Much Ado about Negotiation

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Yo, Shoshers, what's up?" Bethany yelled to me across the English department's writing lab as I entered to begin the first session of our second semester Advanced Dramatics course. Before I could utter a reply, Kevin lobbed a tennis ball at Cubby, which missed him and rebounded off the rear wall only inches above one of the thirty new Macintosh multimedia computers. It landed next to Tonya, who had been the unintended victim of Kevin's pranks more than once in last year's Drama I course. Alison ran towards me, "P-l-e-a-s-e get us outta here. Can't we go down to the auditorium?"

"All in good time. Pull up a chair everyone, and let's get started." I worked doubly hard to appear self-confident and poised as I prepared to begin the all-important first negotiation. It would have been much easier to address the group with my customary syllabus in hand. In fact, I'll admit it. I love devising syllabi. I regularly devote entire summer vacations to the process of syllabus creation—reading voraciously, setting goals for the course, juxtaposing primary and secondary source materials, thinking out strategies for student engagement, devising writing prompts, and, not coincidentally, learning a great deal every step of the way. Now, for the first time, I would attempt to invite students to join me in this process by negotiating our course of study.

Prologue: Setting the Stage for Negotiated Learning

Instead of confronting the troops as a four-star general with my detailed battle map before me, we would negotiate our terrain together. I'm not one who normally uses military metaphors. After all, as Susan Ohanian points out, if we purchased just one less Stealth bomber, we could more than quadruple the amount of money earmarked for K–12 libraries in every school in America—but I digress. I never liked an autocratic classroom filled with teacher talk, behavioral objectives, and I-R-E classroom discourse, but for most of my teaching career, I had retained control over the course content and the means by which that content is "covered" and assessed. I was now trying to create a Freirean learning environment in which students and teacher learn in dialogue with one another.

Of course, even in my more conventional teaching, I had always learned as much, if not more, from my students than I taught, but I had paid lip service to the notion of a truly student-centered classroom. I had always been somewhat constrained by hefty curriculum guides and my need to "cover" the content. Beginning my foray into a negotiated curriculum in the context of an English department elective would allow me to experiment without this pressure. The course overview I was about to distribute had no preselected readings or assignment due dates but was instead filled with potential resources, including relevant Web sites and books from our school library. It listed the types of activities in which we could engage, namely the performance of monologues and scenes, traditional and Web research, character analyses, live performance

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critiques, and some type of final project, the specifics of which we would determine together.

I hoped that my reading of Australian English educator and master negotiator Garth Boomer had prepared me adequately for this moment. Would students think I was simply abdicating one of my responsibilities as a classroom teacher, and could I explain clearly why I wanted them to participate in the joint creation of our course of study? Boomer suggests that educators "deliberately plan to invite students to contribute to, and to modify, the educational program, so that they will have a real investment both in the learning journey and in the outcomes. Negotiating also means making explicit, and then confronting, the constraints of the learning context and the non-negotiable requirements that apply" (14).

Would I live up to Boomer's expectations in my first attempt to negotiate the curriculum for an entire course of study? Or was I about to open a Pandora's Box that would unleash unstructured inertia on students enrolled in an elective course that already existed on the fringe of the curriculum, fulfilling no sanctioned school requirements? All of the students in the room had taken Introduction to the Theatre with me the year before and thus had already earned the requisite arts credit. Fully half of the twenty students now present had also been involved in our recent production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and those students and I had quite a history already.

Act I: Establishing Ownership and Building Ensemble

"As you know, the auditorium is still off limits . . ." I stammered to the groans and hisses of those assembled before me. Our first non-negotiable item was our classroom itself. While the auditorium was undergoing renovation, we'd by necessity meet in the writing lab and, like a troupe of traveling players, move to temporarily vacated classrooms whenever others needed to use the lab.

"I want to begin with an improv," I said, my voice exuding a new air of confidence, "but it will take us a little while to plan." I continued:

> Here's the scenario: You're all members of the board of directors of the Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival. It's your job to convince the other board members that the play you have selected should be performed as part of our upcoming season. Each of you will have twenty minutes to give us a summary of your play's plot and tell us what we need to know in order to produce it. You can make a fact sheet for us. Then, in role, we'll vote on our top three picks, and those will be the three plays that we'll study in detail as a class this semester. Of course, we can also do monologues and scenes from other plays, so even if your work isn't chosen by the class, you might still use it later on.

