

Shakespeare Theater Companies  
Report on initial survey  
August 24, 2008  
Barry Oreck, Ph.D. Primary Investigator

---

## **Overview**

The first stage of this investigation yielded an interesting (but far from complete) picture of the state of Shakespeare education programs in schools. 84 theater companies representing all regions of the country as well as Canada, Britain and South Africa responded to the online survey. The responses provide a broad general overview of the programming professional theater companies provide in collaboration with schools. The statistical data on the types of programs, numbers of schools, students and teachers reveal the magnitude of drama-based Shakespeare programming across the country but cannot be considered a reliable statistic due to the different ways in which the companies count their activities and participants. While this is just a first step, it is perhaps the broadest investigation to date of this particular aspect of arts education programming in the U.S. and sets the stage for further research.

Amidst the variety of communities, schools, companies and programming models, a few obvious conclusions jump out from these data. First, these theater companies are highly successful at what they do as judged by the demand from schools for their services and the preponderance of repeat customers and long-term school partnerships. From small programs employing just a few actors in rural communities, to large Shakespeare-specific companies and festivals, these groups are in demand by schools and valued for their work. Second, Shakespeare programs – written into the standards and curriculum of most American high schools and many middle schools -- occupy a singular position in the field of arts education. Teachers and administrators recognize the importance of seeing a live performance as part of learning about Shakespeare. Whether as a way to interest and hook students in the subject, to teach specific content about language, time period, or characters, or to develop speaking and acting skills, the benefits of collaboration with professional theater companies is recognized and appreciated by schools. In a time of shrinking arts budgets, theater educators focusing on Shakespeare need not go to the lengths that some other arts educators do to justify their presence in schools. The value of the experience is self-evident.

Shakespeare programs are unusual in current arts education programming in their primary focus on professional performances. The trend over the past 20 years in U.S. arts education has been toward classroom instruction and artistic skill-building through short- and long-term residency models. ArtsConnection and Young Audiences, for example, two of the country's largest dedicated arts-in-education organizations have moved from programming over 90% performances and lecture demonstrations to a large preponderance of instructional residencies (over 90% in some cases) with no professional performance component. However, because schools understand that seeing a high quality, live performance is an essential part of appreciating Shakespeare's work, performance remains at the center of the experience and in most cases, instruction is designed to support it. In-depth skill building in theater arts appears to take place primarily in summer or after-school acting programs. The potential certainly exists to expand on the established relationships between schools and theater companies to offer skill-

oriented programs that address more of the theater standards, but for now, the performance programs satisfy a clearly defined need.

As a result of this relationship between professional theater companies and schools, and the broad range of Shakespeare-specific programs offered, the criteria by which the arts education programming is evaluated must be carefully and thoughtfully addressed. I do not recommend using a “best practices” or “model program” approach for the next steps of this study. Each program described here has distinctive features based on the goals of the company and the educational needs being addressed. A program that travels to 150 schools around rural Utah, for example, will have very different features and approaches than one that brings students to a professional theater in downtown Atlanta. Similarly, long-term residency models with drama students will bear little resemblance to short pre- or post- performance workshops. Both can be highly successful in reaching their goals. Common features of quality arts education programming such as highly trained artist teachers; a written, standards-based curriculum; the existence of student assessments; or formal program evaluations, may be more or less relevant depending on the type of programming offered and the nature of the relationship between the schools and the presenting theater. That does not suggest that all programming is uniformly excellent or that there is nothing to learn from particularly successful practitioners. I am simply pointing out that Shakespeare programs fill a special niche in arts and literacy education that does not fit into a single vision of arts education and they should be evaluated in that context.

I will summarize and comment on the results and suggest possible next steps:

**Some summary observations:**

- The most frequent educational activity of the participating theater companies is to bring students to performances of full length or abridged Shakespeare plays at their theaters.
- The second most frequent educational activity is performances at schools.
- Most workshops in short (1-3 sessions) or longer term (4-25) residency programs focus on preparing students to understand and appreciate the play they will attend.
- Professional development programs with classroom teachers and materials given to teachers are designed to support the performances.
- Most in-depth theater instruction takes place during summer programs.

