

## Theatre company offers online teaching tools for Shakespeare

Michael Oliveira, *The Canadian Press*

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TORONTO — About 10 years ago, actor Michael Kelly came up with an idea for a cool Shakespearean teaching tool. What if he could share online videos of actors and drama teachers performing the Bard's works as a way to inspire budding thespians?

Technologically, the concept was a little ahead of its time but has finally been realized with Thursday's launch of the Shakespeare in Action Virtual Lab.

The website, which is free for students and teachers, includes lesson plans, videos of tutorials and rehearsal techniques, and a karaoke feature so students have a virtual partner to practice lines from "Hamlet," "Macbeth" or "Romeo and Juliet."

Kelly, a Toronto-based actor who has taught master classes for the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, says many teachers often find themselves out of their element when teaching Shakespeare, or helping to organize a drama production.

"They're obviously sometimes starved for resources and I think, in particular with Shakespeare, they're kind of left on their own," said Kelly, who founded the non-profit Shakespeare in Action in 1988 with a goal of exposing young audiences to Shakespearean works.

"If you're a teacher and you come out of university, no one teaches you how to teach Shakespeare, maybe your major was English but so what? That doesn't mean you really know how to teach Shakespeare well and so you're sort of thrust into the classroom."

Although the website mostly focuses on teaching drama, there are resources for English teachers as well, including an exercise on writing a Shakespearean-style dialogue. Alexis Hyndman, a teacher with the Niagara District School Board, said she can't wait to use the website in her classes.

"There's a whole element of making up sentences using Shakespearean language to talk about PlayStation, or the movies, or pizza, or something like that, where kids can actually relate to it, and I think it just takes a lot of the fear out of the language," Hyndman said.

"And as a result, I think kids are really going to find wonderful things that are in the story. Shakespeare is something that's so valuable and there are so many wonderful lessons in his stories that are so relatable. His stories really are timeless ... and I think this program makes it much more accessible to relate Shakespeare to things."

Kelly hopes English teachers who previously wouldn't have considered drama as a part of their lesson plans will give it a try.

"When they're teaching, of course, they're often teaching it as a piece of literature and we as actors don't really see it as that -- it's dramatic text," he said.

"So we're kind of trying to get teachers to understand, 'OK, we're not going to change your style about teaching necessarily, but what we'd like to do is give you a way of making your lessons more active for your students, which will be more engaging to them and ultimately, there'll be a big payoff at the end.'"

Kelly sees the current version of the site as a first step of a much richer experience and a small taste of what technology can add to the classroom.

"We see this as the future," Kelly said. "You can interact, you can use all these different multimedia devices in order to communicate and create what you want to do."