Here, I was striving to begin the course with what Garth Boomer's colleague Jon Cook calls the ownership principle. "Like adults," he says, "children have needs, wants, and points of view; they will work hard to get what they want; and they can understand the trade-off, involving the recognition of inevitable constraints and the impossible" (15). OK. I'd take Cook's word on that and try to negotiate to create his three essentials of engagement, exploration, and reflection. As I nervously scanned the faces before me, the first question shot out.

> Where once I would have made all of these decisions in advance and lauded myself for making my criteria for evaluation clear to my students, I now realized how much I had learned simply in the process of creating the rubric in the first place.

"You mean we have to go to the library?" Cubby asked with his characteristic sheepish grin.

"If you want to. Sure. Miss Guastella knows what we're working on, and she can help you find what—."

Bethany, once the Bard's diminutive Hermia, now cut me off. "Why waste your time down there? There's not much available anyway. Let's just connect to the Net since we're stuck here anyway and

do a Shakespeare search." Of course, this was one of the realizations I had hoped for, even if it wasn't as enthusiastically suggested as I would have liked.

Act II: Clarifying Expectations and Rehearsing Together

"I have a couple of Web addresses to share," I said, "and Bethany can show you how to use a search engine, if you don't already know. I also brought a couple of CD-ROMS and some books from home, so we have plenty of resources."

Eric, the theatre company manager who had recently portrayed Nick Bottom, questioned pointedly, "Can you tell us what you want on the fact sheet?" As usual, he'd take charge and get the job done as long as I'd be clear about what needed doing.

Eric had just unwittingly laid a landmine for me, and without thinking, I nearly stepped right on it. You see, high, clear standards have always been important to me, and New Standards have recently become important to my district. School administrators have seen to it that giant posters emblazoned with the standards are posted everywhere, but here, as in life, the question becomes how to apply the standard to the problem. New Standards are explicit in listing the components of a "narrative procedure" or a "response to literature," but there is no rubric for "fact sheet." *Standardistos,* to borrow Susan Ohanian's term, might suggest that my students produce what's called for, namely a narrative procedure or response to literature, even though those forms had nothing to do with our need to share real information with a genuine audience for authentic purposes. Therein lies the problem, for students must learn to create their own response forms and criteria without blindly modeling those that have been created by a committee of experts. In *Research on Written Composition,* George Hillocks writes:

> Students examining models are supposed to learn the criteria from examples. However, they tend to be passive recipients of information rather than users of it. Students working with scales, on the other hand, learn the criteria through actively applying them to various pieces of writing. They are engaged in the process of *using* what they are to learn. (230)

Hillocks is right about the need for active application, but prepackaged rubrics, like well-intentioned models, do not have their desired effect unless students have a hand in their creation. I knew exactly what I wanted on the fact sheets, but the assignment would be meaningful to my students only if they could own it.

"You tell me," I volleyed back to Eric and his classmates. "What needs to be there so we can make an informed judgment about which plays we really want to study?"

"I want to know the story, baby," offered Selena. "I didn't get into playing Helena until I had a chance to scope it out and know what was going on around her."

This time Molly, formerly Puck's female fairy counterpart, interjected, "Look around. There are more girls than guys, so tell us about the characters, so we know if we have the right people to act it out." So far, so good. Our non-negotiable item of location had been confronted, and I presented the idea of the planned improvisation as a non-negotiable way of collaboratively selecting our major works of study. We continued discussing what would be useful and agreed that we would all include a brief plot summary, a series of character sketches, and a production history. Other pertinent information, including photos, could be added to the information that we all would share. As each of us found a play to research, we signed up on a sheet I had placed on the bulletin board to ensure that we wouldn't all be trying to pitch *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Romeo and Juliet,* the two Shakespearean plays with which we were already familiar.

Together we had successfully negotiated the terms of our first assignment. Where once I would have made all of these decisions in advance and lauded myself for making my criteria for evaluation clear to my students, I now realized how much I had learned simply in the process of creating the rubric in the first place. As Paulo Freire says, "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (53). Clearly, using last year's study guide questions or a predesigned rubric doesn't allow students to invent and reinvent as they must do in order to engage in the meaningful inquiry that is a necessary concomitant to real rather than regurgitated learning.

