

## **SHAKESPEARE SUCCESS!**

Many thanks to members of the Whitby community who came out to support the Middle School Shakespeare play last weekend! The MS students enjoyed playing to a range of students, parents, alumni and friends. With your help, the MS Shakespeare plays raised \$1266.85 to help with the cost of their trip to Italy!

The Shakespeare performances are the culmination of Whitby's academic theatre program that each child begins in the first grade. Every year, students explore academic topics through theatre in order to help develop their speaking ability, presentation skills, vocabulary, confidence, imagination and to reinforce their academic understanding through kinesthetic learning. Students learn how to decode texts to help them to create characters and environments which make the story come to life. Throughout the program, students take ownership of the creation process as actors, designers and fabricators. In LE and ME, students begin designing and fabricating costumes and props for their performances. Beginning in UE, students take Design Technology Theatre to develop skills in problem solving, planning, managing resources and fabrication (including sewing, painting, cardboard fabrication, electrics, light color theory, use of garage band and iTunes, and video skills). In the Middle School years, the students tackle Shakespeare.

The Shakespeare program at Whitby is an exciting challenging program in which students partake both in seventh and eighth grade. They develop their vocabulary, memorization skills, physical and vocal expression, confidence, text decoding skills and to prepare them well for their future studies in Elizabethan texts and Shakespeare in particular. In high school, and in most college programs, the study of Shakespeare in Language Arts is mandatory. For many high school and college students, Shakespeare is only studied in literature class, is difficult to understand and is, therefore, suffered through. William Shakespeare never wrote these plays to be read, he wrote them to be experienced as theatre. By engaging Shakespeare's text through close reading in Language Arts class with the intent of realizing the plays on stage and studying Shakespeare's instructions to actors hidden in his grammatical use and word choices, Whitby students come to enjoy Shakespeare's stories and language, making their future studies easier for them, creating vivid emotional and physical links with the text they read, and raising their vocabulary and reading comprehension to the upper levels used in standardized testing.

Whitby Shakespeare productions are also linked to the Middle School's cultural studies and to their trip, in order to give the students the most complete experience possible. For instance, last year the students studied World War II in Culture, went to Germany and Prague where they visited a former concentration camp and, prior to the trip, performed "As You Like It" set in Vichy France as the Nazi's took over. This year the students are going to Italy and so performed "The Merchant of Venice" and "Julius Caesar", giving them the opportunity to research the cultures, architecture and history of Venice and Rome in conjunction with their Culture, Language Arts, Art and Music studies. Using the Shakespeare to help the students explore the culture they are visiting helps them to prepare for the trip and compare their research and imagination to their experience of the real people, culture and cities.

In Shakespeare, as in all studies at Whitby, learning is differentiated; each student is given work as actor, designer and fabricator which corresponds to his/hers level of

development. As teachers, we endeavor to challenge each student in a manner that is exciting for each learner, but not discouraging, providing him or her with experiences which encourage each child to try unfamiliar skills and deepen skills already learned, beginning with a foundation and building upon it. The Shakespeare program is a demanding multi-year program which allows the students to encounter difficult material in the seventh grade, gain some experience with the language and, in eighth grade, be able to deepen their understandings to feel they have some mastery when they leave the program.

Essential to the learning process in our Shakespeare studies is the mentoring the eighth graders give the seventh graders. The eighth graders always begin the Shakespeare unit by telling the seventh graders how daunted and mystified they were by the language at the beginning of seventh grade, and how confident they are with the language in eighth grade. Throughout the Shakespeare process, eighth graders deepen their own skills through mentoring the seventh graders, helping them to decode the meaning of the text, create characters and translate the written word into a vibrant three-dimensional world. The mentoring process and two-year structure of the Shakespeare program also allows eighth graders to reflect upon how much they have learned and the seventh graders to see ahead to where they will be in a year's time, lending them confidence and increasing the rate of their learning. This dialogue between students new to the rigors of Shakespeare and those who have a year's experience is key to the learning of both levels of learners.

When they leave Whitby, our students find Shakespeare to be a pleasure. Many alumni tell us how much they enjoy their Shakespeare units in high school because they do not struggle with the language, but can read it fluently. Many alumni go on to pursue acting in Shakespeare through high school and college. As educators, this makes us very happy, indeed!

If you have any questions about the Shakespeare program or our academic theatre program, please contact Kim Guzowski at [kguzowski@whitbyschool.org](mailto:kguzowski@whitbyschool.org).