



ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

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EDUCATION ACTIVITIES PACK

ABOUT THIS PACK

This pack accompanies the 2013 production of *All's Well that Ends Well*, directed by Nancy Meckler, which opened in Stratford upon Avon on 25 July and will run until 26 September.

The activities within this pack are designed to be used with KS3-KS5 English and Drama students but can also be developed for younger learners.

The activities aim to help students explore some important features of the text and production, using the RSC's rehearsal processes.

The pack contains:

- Links to Synopsis and Production information
- Plot introductions and design ideas
- Practical activities inspired by the current production

CONTENTS

Introduction	Page 1
Context	Page 2
Telling the Story	Page 3
Designing the Countess	Page 3
Characters on Trial	Page 4
Exploring Motivation	Page 5
Resource Materials	Page 6
Interview with the Director	Page 11

These symbols are used throughout the pack:



READ

Notes from the production, background info or extracts



ACTIVITY

A classroom or open space activity



WRITE

A writing activity



LINKS

Useful web addresses



This pack draws on the rehearsal process employed by Nancy Meckler and her company in interpreting *All's well That Ends Well* in 2013 and consequently explores the interpretations and choices made by this Director and the acting company involved in bringing this production to life.

CONTEXT

Written between 1604 and 1606, *All's Well That Ends Well* is one of the least performed of Shakespeare's comedies. Jonathan Bate describes *All's Well That Ends Well* as sitting in 'the mainstream of comedy insofar as it is about young people'.

The play's male protagonist Bertram is an archetypal representation of a young man; desperate to demonstrate his masculinity and 'prove his worth' as he makes the transition between boyhood and manhood. Joining the army and going to war provides him not only with the fraternity and platonic male acceptance he longs for, but also allows him the independence to pursue his carnal urges. As a young man not yet ready for the commitment of marriage, Bertram chooses to buck any pre-existing ties of duty and follow his own path. In this way he is a very contemporary male protagonist, easily represented in a modern context.

Our heroine Helena, like Bertram, has very modern sensibilities. She takes the course of destiny into her own hands, and refuses to be defined by the gender stereotypes of her environment or her position in society. Pursuing her ambitions by any means she is unrelenting in her determination to love and by loved by Bertram.

When writing *All's Well that Ends Well* Shakespeare took inspiration from Italian writer Boccaccio, and many of the actions within the play seem to echo other well-known fairytales and parables of the period. What this results in is a play with a lot of moral questions, something which led to its categorisation as a 'problem play' in the Victorian era.

FAIRYTALES

As a Director, Nancy Meckler, felt that as **“Shakespeare has based his story on a tale by Boccaccio... the plot has many fairytale elements”**

In interview she explained how this realisation affected the production choices she made at an early stage:

“In keeping with that, we decided to present the piece as a timeless story without being specific about period. The set design is abstract and does not suggest any particular moment in time. Although the costumes have 20th century references, they are primarily based on the characters’ qualities: The Young Hero, The Grieving Countess, The Lovesick Young Woman” (The full interview with Nancy Meckler is contained in this pack)

SYNOPSIS



A full synopsis of the story is available at:

<http://www.rsc.org.uk/whats-on/all-well-that-ends-well/synopsis.aspx>

ACTIVITY 1: TELLING THE STORY



- Provide students with a copy of the synopsis (in the Resource materials) and challenge them to create their own tableaux of the whole story in one image. This image should convey the changing feelings/relationships between characters and begin to interpret what they may be like.
- Watch each group’s tableaux and question specific characters as to why they have chosen their specific positioning. Use this as an opportunity to start asking what they feel may have motivated specific characters. Why do they think Bertram behaves the way he does? Why does his mother support Helen? Why does Helen pursue him?
- Reflection: why might Nancy Meckler have felt this story resembled a fairytale? Do they agree? At what points in the story is the action particularly difficult to believe?
- This play is full of powerful women who seem to manipulate the young Bertram in one way or another. Listen to actress Joanna Horton discussing the reasons why she feels Helen pursues Bertram - <http://www.rsc.org.uk/whats-on/all-well-that-ends-well/video-interview.aspx>

ACTIVITY 2: DESIGNING THE COUNTESS



For this activity, students will need to work in groups.

- Show students the brief from the website that was given to designer Katrina Lindsay (in the Resource Materials). Remembering that the countess also has to act as a ‘stereotype’ of the Grieving Countess (in order to fit in with the fairytale feeling of the

production), challenge the groups to create a costume that brings each of these things to life.

