

PROVIDENCE MONTHLY
PRESENTS

FROM THE STAGE TO THE CLASSROOM

THE GAMM IS BRINGING SHAKESPEARE TO PROVIDENCE STUDENTS

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— Suzie Schutt,
Education Director of The Gamm

The world has changed considerably since William Shakespeare's time on Earth, but adolescents and teenagers in modern America's fast-paced digital culture still find themselves grappling with the same types of urges, emotions, confusion and issues that Shakespeare captured in his plays and sonnets – which is precisely what makes them timeless.

American youth, raised on instant gratification, might initially balk at the idea of delving into centuries-old British writing and performance, only to find themselves weeks or months later unexpectedly enthralled by the chance to explore such rich themes in a visceral way, through the arts. One local theater is honoring the transformative power of language and performance by using a national grant to imbue the lives of local teens with a little hands-on Shakespeare immersion.

THE GRANT

Pawtucket's Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre has held a strong presence in the Providence area theater and nonprofit scenes since 1998 (with origins dating back in various iterations to 1984). For its 31st season, The Gamm has brought to life a diverse spectrum of stage oeuvres spanning from classic to modern, including *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Rant*, *Grizzly Mama* and *A Skull in Connemara*.

The final play in the lineup – Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* – has

something that the other runs do not: it will be used as part of a special teaching workshop for students at ten different high schools and middle schools in Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence and Cranston.

Education Director Susie Schutt has worked at The Gamm for five years total and in her current position for close to two. A sociology major in college, she also studied plays and directing concurrently with her schooling, and directs other plays within the Providence community as well.

“It's so important for my department to have a positive impact on our community and to enact exchanges in a really proactive way; with my sociology background, that is of major interest,” says Suzie.

The Gamm's community-driven Shakespeare workshops and classes are made possible through a \$25,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The Shakespeare in American Communities grant is a well-known 13-year-old national award given to 40 nonprofit professional theater companies in 26 states nationwide. The Gamm previously received the same grant two years ago, when the company ran *Macbeth* as part of its 2014 season. The theatre's 2016's instruction of *The Winter's Tale* will be modeled after the previous grant application, with the advantage of some experience already under its belt.

THE STUDENTS

Some might wonder, “Why Shakespeare in particular?”

“Shakespeare's work is absolutely worth studying because it gives you a chance to think about topics like your own humanity, the English language and its origins, self-expression, poetry and history,” explains Suzie, who herself studied Shakespeare in high school and college and participated in a Shakespearean summer camp in her youth. “The roles in his plays also give students the chance to explore and experience heightened emotions in a safe and interesting way. It gives them a unique opportunity to really tap into themselves.”

The content and tones of the individual plays themselves are also more important than readers may realize if they are not already well-acquainted with Shakespeare's body of work. Whereas *Macbeth* is one of the most familiar titles in the Western world and taught in schools across the country, *The Winter's Tale* is far more obscure and rarely makes it into English class curriculums. Because of this, says Suzie, “It's exciting for the students to get to have this particular work as something they've worked on going forward. We did the play last summer with The Gamm Theatre camp, and that's kind of how I fell in love with it.”

“It's such a beautiful play; it taps into a range of human emotion and



The Gamm's Suzie Schutt

experience in a profound way. You get to look at the sources of jealousy, forgiveness and other big topics that our students are also experiencing deeply and personally in their own lives. *The Winter's Tale* has forbidden love, over-protective parents and children rebelling; it has fight scenes and people going mad, and all of that intensity can really engage students in that age range,” explains Suzie. “Even though it's a 400 year-old text, it's still incredibly relevant at an emotional level, and it's exciting to watch as the students realize that and then use it as a vehicle to channel and explore their feelings through the arts.”

Most of the changes between the

2014 and 2016 programs will be administrative: the Cranston residency is new, for example, and some of the schools on the list will be different than before.

“Because the grant is extremely generous, it becomes a big puzzle,” says Suzie. “It’s all about juggling the schedule and allocating resources.” Different schools have different numbers of classrooms participating: one has six, while another might have two. The ten-week classes have already begun and will continue through June, taught by two people in The Gamm’s education department, and two freelance teaching artists have been hired to help out.

Teaching Shakespeare in schools is very different than teaching his works at the summer camp, Suzie finds. The four-week, seven-hours-a-day camps are elective and have participants working to stage and produce two plays concurrently. The school program works in partnership with the classroom teacher, which means a stronger focus on the study of the text and understanding its themes. Most students at the school are also not electing to be there; the program is a mandatory part of their English class. Many of them initially question why they have to be there at all.

“What I’ve found teaching Shakespeare in public schools,” says Suzie, “is that during the week or so leading up to their performing the play, none of them have that question anymore. They all realize why they are there and why this is important. And that’s the moment when I feel the luckiest to be doing what I do.”


THE PLAY

In addition to studying the text, having students stage the play is a major part of the program. For some of them, it is their first exposure to acting or theater

production in any form. Another key element of the in-school workshops is when students travel to The Gamm to see the same play that they are working on staged by professional actors.

“We wouldn’t be doing this project if we weren’t performing Shakespeare on our own stage,” says Suzie. “We share this incredible work of art with our patrons, and all of our students come and see it and get to interact with the actors. Students playing roles get so excited to see professional actors portraying the same parts and then ask them questions afterwards; they become really engaged.”

She notes that the timing of the professional viewing has a big impact on the class overall, and it can be tough to find the right date: “Ideally, students come see the play when they’re almost ready to perform theirs and have almost everything in place. If they see the professional one first, then they just work on copying; if they view it too late, they’ve already disconnected from the material. We’re trying to talk all of the schools into that sweet spot.”

Schools participating in 2016 are JM Walsh Arts High School, Tolman High School, Blackstone Academy Charter School, Slater Junior High School, Nathan Bishop Middle School, Classical High School, Roger Williams Junior High School, Paul Cuffee Charter School, Central Falls High School and Cranston East High School. In addition to this program and the Gamm Summer Intensive camp, the theatre has recently started partnering with local school districts and offering in-house after school programs taught by resident actors and teaching artists to elementary and middle school students, as well starting a Gamm Summer Intensive Jr. for middle school students in 2015. www.GammTheatre.org 



High school students learn the basics of theatre