I worked beside Cubby, Selena, Molly, and the other students, producing a fact sheet on *King Lear.* It felt odd at first, and I thought that maybe I should be doing my sheet after school and circulating to offer assistance during class. In actuality,

students were thrilled not to have me nagging them, and they knew that I'd assist when needed. Eric and Carey were fascinated by my use of PageMaker and opted to produce their own desktop published fact sheets. I loved Katie's historical photos and thus searched for my own. I shared fully in their alternate joys and frustrations. I cheered when Alison discovered links to other Web sites and felt Dave's sense of loss when his work from the day before had not been properly saved and he needed to begin again.

Students who finished ahead of the rest of us served as our mentors, teaching us how to download copies of our plays, as well as production photos and video clips. When it came time to conduct our initial planned improvisation, each student spoke passionately about his or her play and truly attempted to win over the rest of us. I shared in the agony of defeat when my pitch for *King Lear* resulted in a fourth place finish. Leah's *Much Ado About Nothing* came in first, followed by Molly's *Twelfth Night* and Bethany's *Troilus and Cressida.* Had I traditionally selected the course of study beforehand, I would probably have included *Much Ado* and might have even opted for *Twelfth Night,* but *Troilus and Cressida*? Clearly, negotiating the curriculum had, in this case, produced a very unexpected result but one that would allow me to continue to learn along with my students. They seemed to enjoy the fact that we'd be studying a play for which I wouldn't have ready-made answers.

Carey, who had earlier in the year portrayed Titania, Queen of the Fairies, stated: "I liked the fact that we got to choose which Shakespeare plays we studied in detail. Young people aren't going to pay attention to a history play or some of the more dry dramas. If we're going to study Shakespeare's plays, why not be able to read the ones that are appealing to us?" Susan Ohanian undoubtedly agrees with Carey when she says, "That's what school should be about: Teachers and curriculum being flexible enough to meet the needs of each student, not shoving every kid through some distant committee's phantasmic pipe dream of a necessary curriculum for tomorrow's workforce" (2).

Act III: Planning Ahead and Assessing Our Performance

At this point, having completed our initial research and finished our first group improvisation, we discussed the nature of our work for the semester that lay ahead as well as the criteria for the evaluation of that work.

> Several students mentioned, however, that they wanted to know more about what it was really like to live and act in Shakespeare's day.

After some heated deliberation, the class decided that I should create essay questions to be answered in collaborative teams for each of our full-play units. As "teacher-student"—to borrow Freire's term—I insisted on some form of written response, and they, as "student-teachers," insisted on having resources, including their fellow student-teachers and the actual Shakespearean texts, in order to write their responses. As for the performance work, we would complete evaluation forms for ourselves and one another. An actual number grade would be assigned, based upon an average of the student's self-assessment and my assessment of ten items we negotiated, each to be evaluated on a ten point scale. We decided to adapt a rubric that last year's Introduction to the Theatre class had created. As a result, we'd pay particular attention to body language, blocking, characterization, concentration, diction, and vocal variety, among others. To these, we would add comprehension of text and facility with language. If the student and I differed in our assessment by more than one letter grade, we would conference in order to reach consensus. In retrospect, I wish I had suggested that we create a new rubric based upon Kurt Daw's tips for "personating" or working with speeches, but we were comfortable with our earlier checklist, and modifying it slightly seemed both to meet our needs and to make our new performance task seem just a bit more comfortable.

I pressed on, noting that I wanted us to attend a professional production and write a critique as well. We also talked about the value of written character analyses and the need for some type of final project, where we could pull together everything that we had learned in some culminating event.

