ROMEO AND JULIET: CONTEXTS KS3

In this lesson, students will be introduced to the world that Shakespeare lived and wrote in. This will help them to build an informed overview of the social and historical contexts important to the dramatic world.

This is a lesson that we have taken from our KS3 Romeo and Juliet Scheme of Work, comprised of 20 lessons split into: Text in Performance, Characters, Language, Themes and Context.

We have adapted this lesson to make it suitable for use in a distance learning context. To access the full Scheme of Work for classroom-based learning, click here.

DISTANCE LEARNING ACTIVITIES: CONTEXT

Key Questions for Students
Can I establish how much I know about London in Shakespeare’s time and what I would like to find out?

Can I apply what I have learned in a creative task and ‘step into the shoes’ of someone visiting the theatre in Shakespeare’s time?

Key words: atmosphere, empathy, glossary, questions, research, sources, topics
PROLOGUE

Through these activities students will travel back in time to the 1590s, to one of the very first productions of Romeo and Juliet. London was by far the biggest town in England and an attractive place to young men like William Shakespeare, who arrived there to make his fortune some time between 1592 and 1594. Ask students to create a mind map, thought shower or spider diagram on everything that they already know about London at this time.

ENTER THE PLAYERS

1. Shakespeare’s London

Students research information about London life in Shakespeare’s time, focusing on a particular topic assigned to them. You may want to virtually group students into teams. The topics are: entertainment; crime and punishment; transport; shops and trades; clothing; buildings; poverty; hygiene; risks and dangers.

Students may find the following a useful starting point:
shakespearesglobe.com/discover/shakespeares-world/

They also have the text ‘Shakespeare’s London’ by Jim Bradbury in the Student Booklet.

2. Theatre Glossary

Students are going to compile their own glossary about theatres in Shakespeare’s time, the template for which can be found in the Student Booklet Ask students to predict what they think each of the words below means in the context of Shakespeare’s Globe.

attic, cabbage, discovery space, frons scenae, gentlemen’s boxes, groundlings, heavens, hell, iambic pentameter, jig, lord chamberlain’s men, in the round, lords’ rooms, musicians’ gallery, pillars, thrust stage, ring house, traps, vomitorium, yard

Ask students to make notes on their predictions, including any words that have a specific meaning in this context, but which have a different or more general meaning outside this context.

3. Publicising the Play

Students should imagine that they are trying to sell tickets for Romeo and Juliet to passers-by on a rainy afternoon in the 1590s. How can they encourage people to come inside the theatre to see Romeo and Juliet? Students should devise publicity slogans and and try these out on members of their household! Once they have some feedback on the most effective one, they should create a ‘handbill’ (a promotional flyer given out by hand) to advertise the show. They should consider what an Elizabethan audience member might be looking for, or might be drawn in by, when designing this. For example: How much of the plot should they give away? How much might an Elizabethan audience member already know about the plot?
EXUENT – Closing questions for students
Ask students to write a response to each of these questions, which they could email to you, or note at the back of their Student Booklet.
What would the atmosphere have been like on Bankside in this period?
What do I think drew people to the theatre?
What do I think were the challenges involved in putting on a play?

Suggested plenary activity – Students apply what they have learned to an empathy task in which they wonder about what it would be like to be an actor, a ticket-seller and a playwright just before the show begins.
Students select one of these roles, and capture their thoughts and feelings, in any of the following media: vlog, diary entry, collage, blog, drawing, etc.

ASIDE – Further resource
The cloze activity in the Student Booklet will help students build a picture of what a visit to the theatre in Shakespeare’s time would have been like.

CHALLENGE TASK
The above activities can be used to prepare students for an imaginative writing task on ‘a trip to the theatre’. In the Student Booklet, there is a planning sheet that students can use to help them write an account of visiting the theatre in Shakespeare’s time to watch a production of Romeo and Juliet. They should write from the point of view of an audience member they have imagined, using their research from the activities above to inform their choices.

We have added the relevant pages from the Student Booklet below for ease.
TEXT IN PERFORMANCE

Dramatis Personae.

**CAPULETS**

**JULIET** – a thirteen-year-old girl from Verona, only child of the rich Capulet
**CAPULET** – her father
**CAPULET’S WIFE** – her mother
**COUSIN CAPULET** – a relative of her father’s
**NURSE** – Juliet’s wet nurse
**PETER** – Nurse’s man
**TYBAL** – Juliet’s cousin
**TYBAL’S PAGE**
**PETRUCHIO** – a follower of Tybalt
**SAMSON** – a Capulet retainer
**GREGORY** – another Capulet retainer
**SERVINGMEN** – in the Capulet household

**THE PRINCE’S KINDRED**

**PRINCE ESCALUS** - governor of Verona
**MERCUTIO** – his kinsman, and friend of Romeo’s
**COUNTY PARIS** – another kinsman, suitor to Juliet
**PARIS’ PAGE**
**MERCUTIO’S PAGE**

