
Ralph Alan Cohen. *Shakesfear and How to Cure It: A Handbook for Teaching Shakespeare*. Clayton, DE: Prestwich House, 2007. 435p.

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As the title indicates, this is a how-to handbook for people who teach Shakespeare. Cohen stresses lowering “the inhibitions that act as barriers to good Shakespeare teaching and...increas[ing] your trust and knowledge of Shakespeare” (21). Most Shakespeare teaching links the works to scholarly issues and concerns rather than in-class performance and personal response. Such teaching, according to Cohen, can generate “ShakesFear,” defined as a “phobia” arising out of Shakespeare’s iconic position in English literature, the “god of our literary curriculum” (11). Cohen’s *Handbook* works to overcome the phobia and reduce resistance by focusing on the plays as literature, theater, and language.

Cohen does not limit his advice to university-level teaching. What he has to say applies to any level where Shakespeare is part of the curriculum. The teachers most likely to profit from his advice will be those who struggle against their students’ perception of Shakespeare as “the Chairman of the Bored” (11)—those students who perceive in the task of reading Shakespeare a boring, tedious, meaningless (for our modern times) enterprise to be endured, somehow, and forgotten immediately after the final research paper and/or exam is turned in. After all, how can any writer nearly 400 years dead have anything to say? Everyone says Shakespeare is great, but to many students he merely inspires fear that they will appear ignorant, and suffer for it.

The first half of the book addresses the problems of teaching Shakespeare and offers some methods for addressing those problems. Cohen names ten “DON’Ts” for the classroom, some of which may prove surprising, such as “Rule II: Don’t show them films or videos (except sometimes)” (55), and “Rule IV: Don’t assign research papers” (62).

As teachers we are conditioned by the methods that were used to teach us. Cohen asks us to look past our past to discover ways to engage students in Shakespeare, and films of someone’s interpretation tend to fix the play in the students’ minds without a corresponding effort on their part to consider issues of staging, acting, theater, language, and so forth. Likewise research papers: they take away creative engagement on the students’ part. The effort of researching is better spent, Cohen thinks, in engaging the play as a play rather than as a literary artifact to be dissected and then stitched up into a patchwork of often conflicting scholarly positions.

He balances the “DON’Ts” with ten “DOs,” among which he lists “connect the works to yourself,” “stress staging,” and “stress character, but in your students’

terms” (70). This is not a literary scholar’s approach, the “sage on the stage” format in which all the “dead white critics” are marshaled to support the lecture; it is a theater scholar’s approach, in which Cohen makes a compelling case against imposed interpretations of Shakespeare. He argues that we should let the students make the discoveries while working directly with the materials, particularly by having them work in groups to stage scenes.

Cohen wants teachers and students to realize that Shakespeare’s works can “flourish under the direction of a novice [the teacher]...be resilient to ‘mistakes,’” and that “they offer an infinite number of acceptable choices” (13). Additionally, he issues “a call to high school and college teachers to join the post-modern generation by using theatrical process and by trusting in their own meanings” (15).

Should Shakespeare classes be required? Cohen says no, that we should “*un-*require” them and thus take away the “spinach factor,” the burden of trying to “stomach” what “we do not like [but are] obliged to [read]” (17). Cohen’s purpose is “to turn the works over to our students” and “get beyond the traditional ideas of ‘Shakespeare’” (17).

Cohen’s methods, as his lists suggest, involve the students and teacher personally. He would, in fact, prefer the students read portions of a play, not the whole, and stage scenes, read in groups, “deal with small moments, small speeches, specific words” (70), do blocking, table talk, and rehearsals. Students are naturally willing to accept the “tedium” of reading the play if they can use their kinesthetic senses to stage it in the classroom.

To counter the students’ complaint that Shakespeare is “boring and/or irrelevant” (chapter 6), Cohen advises teachers who have bored students to show them the sex, the puns, the witches, ghosts, and goblins (the “Harry Potter” stuff), the mayhem and murder, the “party animals and party poopers” (142-144), the “smart ass” fools (144-146), the foolish big shots, and children coping with parents. For those who say Shakespeare is irrelevant, Cohen suggests having the students find parallels in their world: by casting a movie of a play using today’s actors, by staging a play in a modern setting, by having them relate personally to characters (“I know a guy who is just like Falstaff”), by making connections with popular music, and so on.

This kind of active, hands-on approach can be difficult for teachers unused to doing more on the theatrical end than merely attending performances of the plays, so Cohen offers a multitude of strategies to use, questions to ask, and scenes to have the students work with in the classroom. Although not everyone may want to use Cohen’s ideas on everything, his strategies will, at the least, give rise to possibilities that can be modified to suit a teacher’s personal style.

The second half of the book tackles 22 plays most likely to be taught in high school and, at least on a lower level, in college: seven comedies, five histories, seven tragedies, and *The Tempest*. Each play is discussed in four parts: 1) Cohen's personal response, 2) teaching methods that are specifically useful for the particular play, 3) ways to stage two or more interpretations of scenes, and 4) the value of media productions (DVDs, videos, films) of each play. In each part Cohen offers helpful advice and realistic strategies, not only for teaching but also for understanding the play, not as a dead, about-to-be-dissected frog, but as an entity that croaks and hops and can be beautiful or ugly, "as you like it."

So, who will profit most from Cohen's *Handbook*? If you are just starting your career, or have been assigned to teach Shakespeare for the first time and are suffering your own form of "ShakesFear," Cohen's *Handbook* will provide cheerful assistance in your time of trial. Cohen is a wise and logical man whose book will become an old friend immediately. The book is so well organized and rich in detail that you might decide to craft lesson plans straight from it.

If you are willing to step outside the boundaries your education has imposed upon you and look at Shakespeare as he should be looked at—as a practicing playwright and actor whose concerns cover the business of the stage as well as what it means to be human, then or now—Cohen's book will become your desktop (not bookshelf) "go-to," no matter how many years you have taught Shakespeare.

And, if you are an old hand now coming to the end of a long career of teaching Shakespeare and are convinced that there is nothing new to be learned, Cohen's *Handbook* may show you some refreshing and challenging ways to revitalize your approach to teaching the plays. And who knows? If you adopt Cohen's methods maybe those younger colleagues who scoff at you as an antiquated and irrelevant geezer may recover their respect and genuflect as you pass them in the hall. ✱