

NCTE November 2007 Report: Kevin Wright

Hardcore Bardcore 2

The Chicago Shakespeare Company with Darren Tuggle and Janna Walson as presenters made a return appearance at the 2007 NCTE Convention in New York City. Both presenters work in urban schools whose students would not necessarily be considered enthusiastic readers.

As a warm-up activity, the audience was given a sentence: "We're glad you're here." The audience was instructed to shout out the sentence emphasizing the first word. Then the exercise was repeated with the emphasis on the second, then the third word. This served as a vocal warm-up, and as an exercise to show how inflection creates meaning.

Thirty-two numbered cards were distributed to thirty-two audience members as we came in. After the warm-up, we were asked to practise saying the line on the card in as many ways as possible. Darren then asked that the cards be read in numerical order. By so doing what we had was a very basic reading of the play. For a class unfamiliar with the story, this is a good ice-breaker.

Other members of the audience had been given some of the same sentences, but were asked, while the first group practised their readings, to work in pairs to prepare a freeze-frame tableau. The sentence or phrase was read by one of the pair and then they went into a physical freeze-frame tableau representing the concept. The audience was asked to comment on how successfully the tableau represented the idea and to suggest alternative positions or interpretations. This activity would be useful in helping students to assimilate the unfamiliar vocabulary of the Elizabethan era and help with comprehension of the text.

One of the final activities involved learning to read the codes and conventions of the text. Since actors did not have a great deal of time to rehearse a play, certain conventions such as repetitions and parallel structures were indications of the tone of voice to be used by the actors. Parallel structure was often an indication of a crescendo effect. Switching from a "thee" to "you" is an indication of a change in a relationship. Just think of how Hamlet addresses Gertrude as "you" when he wants to show contempt for her when he is summoned to her chamber after the "mousetrap" scene. Gertrude addresses Hamlet as "thou", but as the tension rises, he becomes "you." "Thee," or "thou," indicate closeness, while "you," can indicate the characters are even moving physically apart on the stage.

The Chicago Shakespeare Company has been able to give Shakespeare's plays a new audience, often by "coming at them sideways, instead of straight on." They help to take the fear out of trying something which can be very difficult, by taking a roundabout route to the ideas that are in the texts.

Kevin Wright