important action” (Mobley 93): *Why did Macbeth have Banquo murdered? Is he purely ambitious and self-serving? Is Lady Macbeth in love with her husband, or is it the power of the crown that she desires? Do Ross and Lennox suspect that Macbeth is anything other than honorable?*

The student actors’ decisions about character motivations will influence the choices they make about their body positions and facial expressions. Once again, careful reading of the script will provide them with this and other information they need to create the human slide show.

### Subtext

Subtext is a term that refers to “the thoughts, feelings, and reactions implied, but never stated in the dialogue of a play” (Mobley 145). Simply put—What are the characters thinking? “The subtext may be supplied by the actors, by the director, or by both as they interpret the roles of the characters. To fully understand the play, the audience must be able to infer the subtext” (Mobley 145).

Some subtext becomes apparent to audiences by the facial expressions and body positions of characters. Human slide shows provide student actors with a purpose for considering subtext. Decisions about subtext help them effectively portray characters within the scene, even when their characters are

minor ones who have no lines or major ones not currently delivering a line or performing an action: *At this banquet, does Macbeth feel he is among friends or enemies? Does Lady Macbeth immediately know that her husband’s guilt is causing him to hallucinate, or is she puzzled at first? What are the lords thinking about Macbeth’s outbursts? Are they amused? Concerned? Shocked? Suspicious?*

### Presenting the Human Slide Show

It’s helpful to print (or have students print) what happens in each frozen picture on chart paper so that the actors can refer to the chart during their presentation. To create the slide-show effect, I explain the following procedure to the students:

If I were directing this human slide show to be performed in a theatre, I could black out the house lights and all stage lights. In the total darkness, the actors would take their positions and freeze. They would remain frozen when I brought the stage lights up, and the audience would view their tableau. Then I would black out the lights again, the actors would take the positions of the second tableau, the lights would be brought up again, and so forth until the last tableau. If done well, the final effect would be that of a human slide-show.

We cannot achieve this effect in the classroom. Even if we were to turn the lights off and on, we could not create total darkness. Therefore, when I say “Blackout,” all audience members will close their eyes and keep them shut. The actors will assume their first poses. When I see that they are frozen and ready, I will say “Lights up.” The audience members will then open their eyes and view the frozen picture until I say “Blackout.” We’ll continue in this manner until the last frozen picture or “slide,” after which there will be one more blackout. The next “Lights up” is when the actors take a bow.

### Assessment

Recent exposure to assessment ideas (McTighe and Wiggins 38) prompted me to consider what evidence I would accept that students had attained the understandings and proficiencies of this human slide show task. With the help of my students, I identified the qualities of an excellent human slide show. Before they plan and perform, I now familiarize students with a list of the criteria I will use to assess their work. (See Sidebar.) My experiences confirm what McTighe and Wiggins assert—students who are aware of a task’s desired results and goals per-

form better (38). My students' understanding of assessment criteria prior to performing has markedly improved the quality of their human slide show presentations. The list of criteria may be adapted into a more formal assessment tool, or it can serve simply to clarify performance goals.

### The Production Process

Once students grasp the process, human slide shows can be assigned, planned, rehearsed, and presented within one class period. Although props and costumes may enhance some presentations, I prefer to encourage students to rely more on their own bodies and faces to create each frozen picture. Deemphasizing props and costumes promotes greater creativity and reduces preparation time both in rehearsals and presentations.

Assigning the same human slide show sequence to all groups allows students to experience a variety of interpretations of the same script. Assigning each group a different sequence exposes students to a variety of scenes from the play. Initially, the teacher may choose the scene, list the events to be depicted, and distribute the list to students. Eventually, a human slide show assignment can require students to read through a scene, choose its four (or five or six) most significant moments, list them on a chart, and then plan, rehearse, and present their work.