We decided to give the final project continued thought as we began our study of *Much Ado.* Carey suggested that we begin with Kenneth Branagh's film version and then tackle the script itself, which we did. Several members of the class had already seen this film, so they readily set up the story and drew comparisons between it and both *Midsummer* and *Romeo and Juliet.* I enjoyed playing Benedick to Selena's Beatrice as we engaged in our own staging of the piece, commenting along the way about the cuts and directorial choices that Branagh had made for his film. Playing Beatrice brought Selena closer to the script than watching or reading alone would have allowed. She noted,

> My favorite character we studied was Beatrice because she was so fully developed through both her actions and speech. Within the first few lines of the play, it became apparent that she was very smart and witty. She went from hating love to needing it more than ever. She was both stubborn and warm-hearted—clearly human.

Act IV: Helping Students Take On Additional Roles

Having now studied the first of our three selections together, we were ready to prepare our own monologues for performance. Several students mentioned, however, that they wanted to know more about what it was really like to live and act in Shakespeare's day. My old lecture notes on this very topic were now screaming out to be rescued from the back of my cabinet, revealing me as the learned expert, but I resisted this temptation. Instead I suggested watching a video from the Learning Channel's *Ancient Mysteries* series, somewhat sensationally titled "Life and Death in Britain's Ancient Theatres," which could serve as a starting point. From there, we could alternate between staging our monologues and researching historical figures from Shakespeare's day, if students still wanted to know more. We eventually decided to prepare a talk show with Elizabethan era guests and to alternate our research with the staging of monologues from our self-selected Shakespearean plays. As students memorized lines, prepared blocking, completed a character analysis chart, and researched English Renaissance figures, I attempted to serve as facilitator, coach, and guide. The film *Shakespeare in Love* had not yet been released, but I suspect that in my next rendition of this course, I'll opt to incorporate it here to give us a flavor for the age and its inhabitants, while also encouraging students to separate historical fact from fiction.

Kurt Daw's excellent *Acting Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* proved invaluable as we looked to an expert to help us prepare a Shakespearean text for performance. Rather than assigning chapters, I provided this text and others as references that each student could consult at his or her own particular "teachable moment." Here, too, I conducted minilessons to talk about Shakespearean verse and how to discern if a scene were written in iambic pentameter and, if so, what the implications were for its delivery. I had taught this type of lesson as part of a larger lecture before in the regular English classroom, and few remembered it because it was devoid of context. Students who had the need for that knowledge in order to stage a convincing monologue could borrow from Daw or from me. Some learned best one-on-one. Others liked my minilesson. Still others preferred to utilize textual resources at their own moment of need. As Boomer said, "The teacher's main role in a negotiated curriculum is to give information and teach only when it is needed" (12).

In the spirit of facilitation, I shared a reading from Brockett's *History of the Theatre* to spur interest in the Burbages, Ben Jonson, and Christopher Marlowe, among others. Eric and Carey had been working on Shylock and Portia monologues, respectively, from *The Merchant of Venice.* One afternoon, I brought them together with their classmates, and we recreated the courtroom with Shylock on the stand. I instructed Carey to grill him just as though she were an Elizabethan Marsha Clark. The sparks that flew that afternoon touched us deeply, and we went on to discuss anti-Semitism and ethnic cleansing. Although these topics were not in the official curriculum, they served to relate our historical study to the world in which we live and remind us all of the political power of the theatre. For Carey, this was a particularly poignant moment in her learning: "The most valuable thing that we did was the individual monologue. That's where I learned the most about Shakespearean acting because it was so challenging." Eric, her impromptu scene partner agreed:

> Staging the monologues taught many different aspects of Shakespearean drama. First of all, memorization cannot begin until one knows what he is saying. Therefore, you must pick apart the monologue to find the meaning of the lines. Then you know where to place emphasis and how to de-

> liver the line. After more analysis, you can set the blocking patterns. Before you can effectively perform a Shakespearean piece, you must fully understand what you're saying and doing.

While Carey and Eric appreciated the insight they gleaned about their performance work, Dave focused on his new understanding of Shakespeare's relevance to contemporary society, noting, "It is very apparent that Shakespeare's works speak to more modern and changing times and interest a whole new generation in a truly wonderful thing." According to Boomer,

> When the products of learning have been written, made, modeled, painted, or dramatized, the teacher and children carry out the crucial process of reflection. This is when the class shares its valuing—when there is compassion, respect for quality and rejection of inferior work by those who did it. (12)

We cried for Molly's Ophelia, grieved for Heather's Cordelia, and gave our constructive advice to Alison when her Viola did not come off as planned. We knew she could give a stronger performance, and with an additional weekend's rehearsal time, she did.

