The Belgrade Theatre and Riding Lights Theatre Company present

BEN JONSON’S

The Alchemist

“IT’S DAYLIGHT CROOKERY”

A TALE OF DOUBLE DEALING, VANITY AND LUDICROUS DISGUISES.

Directed by
Paul Burbridge

Designed by
Sean Cavanagh

Sat 1 – Sat 22 February 2014

Age recommendation: 14+

Education Pack
Pre-Show Activities

There are two ability streams in the lesson plans and activities in the next three pages of this pack. Broadly speaking the activities fit into either the GCSE or the A-Level strand. Teachers may feel, however, that a combination of the two might better fit the various needs and abilities of their students.

Word-Play
A five minute starter: In pairs. Ask the students to think about the title of the play. What do they think it is about? If con-men were ‘Alchemists’ what might they ‘transmute’ instead of lead into gold? How might this production want to transform an audiences’ thinking about contemporary society?

Victims & Vices
Explain that the play follows three dishonest characters (Subtle, Face and Doll Common) who exploit the greed and self-interest of various people in their city. There is a saying that ‘you cannot cheat an honest man’ and all their victims are hardly sympathetic.

1. Dapper (a lawyer) believes a ‘fairy’ can be summoned to help him win at gambling.
2. Drurger (a shop-keeper) believes that by writing certain words on his trading ships and by burying a magnet under his shop, that his business will attract customers.
3. Mammon (a rich nobleman) wants the Philosopher’s Stone which is reputed to turn lead into gold and even make the old young again.
4. Ananias & Tribulation (two strict and pious religious people) seem overly obsessed with money and want their goods turned into gold.
5. Kestrel (who has inherited a fortune) wants to get even more money and social influence by asking ‘The Alchemist’ to ensure his sister marries wealth and power through a match-making scheme.

Choose one of the five victims and create comic scenes of how these scenes would occur in our society. Could an interior designer ensure a shop succeeds? Can a dating guru make sure someone finds love and happiness? Make some satirical scenes for our times...

Visual & Verbal Comedy
Spend a session exploring Act 3.5. In this scene Dapper finally gets to meet the ‘Queen of Fairy’ who will help him win at gambling. The con-men are not content to swindle Dapper but also persuade the lawyer to go through some humiliating rituals. In working on this scene the students should clearly see Jonson’s theatrical skill in creating both verbal and visual comedy. Come to the session armed with an array of strange props, instruments and costume to add to the comic carnage. An excellent scene for a formal assessment.

Servant, Cheater, Punk...
The three protagonists of the play are the servant, Subtle, who is supposed to be looking after his master’s house whilst he is out of town, the house-keeper, Face, and a prostitute, Doll Common.

Despite being in league with each other they are also often ready to stab each other in the back and there is a good deal of comic tension between them. Work through Act 1.1 and list the different aspects of each of the three characters. Who has the highest status? For whom do you have most sympathy? What are the opportunities for an actor in each of these three great comic roles?

Homework/Research
The play was written in 1610 near the end of Shakespeare’s career. Find out why the elements below were important to Jonson and how they are incorporated into the play and its original production.

1. The Plague
2. The Puritans
3. Blackfriars
4. Aristotelean Unities

“Sheb, squire, impostor, many persons more,
Whose manners, now called humours, feed the stage...”
Prologue of The Alchemist
This workshop plan is designed to help young people both explore and perform the serious business of farce. It can be suitably run in advance of seeing *The Alchemist* or afterwards. The students should be encouraged not only to question how farce can be played effectively but also why Jonson might choose to use this dramatic structure and its tropes within *The Alchemist*. The length of the workshop is best suited for a double lesson or split over two sessions.

**Introducing Farce**

A five minute starter: Chuck Jones said that ‘Comedy is unusual people in real situations; farce is real people in unusual situations’ Can the students explain what he meant by this? Explain that the students will be exploring farce in this workshop.

**‘Out of Bed’ Farce**

*Solo-work:* Each student must mime out, in as a detailed way as is possible, their actions from the moment they got up that morning to the moment they left the house. They must refine this until they have a set sequence. Then, in pairs, with one actor showing their sequence and the other actor providing exaggerated sound-effects for each moment.