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The theatricality of these human slide shows engages even the more reluctant students. Those who choose at first just to be observers are drawn in by the compelling visual images their classmates create. When human slide shows are done well, the effect of closing your eyes after one frozen picture and

### Assessment Criteria for Human Slide Shows

#### The actors

- remained frozen during the presentation of each frame
- remained silent during the presentation of each frame
- performed the events in the correct order
- chose appropriate body positions
- chose appropriate facial expressions
- posed with energy
- were focused and maintained concentration
- worked together as a team
- changed positions quickly, quietly, and efficiently
- altered their poses from one frame to the next
- positioned themselves with the audience's perspective in mind
- created the appropriate mood

opening them for the next one can be amazing, delightful, informative, moving, amusing, or all of the above. (One piece of procedural advice: Before a group presents, I request that the audience members refrain from calling out any comments or laughing too raucously during the performance. Specifying in advance these standards for audience behavior has contributed to more successful performances.)

Reflection time after each human slide show presentation encourages students to praise one another's work and suggest ideas that might enhance the performance. In leading these reflection sessions, my first question to the class is always, "What was effective about the performance this group created?" Students' responses, of course, vary, but my favorite occurrence is when one audience member enthusiastically compliments an actor who rarely receives positive attention in class.

To solicit ideas for improvement, I ask the class, "If these actors were to perform their human slide show again, what suggestions do you have for them?" The discussion that follows allows us to touch upon the idea of artistic choices—one person's vision may not be shared by another, and each can be valid. Students return to the script as evidence for choices

they did or did not make and explain why. Many times, students' advice to one another is actually dramatic coaching: *I think Macbeth would look even more frightened. Lady Macbeth could be offering Lennox a drink. Maybe Banquo should look directly at Macbeth.* Often, students just encourage one another to do exactly what they did, but make it bigger—more energetic and expressive.

### Educational Performance

Dramatically speaking, a human slide show is a relatively low-risk educational activity. Students freeze in position. They are not required to speak or to memorize lines. They are not encumbered by scripts. They need to examine Shakespeare's language to understand what is happening in the scene, but the focus of their task is to *show* the sequence of the incident, not to deliver the lines of the script dramatically.

The educational rewards of human slide show activities are many. Visual and kinesthetic learners benefit from observation and active participation. Because spoken language is not emphasized, non-native English speakers can participate more easily and comprehend the action of Shakespeare's plays more completely. Human slide shows provide all students with a purpose for reading and rereading the text carefully. They do not require a written product to demonstrate students' comprehension of the material.

Human slide shows may also function as a form of performance-based assessment. To succeed, students must apply knowledge and skills to create products that reveal their understandings and abilities (McTighe and Ferrara 8). Human slide shows demonstrate comprehension via multiple interpretations, approaches, and solutions. They also require students to consider the audience for whom they are creating their performance (McTighe and Ferrara

16). They encourage a synthesis of knowledge and skills by requiring students to use good judgment, "put it all together," and present their unique interpretations (Wiggins 28). They provide stimulating challenges with meaningful purposes, and they allow the students to "own" their final products (Wiggins 26).

### The Critics' Reviews

Teenagers can be a tough crowd to please. Overwhelmingly, those who have experienced human slide shows give them rave reviews:

"Class wasn't boring and I actually learned something!"

—Student in Charles County, Maryland

"That was fun! I never knew we had so much talent!"

—Student in Jefferson Davis Parish, Louisiana

"Now I understand why Shakespeare is so popular!"

—Student in New Brunswick, New Jersey

### Works Cited

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ROSALIND M. FLYNN is an educational drama specialist with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts National Touring Workshops for Teachers. She has worked with students and teachers in thirty-three states.

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### APPENDIX

To expedite the debut of this theatrical technique in your classroom, here are some human slide show sequences from other Shakespearean plays:

*Julius Caesar* (Act 3, Scene 1):

1. Caesar and his followers enter the Capitol.
2. Metellus begs Caesar to end his brother's banishment, but Caesar refuses.
3. The conspirators prepare to stab Caesar.

4. The conspirators stab Caesar. Caesar looks at Brutus and says, "*Et tu Brute?* Then fall, Caesar!"
5. Caesar dies and the conspirators shout triumphantly to the onlookers.