Act V: Allowing Students to Give Direction

Having put discussion of the final project on hold to stage monologues and conduct our Elizabethan era talk show, we realized that, with half of the course behind us now, we'd need to clarify expectations and begin work on the final project while moving on to *Twelfth Night* and *Troilus and Cressida.* Each time we engaged in a new activity, we would make our way through Boomer's curriculum development process of planning, negotiating, teaching and learning, performing, and evaluating (35). Just as envisioned, this was never a cleanly linear process, and we regularly found ourselves renegotiating as needed. One suggestion for the final project was to create a pastiche of Shakespearean scenes and monologues strung together by a narration and performed for an after-school audience. Another was to stage scenes from Shakespearean plays being studied in the school's English classes and to present our scenes for those classes. Here interest was split along grade-level lines, with underclassmen feeling a bit intimidated at the prospect of performing in the classrooms of older students. Another student suggested looking for plays written about Shakespeare and perhaps presenting one as a second-stage production.

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We went on to discuss projects that would include drama but not necessarily culminate in a full-fledged production. We entertained the notion of contacting representatives from our nation's summer Shakespeare festivals and producing an annotated roster of their offerings. Then, thinking back to our use of the Internet, several students suggested somehow making our own Web site. Suddenly we realized that we could share what we were doing with a World Wide Web audience. To the best of our knowledge, no class in our school had yet created its own Web site, but other high school students across the country had clearly done so because we found several of their sites and used them in our initial creation of Shakespearean fact sheets. We agreed that we would each write about some aspect of our work in the course and that we would all contribute copies of the work we had already done, as well as that which we were still to do. I smiled inwardly, recognizing the fact that this public recreation of our work would serve as a defacto review of all that had come before. It would also serve as an impetus to do our best, since everything we produced would ultimately be available for public display.

I hadn't mentioned attending the theatre in a while, and some students believed that I was reneging on my promise to see live Shakespeare in New York City. I pulled out a copy of the *New York Times,* so that we could see what Shakespearean works were currently both on and off Broadway. Eric tapped into *Playbill On-line* and downloaded an up-to-the-minute roster. Although New York theatres were only ninety minutes away from our Pennsylvania high school, we'd still need to figure out how to raise the money for both transportation and the costly tickets.

Molly discovered an ad for England's Royal Shakespeare Company in residence at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. She placed a call to BAM's Education Director, and in no time at all Molly arranged

a workshop with the RSC, as well as $5 student matinees of *Hamlet* and the medieval morality play *Everyman.* Realizing that three bus trips would require raising an additional $60 per person, we agreed to contact the Athletic Department for use of the school van and called upon parents to drive and chaperone our trips. As we worked out our transportation logistics, we began a series of bake sales to pay our way. Tonya went on to write about these fundraising efforts, and Bethany penned a travel log. We renegotiated the written critique and decided that students could pitch their ideas for a written contribution to the Web site. Those who wanted to write a formal critique could do so, and others could focus on those aspects of the course they found personally meaningful. Heather summed up:

> I would have to say that the most valuable activity for me was going to see the RSC at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. It's not very often that a chance to see such gifted performers doing Shakespeare comes along. Seeing them gave me whole new ideas and concepts about Shakespeare. Alex Jennings as Hamlet was truly wonderful, especially after watching Keanu Reeves in *Much Ado.*

For me, facilitating our classroom production of *Troilus and Cressida* was the most difficult aspect of the course because I was openly as vulnerable as my students who were exploring the work for the first time. Could I trust enough in my own literary education to risk modeling my clearly imperfect meaning-making process? Yes and no. In order to ease students' access to the piece, invite their initial understandings (and my own), allow them to develop interpretations and take a critical stance, as Judith Langer exhorts in *Envisioning Literature,* I needed to consult the same textual and Internet sources we had used earlier in the course to create our initial fact sheets.

I also headed to a local college library to obtain BBC cassette tapes, so that I could listen to the play on my way to and from school. To facilitate adequately, I needed this overview, but it was equally important to me to model honestly the process I was going through in order to make my own meaning of the text. Langer helped me to confront the lingering belief that I, as teacher, must be the class expert because "these 'old bones' are in conflict with a pedagogy in which the primary concern is helping students arrive at their own responses, explore horizons of possibilities, and move beyond initial understanding to more thoughtful interpretations" (87).

