Today’s Goal: To build a connection between the ideas and themes of the play and visual imagery.

Introduction:

Arguably, best way to study the play is to do the play. In our Shakespeare camps, residencies, and after-school programs, this is usually the tactic we use. You've heard from other practitioners the best ways to approach the language, characters, and plots. In this session, we’ll look at ways to approach the play visually, from the perspective of a director of Theatre for Young Audiences.

• I find directing young actors works best when you impose restrictions. Unlimited budgets bring their own problems (just ask Julie Taymor). Impose some restrictions and creativity will explode. Ideas: We only have 5 actors. We only get to use 4 chairs and a curtain. We will wear black shirts and pants and have one single costume piece to define each character.

• Beware that dreaded idea, concept. There seems to be an idea in the modern Shakespeare theatre that the plays are boring and we have to sex em up. My mantra: Do less. Get out of the way. Tell the story. You do not need to do the “Harry Potter Tempest” or the “Wild West Macbeth.” There’s enough to work when you just start with the play.

• This doesn't mean you have to use Elizabethan costuming. This means you should start with the words and the students' response to the words. This is not your master’s thesis, it is their show and it should come from them. Say yes. You'll be surprised what happens. Use all the brains in the room.

A. Word Pool (adapted from Susan G. Wooldridge’s “Poemcrazy”)

Materials: White paper, pens, crayons. A white board and pens if you have one.

Objective: To create a unified design for the backdrop.

Focus: On using the ideas and creativity of the entire class to come up with a look for the backdrop (to be created next week.)

Description:

Step 1 (15 minutes)

Ask the students “What do you think (Prospero’s island, the witches’ cave, Dunsinane, etc.) LOOKS like?” or, if you’ve already done a synopsis game, “When you think about the story of the play, what words come to mind?” Write some key words up on the white board (dark and spooky, tropical, green plants, grey stone, smoky, colorful). Create a “word pool” on the board of these different ideas by writing them at random, not in careful rows, so that they create a visual image as well as a verbal one. When you’ve collected as many ideas as possible, ask the students which are their favorite pairs or threesomes and circle them. With word pools, words may bump up against each other in interesting ways – you may find that you want to circle “murder forest” or “tropical dream.” See if you can come up with one image that everyone likes and agrees with.

TEACHING NOTE: You may not be able to get younger students to think beyond the limits of the literal. This is fine – if they spend the time figuring out what color the witches’ cave is and which magical items are inside it, that helps just as much.
Step 2 (15 minutes)

Based on the word pool, have each student draw a backdrop idea on a piece of white paper. Alternatively, you can pair them up into teams to design backdrops, or have one student draw on the board while others give him or her suggestions.

Step 3 (5 minutes)

Share your designs, if you haven’t been working as a group. See if you can come up with one design that everyone likes, or perhaps combine two or three of them, using elements from each. Save the drawings, because they will be the templates for your backdrop next week. If you’ve been designing on the white board, have someone transfer the design to paper.

B. The World of the Play

Materials: Scripts, cardboard trays or plates, bag of art supplies marked “World of the Play” (including word imagery slips, magazines, postcards, colored paper, fabric scraps, other bits and pieces), glue, pens, crayons, scissors, tape.

Objective: To use ideas and images from the play to create a sculpture of “the world of the play.”

Focus: On discovering the central images that you will use in creating sets, costumes and props for the play. On creating an ensemble that understands and invests in the play as a whole.

Description:

Step 1 (5 minutes)

Before the class, set up supplies on one table or tarp, and slips of paper provided, with visual images from the play, on the other. Pass out the cardboard bases. Explain that they are going to create sculptures based on lines from the play, and cardboard is the base of their sculpture. Students then pick a line of text from the word slips at the center of the table and glue that line onto the center of their base. They’ll use the other supplies to find pictures, colors, objects, etc. that embody that line, and build a three-dimensional sculpture of the line. Give examples: “We are such stuff as dreams are made on” might inspire images of clouds, sleeping people, beds, fairydust… Encourage them to let their imaginations run wild.

**TEACHING NOTE:** This exercise can be done as individuals or in pairs if you prefer.

Step 2 (20 minutes)

Give students plenty of time to create their sculptures. As they work, make sure everyone has the glue and scissors they need, and encourage fair sharing. Check in with each student on his or her progress. Give them warnings when their time is nearly up.

Step 3 (15 minutes)

Line up the collages on a table in order of Act and Scene, as indicated on the slip of paper. Take a look at all the sculptures together – a visual representation of the world of the play. Give everyone a chance to briefly share their sculpture and comment on what they notice about the sculptures. Make notes about any ideas and images that come up.