- Share with students the preliminary drawings of the countess' costume in the Resource Materials. Encourage students to label it to show where they can see the elements of the design brief, and of the stereotyping of the Countess.
- Using the other costume images from the Countess Gallery on the website ask students which they think most effectively conveys the Countess' character/role.
<http://www.rsc.org.uk/whats-on/all-well-that-ends-well/designing-the-countess.aspx>

A 'PROBLEM' PLAY

When discussing the nature of this rarely performed play Nancy Meckler explained that, "The play is neither a comedy or a tragedy and people are unsure whether the ending is a happy one. I think that is part of the reason it is called a 'problem play'."

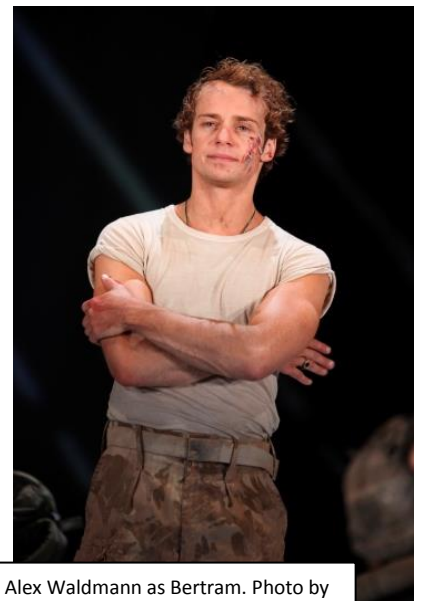
ACTIVITY 1: CHARACTERS ON TRIAL



For this activity, students will need to work in groups of four.

During the rehearsal process, group and private conversations helped the cast to answer some of the questions that arise in this activity and explore the reasons behind their characters' actions.

- In each group, ask students to assign three of them with characters: the King, Bertram and Helena and explain that the fourth person will act as a prosecutor. Each of these characters performs some controversial actions in the play. Ask groups to recall what the two most controversial actions performed by each character are and feed these back to the whole group.
- Give each group the defence and prosecution notes and allow each character to read through their defences.
- Allow the groups some time to stage their own mock trial, before inviting up a representative King, Bertram and Helen. Standing these characters in front of the whole group, invite everyone else to act as a prosecution.
- Why do each of these characters behave the way they do?



Alex Waldmann as Bertram. Photo by Ellie Kurtz

CHARACTER MOTIVATION



Working with a 'Problem Play' means that the cast and director have to find believable and realistic motivations for each of their characters and their problematic actions. With *All's Well that Ends Well*, Nancy Meckler has placed the focus on Bertram's youth and desire to prove himself in war and built this in as his motivation for rebelling against the King's wishes.

The production's trailer clearly shows this visual contrast between love and war in the filming of Helena and Bertram respectively - <http://www.rsc.org.uk/whats-on/all-well-that-ends-well/trailer.aspx>

ACTIVITY 2: EXPLORING MOTIVATION



For this activity, students will need to work in an open space.

- Organise students into twos or threes and distribute the extract from Act II Scene V. Explain that this scene features Bertram and Helena, but Parolles – Bertram's friend is also present. This is the moment where Bertram announces he is leaving for war despite having had to marry Helena. Allow students to do a read through, taking one line each, before working on the text.
- Explain that, in rehearsal, Nancy Meckler used the idea of 'objectives' and 'obstacles' to help the cast explore their characters' motivations as the 'objective' a character has affects the way they might play the scene, as do the 'obstacles' they have to overcome.
- Ask students to produce a short performance of the scene where they focus on character motivation, creating one version where:
 - Bertram's objective is to get away as quickly as possible, and get to war.
 - Helena's objective is to ensure that Bertram is happy, above everything else.
- Encourage students to use voice, movement, emphasis and props to indicate their objectives, and how they're trying to achieve them, when possible.
- Then, ask students to re-read the scene in a short performance where they also introduce an 'obstacle':
 - Bertram's obstacle is that he secretly respects Helena.
 - Helena's obstacle is that she feels she is too low in status and doesn't deserve Bertram.
- Students could then experiment with a different objective and obstacle for the two characters in the scene to see if a different combination works better. Which motivations seem to be more true to the characters?
- In the 2013 production, Nancy Meckler has Bertram kiss Helena on the lips during this scene, before he leaves. What does this suggest about the characters? Why might Nancy Meckler have done this?



Joanna Horton as Helena and Alex Waldmann as Bertram. Photo by Ellie Kurtz

RESOURCE MATERIALS

THE SYNOPSIS

Helena, the orphaned daughter of a doctor, is under the protection of the widowed Countess of Rossillion.

She is desperately in love with Bertram, the Countess' son and so follows him to court when he goes away from home. While at court, in France, she cures the sick French king of an apparently fatal illness.

The king rewards Helena by offering her the husband of her choice. She names Bertram but he resists, not liking the way the choice is made for him or the social standing of his new bride.