**Some outstanding features of theater-based Shakespeare programs revealed in this survey:**

- The companies, in collaboration with school districts, state and local arts councils, and individual schools have developed an extensive network of schools throughout their areas. The number of schools served by each company (avg. = 70), the geographic reach of both urban and rural companies, and the number of events provided (avg. = 54) is huge by comparison with most arts education programming. Both companies that travel extensively and those that bring students to their theaters have established and maintained the communication and support systems to sustain such complicated partnerships. Arrangements for tickets, transportation, preparatory workshops, distribution of materials, are a major

project for any company and require significant administrative work on the part of both arts organizations and schools. The functioning of these basic, but difficult, organizational elements has to be considered a significant measure of success of the partnerships and evidence of the value placed on the programs by schools.

- Intensive, in-depth, rigorous, theater instruction is offered by many of the companies in the summer. This level of instruction can rarely be provided in schools, due to the limitations of time and money, but demonstrate the potential for extending the performance/lecture demonstration-based Shakespeare programs into the realm of full-fledged theater-based programs both during and outside of school. The companies have the experienced teaching artists, and there is a demand on the part of students and parents for intensive Shakespeare-based acting programs. Currently few schools provide such programs.
- Drama-based approaches offer teachers a range of new tools to help students understand the language and meaning of the text along with deeper knowledge of historical contexts and relationships in the plays. Actors and directors employ particular skills that are, in many cases, fundamentally different from those commonly used in literature classes. While changes in pedagogy and approach are difficult to measure, the positive response teachers reported in terms of their own professional development suggests that these programs may have an impact as significant for teachers as for students.
- The programs reach extends beyond school audiences. Many of the companies work in prisons, hospitals, community centers, colleges and a range of other institutions in their local areas and around their regions. This broad spectrum of audiences is not unique to these programs but speaks to the broad appeal of Shakespeare and the potential educational impact beyond traditional school settings.

#### **Questions and issues for further investigation:**

- Documentation of curriculum is inconsistent. While most companies report that study guides or other supporting materials accompany their programs, written curriculum documents, either in the form of lesson plans or more general frameworks, appear less prevalent. Few respondents mentioned specific instructional approaches; they may have an established methodology and internal documentation of the curriculum (concerning text, content, or performance skills, for example) but lack a formal or published version. Given the focus of the Shakespeare programs and their demonstrated value, schools may not have requested the types of documentation they require of other programs.
- Few respondents listed specific learning objectives and outcomes for students or evidence of individual student learning in their school-based programs. Many of the companies assess students in summer or after school settings but assessment and evaluation of school program outcomes appears to be general and anecdotal. It is also possible that the format and wording of the questions in the survey did not encourage in-depth discussion of these practices.
- Few programs reported working in close partnership with school English and Drama teachers. Close collaboration may be difficult given the large number of schools involved compared to the size and resources of the theater companies. Again, schools' satisfaction

with the programs offered may make more complex, time consuming collaboration seem unnecessary, but pursuing such goals might increase the educational impact of the existing programs.

**Suggested next steps:**

- Identify a small number of theater company/school partnerships to study in greater depth. Despite my previously stated opinion that a model program approach would be problematic (due to the wide range of educational contexts and goals), outstanding examples of common practices would be of great interest and use to others in the field. 4-8 groups representing a diversity of geographic areas, sizes and programmatic approaches could be selected for study in order to give as broad picture as possible of theater-based Shakespeare instruction in partnership with schools. The most effective practices highlighted through this investigation could offer a roadmap for companies seeking to expand their programming, as well as provide a foundation for comparing common methods, instructional approaches, evaluation and assessment processes, organizational strategies, and partnership models.
- Gather a small number of Shakespeare theater education leaders for a symposium to define a research agenda for Shakespeare education. Using the survey data collected so far, knowledge of other past and current studies, and the needs of the field, this group would seek to identify core questions for further research and look for potential relationships among companies for larger scale investigations. Participation of companies from other countries at this event, if feasible, could be highly beneficial, providing a wealth of new perspectives and approaches.
- Collect and analyze data from schools on the impact of theater-based Shakespeare programs. This research would be quasi-experimental at best, using data from a voluntary sample, but could help identify some benefits of the theater experience as seen through the eyes of schools, teachers and students, as opposed to the theater companies. Examples of student projects, essays, original plays, along with test scores, where available, could set the stage for further research by identifying specific areas of learning that are deepened through the theater experiences.
- Survey existing evaluation reports to find out how theater companies assess and report the results of their programs. It is hard to know how easy and useful this approach will be. Some companies may not be willing to share internal or external evaluation reports; the quality and depth of such reports vary widely; and the analysis could be extremely time-consuming. The results, moreover, may tell us more about the state of evaluation practices in small non-profits than offer insights about the impact of programs on student or teacher learning or other educational outcomes.