*Hamlet* (Act 1, Scene 5) The Ghost's description of how he (Hamlet's father, King of Denmark) was murdered by Hamlet's uncle (Claudius):

1. Hamlet's father sleeps in an orchard one afternoon.
2. Claudius sneaks into the orchard and pours a vial of poison in King Hamlet's ear.
3. The powerful poison quickly courses through the King's blood and kills him.
4. Claudius leaves his dead brother in the orchard.

*Hamlet* (Act 5, Scene 2) The deaths at the end of the play:

1. With Laertes using a poison-tipped sword, Hamlet and Laertes begin their sword fight.
2. Hamlet declines Claudius's offer of the poisoned cup.
3. Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup. Laertes wounds Hamlet.
4. Their sword fight continues, and they end up exchanging swords.
5. Gertrude dies. Hamlet wounds Laertes.
6. Hamlet then wounds Claudius with the sword and forces him to drink from the poisoned cup. Laertes dies.
7. Hamlet convinces Horatio not to commit suicide.
8. Hamlet dies.

*The Tempest* (Act 2, Scene 1):

1. While Alonso, King of Naples, and Gonzalo, his councillor, sleep, Antonio works to persuade Sebastian to murder his sleeping brother so that Sebastian can inherit Alonso's crown.
2. While Antonio and Sebastian step aside to plan the murder, Ariel sings into Gonzalo's ear.
3. Antonio and Sebastian raise their swords above the sleeping men.
4. Gonzalo awakes and then wakes Alonso.
5. They question Antonio and Sebastian, who claim that they were protecting the King from lions. Ariel leaves to inform Prospero.

*Much Ado About Nothing*: (Act 4, Scene 1):

1. While the guests are assembled for the wedding of Hero and Claudio, Claudio refuses to accept Hero as his bride. He denounces her as an unfaithful wanton woman and gives her back to her father, Leonato.
2. Leonato wonders if it is Claudio who took Hero's virginity, but Claudio denies this. Hero protests and denies all the accusations. Don Pedro denounces Hero as a common prostitute. Don John and Don Pedro confirm Claudio's accusations of Hero's disloyalty. Beatrice and Benedick believe that Hero is innocent.
3. Hero faints from shock because even her father believes the false accusations. Beatrice fears Hero is dead. Don John claims that Hero has fainted because her misdeeds have been revealed.
4. Don John, Don Pedro, and Claudio leave the scene.

*King Lear* (Act 1, Scene 1):

1. King Lear declares that he will divide his kingdom among his three daughters—Gonerill, Regan, and Cordelia. Lear challenges each daughter to express her love for him, promising that the daughter who expresses the greatest love will receive the largest portion of his lands.
2. Gonerill wins a share by expressing limitless love.
3. Regan's inheritance is guaranteed when she declares her father's love to be her greatest joy.
4. Cordelia states only that she loves her father as a daughter should—no more nor less.
5. The enraged King Lear disowns Cordelia.

*Romeo and Juliet* (Act 3, Scene 1):

1. Romeo finds his friends Benvolio and Mercutio arguing with Tybalt.
2. Tybalt tries to pick a fight with Romeo, but Romeo refuses to quarrel.
3. Mercutio, angered because Romeo refuses to fight, challenges Tybalt.
4. When Romeo and Benvolio intervene and try to "beat down their weapons," Mercutio is fatally wounded.

5. Grief-stricken and angry over the death of his best friend, Romeo slays Tybalt.
6. Romeo flees as angry citizens gather.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream (Act 2, Scene 2):*

1. Titania's fairies sing her to sleep.
2. Oberon squeezes juice from the magic "love-in-idleness" flower on Titania's eyelids. His goal is for her to "wake when some vile thing is near."
3. Lysander and Hermia enter. They are lost and they prepare to sleep.
4. Lysander and Hermia sleep. Puck puts the flower's juice on Lysander's eyes.
5. Demetrius is chased by Helena.
6. Demetrius escapes. Helena wakes Lysander, who immediately falls in love with her.

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