**OTHERS**

**CHORUS**
**CITIZENS** – of Verona
**FRIAR LAURENCE** – a Franciscan
**FRIAR JOHN** – another Franciscan
**APOTHECARY** – of Mantua
**THREE WATCHMEN**
**THREE MUSICIANS** – Simon Catling, Hugh Rebeck, and James Soundpost
**Attendants, Masquers, Torchbearers, Guests**
**and Gentlewomen**

**MONTAGUES**

**ROMEO** – sole son and heir of the Montague family
**MONTAGUE** – Romeo’s father
**MONTAGUE’S WIFE** – Romeo’s mother
**BENVOLIO** – Romeo’s cousin
**BALTHASAR** – Romeo’s man
**ABRAHAM** – a Montague retainer
**SERVINGMEN** – in the Montague household
Jim Bradbury, *Shakespeare and his Theatre* (Longman, 1975):

London was still a walled city with its medieval gates: Bishopsgate, Aldgate, Cripplegate and so on. There were so many newcomers that London was growing outside its walls, to the west around Westminster, over the river on the south bank, and along the main roads that came into the city. But there were still fields in many places that are now built over, such as Moorfields and Chelsea. You could still go duckshooting... to Islington ponds. Hackney was a village that sent turnips to the city.

The River Thames was as important to London then as it is now. Ships came and went from all over the world, to ports on the continent, to the Mediterranean, sometimes to the New World of America, or perhaps just up and down the Thames, or round the English coast. Water transport often seemed more reliable than the badly made roads. London Bridge was still the only bridge over the river into London.

People often crossed by ferry. The watermen got very annoyed when the authorities closed the theatres on the south bank, because they lost all the customers they usually took across to see the plays. London Bridge was the old bridge you have probably seen in pictures with houses and shops actually on the bridge itself, with a covered way and just a narrow road. It had twenty arches between the large piers or ‘starlings’. They caused the water to flow through so fast that it made dangerous currents. On the Gatehouse tower of the bridge the heads of traitors were stuck on poles as a warning. In 1592 a foreign visitor counted thirty-four heads on show.
## Glossary

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Cloze Exercise:
By 1600 London theatres could take up to ____1____ people for the most popular plays. With several theatres offering plays most afternoons, this meant between ____2____ and 20,000 people a week going to London theatres. With such large audiences, plays only had short runs and then had to be replaced. Between 1560 and 1640 about 3,000 new plays were written. To attract the crowds, these plays often re-told famous stories from the past, and they used violence, music and humour to keep people’s attention. This was vital because, if audiences didn’t like a play, they made their feelings known. In 1629, a visiting French company were hissed and ____3____ from the stage. This was because the company used ____4____ to play the female roles, something which outraged the audience.

In open air theatres the cheapest price was only 1 penny which bought you a place amongst the ____5____ standing in the ‘yard’ around the stage. (There were 240 pennies in £1.) For another penny, you could have a bench seat in the lower galleries which surrounded the yard. Or for a penny or so more, you could sit more comfortably on a cushion. The most expensive seats would have been in the ____6____.

Admission to the indoor theatres started at 6 pence.

The groundlings were very close to the action on stage. They could buy food and drink during the performance – ____7____ (apples), oranges, nuts, gingerbread and ale. But there were no ____8____ and the floor they stood on was probably just sand, ash or covered in ____9____.

In Shakespeare’s day, as people came into the theatre they had to put their money in a ____10____. So the place where audiences pay became known as the box office.

Shakespeare’s World:
Will Kemp was one of the star attractions of the Chamberlain’s Men, the company Shakespeare was part of although the part he played – Peter, the Capulets’ servant – does not have many lines in the script. But clowns often said more than the author wrote, improvising anew every performance. Will Kemp would also have dominated the jig that ended every play, a feature that was extremely popular with audiences.
Label the different parts of the Globe Theatre in the picture below.
A Trip to the Theatre.

Planning Sheet:

On the next page you will find a Planning Sheet. Use this to plan and write an account of visiting the theatre in Shakespeare’s time to watch a production of Romeo and Juliet. Write from the point of view of an audience member you have imagined. What kind of person are they? How much money can they afford to spend on a seat? Where will they sit?

In your account you should aim to:

• describe the atmosphere at the theatre in Elizabethan times
• include textual details about Romeo and Juliet that
• demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of the play
• describe your reactions to the play from the perspective of your ‘character’

Here are some tips and suggestions to bear in mind.

Context:

• Remember you will be writing about going to see Romeo and Juliet in around 1595.
• Queen Elizabeth is the reigning monarch.
• We believe that Romeo and Juliet was a very popular play from its earliest performances.
• The Globe Theatre didn’t yet exist but early performances were probably staged at the Theatre and the Curtain in Shoreditch.
• Richard Burbage may have been the first actor to play Romeo.
• Juliet would have been played by a boy / young man, as would all female parts. The first actor to play Juliet might well have been the boy Robert Goffe.
• The part of Peter would have been played by Will Kemp, a celebrity actor in Elizabethan times known for his clowning and dancing

Suggested structure:

• arrival, atmosphere
• description of performance including textual details
• what your ‘character’ enjoyed most
A Trip to the Theatre.

Planning Sheet

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