Ask each actor to exaggerate their gestures and action in correspondence with the live sound effects of the other actor.

Explain there is a time pressure and the student is late. Try and create a sequence where the main actor is getting increasingly stressed by everything they have to do without becoming late.

Share the best pieces and discuss. How does time pressure help the comedy?

**Folly & Farce**

Mark Twain said ‘Well, there are times when one would like to hang the whole human race and finish the farce’. Can the students explain what he meant by this? Compare this with a line from the prologue ‘They are so natural follies, but so shown, as even the doers may see, and yet not own.’

What do they think the playwright is trying to use farce to achieve? Is there a serious purpose behind the ‘funny business’?

**Dangerous Double Date**

*Groups of four:* Person A has set up a date with two people at the same time, in the same restaurant. They hope to hop between the tables spending time with both dates without them finding out. The waiter catches on to the scheme and begins to blackmail Person A as the evening progresses.

Derive a mini play based on the scenario above with each character interaction becoming a ‘scene’ in and of itself. These must last at least two minutes.

Each time Person A leaves one of the dates they must find an excuse to do so. These must become increasingly absurd and ridiculous. At the same time, the waiter must become increasingly demanding as to what they require in order to keep quiet.

Jonson writes *The Alchemist* ensuring that the later scenes are much shorter than the earlier scenes increasing the pace of the play. Progress the ‘scenes’ from 2 minutes, to 1 minute, to 30 seconds, to 10 seconds to 5 seconds and see what this does to the comic energy of your devised work.

What happens when you make the later interactions increasingly short? Add the sense of pressure from the ‘Out of Bed’ Farce exercise to Person A’s performance.

**Plenary**

What ‘follies’ are being explored in the restaurant scenario? How does comedy highlight them? What other comedies have the students seen which expose personal flaws or aspects of our own society?

“The very house, sir, would run mad!”

Fisa. Act 4.1. The Alchemist
Post-Show Activities

Comic Potential
Create a table with three columns. In column one list three moments from the play you found funny. How was this achieved in the Riding Lights’ production? Detail your answer in column two. In the final column assess what this comic moment achieved in the play. What did it do for the audience in the context of the scene? Was the plot progressed or a key aspect of a character revealed through the joke?

Share your observations and discuss how comedy can be used to communicate significant ideas.

A ‘Nest of Villains’
The three ‘villains’ in The Alchemist always con their victims by playing a ‘role’ or by adopting a disguise. Devise a three-scene story which involves a protagonist adopting different ‘roles’ in order to achieve a goal.

Examples might be:
1. Someone trying to repeat interview for the same job
2. Someone trying to get a date with the same person
3. Someone trying to sell something on a doorstep
4. Someone trying to get on a reality TV show by being a ‘personality’

Trailer
In groups of three to five: Using the text and an extended period of time select the most significant moments from the play.

Create a mini-version of the play to highlight those key dramatic elements. Share these with other groups in your class.

Which moments from the ‘trailer’ versions are the same? Are there any differences? Discuss why each group highlighted certain moments.

Write an essay/portfolio entry discussing these key moments with a paragraph for each section.

“No more o’ your tricks, good Jeremy; the truth, the shortest way.”

Lovelit. Act 5.3. The Alchemist.

Playing the Fooled
Solo-work: Take one of the ‘victims’ from The Alchemist:
1. Dapper (a lawyer) believes a ‘fairy’ can be summoned to help him win at gambling.
2. Druger (a shop-keeper) believes that by writing certain words on his trading ships and by burying a magnet under his shop, that his business will attract customers.
3. Mammon (a rich nobleman) wants the Philosopher’s Stone which is reputed to turn lead into gold and even make the old young again.
4. Ananias & Tribulation (two strict and pious religious people) seem overly obsessed with money and want their goods turned into gold.
5. Kestrel (who has inherited a fortune) wants to get even more money and social influence by asking ‘The Alchemist’ to ensure his sister marries wealth and power through a match-making scheme.

Create a three minute monologue telling the story of what happened and how they felt of the events of the course of the play, and how the experience of being conned or ‘gulled’ changed them. Explore the painful moments (probably the most comic for the audience) for this character. Make sure you refer to the other characters involved.