My lack of expert status here was much more problematic for me than it was for my students, who didn't expect me to have all the answers anyway. For them, what we had negotiated was much more important than me expounding on textual and historical intricacies. They also liked the fact that we were simultaneously engaged in several projects. Tonya noted:

> One thing I particularly liked was the variety provided by the fact that our staging of the plays and doing the final project were interspersed. For example, I liked studying *Troilus and Cressida* every other day and in between working on the Internet home page project. It was cool to have a variety of projects to work on at once, where things were different day by day, so that class wasn't monotonous or boring.

Epilogue: Reflecting on Our Performance

Like his classmates, Cubby found the time spent on the final Internet project to be especially valuable, saying:

> It involved a complete overview of the material covered in the class. We had to go over the play fact sheets created early in the year. We then went through the scenes and monologues that we performed, as well as the characters we played for the Shakespeare Talk Show. All the test questions from both *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Twelfth Night* were placed on the Net. This project gave both computer knowledge necessary for life and a better understanding of Shakespeare. The project also created a page on the Net for the future study of Shakespeare.

Kevin summed it up:

> I really enjoyed the format of the course because it was very open and we had a lot of fun, but I also learned a lot. As terrible as the statement sounds, there was really no opportunity for sleeping or anything of the sort, but then again, I don't remember ever having the desire to take a nap during the class, seeing as it was my favorite class of the day.

Dave added, "My favorite part of the course was probably the one-on-one attention that the teacher gave to us and that we gave to each other. This gave us more of a chance to change ideas and to fully understand the course and assignments."

What I have attempted to share here is a look at how my students and I entered into and sustained a negotiating process to study the works of William Shakespeare through what William Pinar

calls *currere,* or curriculum as lived experience. Negotiating our course of study wasn't easy, but it was one of the most rewarding experiences of my career. Having gone through the process, I could never return to the days when even my ostensibly student-centered teaching was truly more autocratic than it was democratic because I controlled rather than negotiated the curriculum. Of course, I attempted to negotiate from a position of strength, making reading, writing, and performing non-negotiable, while openly deciding together the forms that those integral processes would take.

If I had planned the course in isolation as I had done for most of my career, we would never have traveled to Brooklyn to see the Royal Shakespeare Company perform, or learned the meaning of panderer in the context of Shakespeare's tale of the Trojan War, or discussed the horrors and realities of war in our world today. I would have *taught* highly structured, carefully planned lessons on the Elizabethan era, early modern English, and close textual analysis, but what would my students have *learned*? In 1938 Louise Rosenblatt first pointed out:

> We go through empty motions if our primary concern is to enable the student to recognize various literary forms, to identify various verse patterns, to note the earmarks of the style of a particular author, to detect recurrent symbols, or to discriminate the kinds of irony or satire . . . Knowledge of literary forms is empty without an accompanying humanity. (51)

For me, a glimpse of that humanity is highly visible in the stories that those students enrolled in our negotiated Shakespeare course opted to tell: Selena shared our class history; Molly wrote about her interactions with the Brooklyn Academy of Music; Bethany told about our workshop with the RSC; Leah reviewed the RSC's production of *Hamlet;* Tonya explained our fundraising process; Cubby and Dave compiled the best answers to our Shakespeare unit test questions; Carey reviewed Branagh's *Much Ado;* Heather organized our fact sheets; Laura wrote about our talk show and linked her page to individual homework assignments; Monique compiled the monologues we presented; and Alison created links to other Shakespearean Web sites on the Net. These students and their classmates met high academic standards in ways that mattered to them. Clearly, if twenty-first century education is to be more meaningful than checking off a list of prepackaged standards, students must be inspired and engaged through their own active participation in the negotiation process.

To see the results of our attempt to negotiate our course of study, visit the Advanced Dramatics Web site at http://www.beth.k12.pa.us/schools/freedom/english/drama/shakespeare/. For a look at our production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* visit http://www2.beth.k12.pa.us/projects/fhs_theater/default.html.

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