

Biting the Bard
Episode # 86
“Gratuitous Sex and Violence” (Shakespeare)

Add a new dimension to your study of Shakespeare's work and times with the *History Bites* episode #86 “Gratuitous Sex and Violence”. After students have seen the show, have them analyze the style and substance of the episode, using the Teaching Strategies provided. Extend the study by using the on-line **scripts** of the show to deepen students understanding of how the show is put together, and enable them to write their own scripts.

Episode Description:

“Merriment Tonight” goes to the Globe theatre to interview hot Elizabethan playwright William Shakespeare as he rehearses his new play, Hamlet. He talks candidly about how he puts his plays together to get “bums in seats”. Actors, audience members, “groupies”...even a New England Puritan have their say on the appeal of the Bard. Channel surfs include a bit on buffoons by a sympathetic Andy Rooney, a round of The Weakest Link using famous quotes from Shakespeare, Greta von Susturn on The Troubles in Ireland, Fashion TV on the styles of the times, and an NBC news item dealing with a common medical problem, depression.

ANALYZING THE SHOW

1. **Elizabethan Genres**

Before viewing, tell students to note the many TV genres that are sampled in the episode. After viewing, ask:

- How do the creators code the genres so that the viewing audience can recognize them?
- Why is it important that viewers be able to identify the parodied programs quickly?
- What would happen to the humour if viewers could NOT recognize the programs quickly? Why?
- How do the creators change the programs to make them reflect the people and conditions of Elizabethan England?

2. **Elizabethan Entertainment**

Have students watch the episode to note the information it presents about the plays, the theatre, the Elizabethan environment and the playwright. Ask students to formulate questions that arise from viewing, such as:

- It seems as though there were many violent forms of entertainment available to Londoners. How many were there? How often were they presented? How many people attended?
- Were the entertainments more violent or more frequently attended than some of the violent entertainment available to 21st century audiences?

3. **Entertainment Then and Now**

After viewing the episode, have students list the many forms of entertainment in Elizabethan England described in it. Then have students list the 21st century equivalents. Ask students:

- What are the parallels between entertainment industries in 16th century England and 21st century North America? Investigate to discover how accurate the parallels are
- What is a form of 21st century entertainment that did NOT exist in Elizabethan England? (Entertainment about entertainment - Merriment Tonight).
- How does making the entertainment industry the CONTENT of the show change society's concept of entertainment?

4. **The Playwright's the Thing – William Shakespeare**

After viewing the film, discuss the following questions about Shakespeare the playwright:

- Why is it significant that Shakespeare never published his plays? Would that have happened today? Why or why not?
- Research some current playwrights and impresarios. Do they behave similarly to the actor who is representing Shakespeare?
- We get to know the Shakespeare as a showman in this episode. What do you think he would say if he learned about the ways that his plays have been changed for 21st century audiences? Why?

5. **Shakespeare in Performance**

Shakespeare's plays were performed at the turn of the 17th century. They have been performed ever since, and are now presented on stage, television, radio and movies. Have students consider the following questions:

- How have performances of Shakespeare's plays changed over the years? How are the stage presentations different from the originals? Have producers ever re-written scenes or changed plots? How? Why?
- What aspects of the plays change when they are adapted for the screen? for radio or CDs?
- Almost all of the current versions of the plays have been shortened. Why might that be?

ANALYZING THE SCRIPTS

Provide one copy of both the shooting and editing **scripts** of Episode #85, "Gratuitous Sex and Violence" student groups. Alternatively, if computers are available, have students access the **scripts**. Use the following strategies to help students understand the scripts and write their own.

- **Shooting and Editing scripts – what's the difference?**

A shooting script guides the crew while they are recording the actors. The editing script guides the editor in sequencing the scenes, sounds and titles into the finished show.

The sequences of scenes are very different in the two scripts.

- Which script do you think was written first? Why?
- How does the sequence of scenes in the shooting script increase the efficiency of the cast and crew when they record the show?
- How does the sequence of scenes in the edit script increase the interest and entertainment value for the viewer? Identify specific examples from each script to support your answers.

- **Dialogue distinctions**

The characters' dialogue has been written to parody the speech of current entertainers. For example, the dialogue for Shakespeare has been written to sound like the speech patterns of Quentin Tarantino, a hyper-kinetic director of violent movies. Examine some of Shakespeare's speech in the script and identify those parts that sound like Tarantino.

- How are word choice and sentence structure used to create dialogue sounding like Tarantino?
- How does the actor use body language and tone of voice to enhance the Tarantino parody?

- **Music and Graphics**

In watching History Bites, the combination of the music, acting, and graphics seems natural and almost impossible to notice. Each element, however, has to be indicated in the script. Examine two or three pages of the script to identify places where music and graphics have been indicated.

- How does the script use capitals, etc. to code, or indicate the different elements, so that the director and editor can note them easily?
- What important functions do these elements serve in the program?
- What entertainment value do they add?

- **Show “Style”**

History Bites borrows language styles and conventions from many different TV shows. Choose one scene that is based on a show that you recognize. Examine the characters' language in the script. Identify word choice, sentence structure, tone and voice elements that have been based upon the language used in the original shows.

- How well do the scenes use language to mimic the original shows?

Watch the scene on video and identify ways that the actors have embellished the language with their costumes, gestures and voice.

- **Write your own**

Select a TV show that History Bites has NOT mimicked in this episode. Choose some information about Shakespeare or about one of his plays, and create a scene in the style of History Bites that could be used to deliver the information. Be certain to include dialogue, music and graphics cues in your script, coding the cues in the same way as the original script. Be prepared to explain how your script a) successfully uses the History Bites formula and b) delivers useful information in an entertaining way. You might produce your script on video.