Group work: This monologue can then be cross-cut with the monologues of other characters and/or interspersed with sections or scenes from The Alchemist itself. Very useful for an assessed piece of work.

Surly, You Can’t Be Serious?
The character of Surly is the only character who sees through the schemes of the three crooks. He even adopts the same tricks (by disguising himself as a Spanish nobleman) in an attempt to expose them.

Work on Act 2.1. In this scene Surly continually makes jokes which undermine the credibility of the con-men.

After working on the original text, devise a contemporary equivalent with a ‘Surly’ or sceptical character stepping out of the action to comment on and satirise the various lies of the other characters.
The Alchemist was first performed in 1610 and aside from Shakespeare’s plays it is one of the few from that time that is still performed today. Why do you think the play has endured and remained relevant to audiences over the years?

As writers of topical TV comedy or cartoonists like Steve Bell would tell you, good satire is only really enjoyed by audiences if it is effective in hitting its targets, so I suppose the reason why The Alchemist has had a long stage history from the 17th to the 21st century is because its targets are ones which continue to crop up. They are the familiar obsessions, vices and foibles of human nature, brilliantly displayed here in some wonderfully funny characters. And we recognise them in any society, mainly because we recognise the same traits in ourselves (though perhaps only admitted privately!).

In contrast to many other plays from the Shakespearian age, there’s a definite urban reality to The Alchemist which takes little adjusting to make it feel modern – quite similar in fact to the kind of satirical ‘sketch-based’ comedy which we are used to on television… except that here there is a great story-line which holds it all together.

What can audiences expect from this production? For instance, will it be updated from its original 17th century setting, what will the set look like?

Yes, certain elements of the play’s original context will be updated to make sure that the play stays sharp and accessible to a contemporary audience.

It’s important, I think, with a play that is clearly meant to be riotously funny as well as ‘doing some good’, that the production doesn’t slip into a warm glow of worthiness that can sometimes surround our experience of ‘the classics’ – the play has to be produced with an energy and a desire to communicate that goes far beyond the ‘heritage mentality’.

This is why we have chosen to give the play’s publicity a strong contemporary image which we hope will appeal to an audience who might otherwise have dismissed a classic like The Alchemist as not for them and certainly not full of the kind of comedy which still packs a punch today. The set is designed to make each member of the audience feel as though they have been spirited into the very room where the confidence trickstering is taking place… into the heart of the spider’s web.

The original play is set in London and when you first produced it for Riding Lights in York you moved the setting to Yorkshire. To what extent will this new version be adapted for Coventry audiences?

Ben Jonson wrote The Alchemist for a specific audience who knew the location and the community of the Blackfriars area of London where the play was first performed. The ‘now’ factor of the play is intensified by a sense of Neighbourhood Watch – everyone enjoying the jokes and the references to pubs, streets and businesses which they might have been in only yesterday.
The nervous laughter which the play creates is increased when you realise that the gang of rip-off merchants has moved into your city and you might be their next victim if you don’t watch out. So the production and the text will reflect a strong sense of place in Coventry and a resonance with characters and events which have hit our own headlines.

Are there any particular challenges in staging this play? If so, how can they be overcome?

I think the main challenges of staging this play are to do with keeping up all the levels of tension on which its success depends. For instance, in spite of its ‘medicinal’ purpose, the play feels like an early example of farce, where keeping up a fast, furious pace is essential to the comedy, as well as keeping the audience fully aware of each twist and turn in the plot - who’s in disguise, who’s locked in the toilet because they must not meet the person who’s coming up the stairs, etc. etc.

However ridiculous or absurd the scams are which the confidence tricksters offer, everything has to be believable or the comedy falls flat – we have to believe that at any moment the gang will finally deliver for their customers that recipe of recipes which will turn a frying pan into bankable gold. We all have to believe that the gang can deliver anything we want and, of course, if we want it badly enough we believe it even more and become more vulnerable.

Another crucial tension in the play is created by the absence of good characters – we find ourselves tempted to support a gang of crooks against the idiots they exploit. Do we want them to be found out? The play is finely balanced between whether it is the ‘customers’ who are being conned, or the gang itself or ultimately ourselves.

Sum up this production of The Alchemist in three words...

Topical, explosive, hilarious.