



“A Town Divided” was created from interviews with Tallahassee locals. ROBERT HOWARD

‘A Town Divided’ sparks robust student discussion

Amanda Karioth Thompson Council on Culture & Arts

In February of 2020, the Southern Shakespeare Company made a serendipitous decision. They’d been presenting “A Town Divided,” an original interpretation of “Romeo and Juliet,” for live audiences of students since 2017 and they wanted to capture it on film. A month after the recording was made, all live theater shut down.

“In the fall, when it was evident that we definitely would not be doing it live for students in 2021, we decided to create a fully formed education program surrounding the recording. We created a completely digital option for our schools,” said Robin Jackson.

As the education and outreach director for the Southern Shakespeare Company and the co-director of the organization’s junior company, The Bardings, Jackson got to work making the “A Town Divided” experience accessible in the era of COVID.

The play had already gone through a long incubation period. Several playwrights working collaboratively sought to examine the racial divide in our city in an authentic way. “The stories are taken directly from interviews with Tallahassee locals who really formed the story for the writers,” explained Jackson.

Though “A Town Divided” was modeled on a play written more than 400 years ago, the themes in “Romeo and Juliet” remain relevant. This new interpretation offers a way to teach Shakespeare in contemporary times and opens a dialogue about difficult topics.

An educational package

The educational package is offered to teachers at no cost and includes the recorded 50-minute play; three behind the scenes videos with the writers, director, and cast members; a recording of a recent panel discussion between local leaders and students; and a study guide with classroom activities.

“Teachers can use as much of it as they’d like to. We try to give a fully formed curriculum but in pieces they can extract so there’s no pressure to find time for all of it. We just want to provide help to teach ‘Romeo and Juliet,’ start conversations with



Harmony Ward envisions a better future through dialogue. SPECIAL TO THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

their students, and help the community come together to talk about these important issues.”

That’s something Victoria Williams is grateful for. She is kept busy by her course load, teaching English I Honors, Pre IB, and AP English Literature

See **DISCUSSIONS**, Page 6C

Discussions

Continued from Page 1C

and Composition at Rickards High School. Last year, her students experienced the live performance and this year she took advantage of the digital offering. "As soon as it started, they were glued," she said.

As a class, they had recently discussed the Martin Luther King Jr. quote "People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other."

Following the play, this concept re-emerged in the class discussions.

Opening door to communication

"They feel like one of the biggest issues is that we're not communicating," explained Williams. "This play provides some of those moments to talk about stereotypes. It opens the door to get them discussing and to the possibility of taking action as young people. It's a sign of the times. We see more people have stepped out and taken action. Change is going to happen."

Nancy Floyd Richardson agrees. As the English III and English III Honors teacher and literacy instructional coach at SAIL High School, she has created a classroom culture of open and honest dialog.

"We talk about anything and everything. We need to be able to talk about hard topics in our country," Richardson said. "You need to be able to have those



The cast of "A Town Divide," which has been turned into a teaching film for Leon County students. ROBERT HOWARD

discussions without offending people, pointing fingers, or putting someone on the defensive. You also need to be able to back up what you have to say."

Her students just completed a unit of study that dealt with credibility. Students learned how to find reputable sources of information and how to cross check that information. They then dove into a research project focused on current social issues in America.

"This play fit perfectly into that," she said. "Race is such a big topic, after the death of George Floyd and the marches last summer, this play helped personalize it for students."

She was surprised by her students' engagement and depth of thinking.

"We watched the play at the end of the day. We finished with about 15 minutes left for discussion and they just kept talking. The busses dismissed and the bell rang, and they were still here talking," Richardson said.

Powerful messages 'close to home'

"It wasn't just the kids in my classroom, the Zoom kids were still here too. The conversation became so rich and personal, and it mattered. They came back to the next class, two days later, still talking about it. It has hit a time in our society where students need to process this, and they need a safe place to do it. There have been some wonder-

ful, real, moments in our class discussions because of this play."

Harmony Ward is an 11th grader at SAIL. Prior to her recent digital experience with "A Town Divided," she had seen the play in-person twice. Recalling the first time she saw it, she said "I loved it, I loved everything about it. I've always loved Juliet but the spin on it and the fact that I could recognize the schools and the streets referenced in the play, made it connect more."

Comparing her live experience to the digital one, Harmony found the play's message remained just as powerful, but she felt the impact was greater because of current events.

"Watching it now, it's a little more sad. These things have always been happening but now, it's right in our face and you can't ignore it," Harmony said.

"Even though it's a play, this is an example of things that happen in real life. It's so close to home. We need to be talking about this and be respectful of everyone's opinion and hear everyone out but these conversations definitely need to happen so we can move forward into a better future."

Educators who would like to access the Southern Shakespeare Company's "A Town Divided" Education Program are encouraged to contact Robin Jackson at robin@southernshakes.org.

This article is part of COCA's Creativity Persists collection and highlights how area arts educators are continuing to teach and inspire during the COVID-19 pandemic. Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).