

Profile: Lois Burdett

• Lynn A. Cecil •



Figure 1: Lois Burdett and her students brainstorm about Shakespeare, his life, and his work.

Enseignante dans une école élémentaire de Stratford en Ontario, Lois Burdett a développé une approche pédagogique résolument innovatrice. Fondée sur une initiation pratique des élèves à l'oeuvre de Shakespeare, elle trouve son achèvement dans la mise en scène d'une pièce. Cette expérience a eu un succès tel que ses élèves ont fait une tournée au Canada et aux États-Unis. La méthode de Lois Burdett est applicable à l'enseignement de n'importe quel sujet.

Lois Burdett, an elementary school teacher in Stratford, Ontario, has developed an innovative approach in introducing Shakespeare's plays to young students. The success of her method has resulted in her students performing his plays both in Canada and the USA, as well as in her producing several publications, and it is applicable to the teaching of any subject.

Lois Burdett's innovative approach to teaching children as young as seven and eight about Shakespeare's life and times has captured the attention of numerous adult educators in North America and England. The recipient of numerous awards, Burdett also conducts workshops for other teachers. With the first three publications in her *Shakespeare Can Be Fun!* series, she has combined her retellings of Shakespeare's life and plays with her students' letters and paintings about the Bard.

I first glimpsed her approach a year ago when I was driving into Stratford, Ontario. Large, vividly coloured Shakespearean characters — painted by second

and third graders — filled over 50 panels along the sidewalk. Later, I spoke with Lois Burdett, the elementary school teacher behind this display. Approximately 20 years ago, as a teacher in Hamlet School, one of the Stratford schools which are named for Shakespeare's characters, Lois discovered that few of her students knew anything about the reason for the school's name. Some thought Shakespeare was one of the big kids in the school. She set out to engage her students as detectives: they were to find out who Shakespeare was.

First, they barnstormed together to tally what they already knew [see Figure 1]; then they searched through books, looked at pictures, studied maps. They became involved in his



Figure 3. Marijke Altenburg's artistic interpretation of Anne Hathaway.

Dear William,
 Yes I will go out with you
 tonight. All I need is time
 with you. Your eyes glitter
 like stars Your dazzling
 clothes are magnifisint
 We could have a great
 fyoucher. We'll have lots of
 children. William Shakespeare
 I admire you with glee.
 Your honey
 Annie

Figure 2. Eight-year-old Alex Woodley, writing as Anne Hathaway, accepts a date with William Shakespeare.

life, and dramatized an interview with him and his family. They followed his marriage to Anne Hathaway, were thrilled at his theatrical success, and were saddened when his son Hamnet died. He became their friend: they drew pictures and wrote letters to him, his family, and his characters. In the process, their language and communication skills improved tremendously. They learned the plots of the plays through Lois's retellings, and then faced the Elizabethan language of the actual texts as a challenge, not a hurdle. One of Burdett's first students, Leanne Mark, who is now working on her education degree, says that studying Shakespeare's plays again in high school was a treat since she came to them with a positive attitude rather than with fears that his plays were "difficult."

Burdett is a firm believer in the philosophy that we "learn by



Figure 4. Robyn Lafontaine (age 7), engrossed in her role as Sir Toby Belch, helps Ali Kara (age 7) move into his part.

for acting, and for watching theatre. One special project, entitled "Bard's Buddies," entailed pairing each student with a backstage theatre employee. This introduced the students to the nitty-gritty aspects of theatre work such as learning how to do lighting, wigs and costumes, and choreographed swordfighting.

The expressions of Robyn Lafontaine's face as Sir Toby Belch, and Anika Johnson's as Shakespeare at age 32 [see Figures 4 and 5], demonstrate the seriousness with which Burdett's students approach their dramatic roles. Her new students each September look forward to performing a play, or the story of his life, as a great adventure. Her method of retelling the Bard's plays in rhyming couplets makes it easier for young children to learn the text. Her

doing." She intends to render learning meaningful. She brings people from the Festival into her classroom, and takes her class to meet people involved with the Festival. An outing for her students to the theatre is used to sharpen their math skills: they order tickets, collect, and count money. Her students became involved in supporting the restoration of England's Globe Theatre: they raised money for it and had the honour of sending a time-capsule, filled with special items from Stratford, Ontario, to England.

When her students began performing their own versions of Shakespeare's plays, the professional actors at Stratford came to watch. This gala evening became an annual event. By incorporating dramatic performance in her teaching, Burdett has inspired her students with a passion for language,



Figure 5. Anika Johnson (age 7) breathes life into her role as Shakespeare at age 32.

students can speak eloquently about Shakespeare's life and plays, as was seen when they were interviewed by Peter Gzowski for CBC Radio's "Morningside" program — as well as for a forthcoming documentary film.

Another thrill for her students occurred several years ago when they were invited to Texas to perform a Shakespeare play for the state's 150th anniversary celebration. The students wrote a song to commemorate the event, and it became a hit on the local radio station. The latest international performance given by her students was in Utah this past summer, funded in part by special grants from private businesses. Burdett's grade two and three students performed *Macbeth* and also attended a performance at Utah's Globe Theatre.

Burdett has published magazine articles outlining her approach to teaching, and she earned a Hilroy Fellowship Provincial Award in 1986. She continues to travel throughout North America conducting workshops. Recently, she was awarded her second Writers' Award by the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations, and the prestigious Meritorious Service Medal by Government House of Canada.

Her hands-on approach is explained in her publications: *Twelfth Night for Kids*, *A Child's Portrait of Shakespeare*, and *Macbeth*, the first three books in her Shakespeare Can Be Fun! series. Narrated in rhyming couplets, her texts lend themselves well to choral reading, a popular method for teaching reading to primary students. Complementing her written retellings of Shakespeare's plays and the narrative of his life are drawings and letters produced by her students. She includes some of the letters written by her students, pretending to be Shakespeare or someone in his family [see Figure 2]. Burdett has another book planned for release this spring (1997): *A Midsummer Night's Dream for Kids*.

Lois Burdett feels her methods of teaching can be applied to any subject. In Sarnia, where she began her career as an educator, she taught her students to feel pride in their city's oil refineries, just as she has taught her Stratford students to feel proud of their link to Shakespeare. She believes that when students feel a sense of civic pride or ownership — whether in a theatre, a factory, or some other local distinction — their comprehension increases because they are engaged.

Lynn A. Cecil is an elementary school teacher in London, Ontario, with a recent MA in English from the University of Western Ontario.