When forced by the king to marry her, Bertram refuses to sleep with her and, accompanied by the braggart Parolles, leaves for the Italian wars. He says that he will only accept Helena if she obtains a ring from his finger and becomes pregnant with his child, something he believes to be impossible.

Helena then goes to Italy disguised as a pilgrim, giving up hope of being with Bertram. However, when she arrives she discovers he is nearby and has been flirting with a young local girl, Diana.

Bertram has been trying to seduce Diana for a while, by sending messages and tokens to her through his friend Parolles, but she has not given in to his advances.

Helena then works with Diana's mother and the young woman herself to set up a 'bed trick' whereby she will take the place of Diana, as Bertram tries to seduce her.

Meanwhile, a 'kidnapping trick' humiliates the boastful Parolles, who is made to look foolish as he believes he is held captive and inadvertently offends all his comrades and Bertram hears news that Helena has died.

The 'bed trick', which takes place after Bertram has heard of Helena's death, works and enables Helena to fulfil Bertram's conditions, as she ends up pregnant, although he is unaware. This then leads to a scene in the French Court, where Helena reveals she is alive and has managed to secure Bertram's ring and child – making her his wife, to his Mother's delight

THE COUNTESS BREIF

The Countess should be, primarily, a Mother figure and very nurturing. She is also quite practical and sensible. She should look noble, wealthy and distinguished. Katrina Lindsay, the designer, felt she should seem like she was from 'old money'.

DESIGNING THE COUNTESS



CHARACTERS ON TRIAL

The assertions stated here, on behalf of the characters, formed part of the interpretation that Nancy Meckler and the 2013 Company of *All's Well That Ends Well* decided upon for their characters.

Notes for Prosecution

The King

Forces Bertram to Marry Helena.
Doesn't learn from his mistakes as he finishes the play by encouraging Diana to choose a new husband.
Doesn't listen.

Bertram

Deceives his mother, Helena and the King.
Doesn't take the vow of marriage seriously as he betrays his wife.
Doesn't judge character well. Who would be friends with Parolles?

Helena

Tricks a man into sleeping with her.
Follows Bertram.
Takes Bertram's ring.
Misuses the King's power.
She lies to the Widow.

Notes for defence

The king

Arranges the marriage of Helena and Bertram as an act of kindness, to thank Helena for curing him.
Elevates Helena's social standing.
Rewards Diana for helping Helena.
Punishes Bertram for cheating on Helena.

Bertram

Doesn't love Helena
Is too young to get married.
Is in a state of shock and grief over his Father's death.
Is finally free of the shackles of court life and needs to explore the world.

Helena

Is in love. Perhaps for the first time.
Is young and naive.
Doesn't have the same freedom as men.
Is poor.

EXTRACT FROM ACT II SCENE V (EDITED BY RSC EDUCATION)

Enter HELENA

HELENA

I have, sir, as I was commanded from you,
Spoke with the king and have procured his leave
For present parting; only he desires
Some private speech with you.

BERTRAM

I shall obey his will.
You must not marvel, Helen, at my course,
Which holds not colour with the time, nor does
The ministration and required office
On my particular. Prepared I was not
For such a business; therefore am I found
So much unsettled: this drives me to entreat you
That presently you take our way for home;
And rather muse than ask why I entreat you,
For my respects are better than they seem
And my appointments have in them a need
Greater than shows itself at the first view
To you that know them not. This to my mother:

Giving a letter

'Twill be two days ere I shall see you, so
I leave you to your wisdom.

HELENA

Sir, I can nothing say,
But that I am your most obedient servant.

BERTRAM

Come, come, no more of that.

HELENA

And ever shall
With true observance seek to eke out that
Wherein toward me my homely stars have fail'd
To equal my great fortune.

BERTRAM

Let that go:
My haste is very great: farewell; hie home.

HELENA

Pray, sir, your pardon.

BERTRAM

Well, what would you say?

HELENA

I am not worthy of the wealth I owe,
Nor dare I say 'tis mine, and yet it is;
But, like a timorous thief, most fain would steal
What law does vouch mine own.

BERTRAM

What would you have?

HELENA

Something; and scarce so much: nothing, indeed.
I would not tell you what I would, my lord:
Faith yes;
Strangers and foes do sunder, and not kiss.

BERTRAM

I pray you, stay not, but in haste to horse.

HELENA

I shall not break your bidding, good my lord

.

BERTRAM

Where are my other men, monsieur? Farewell.

Exit HELENA

Go thou toward home; where I will never come
Whilst I can shake my sword or hear the drum.
Away, and for our flight.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

Director Nancy Meckler talks about discovering a rarely produced play.

Have you always thought about directing *All's Well that Ends Well*?

The play is rarely produced so I had only seen it once. I am really enjoying discovering all its qualities, The shifts from comedy to drama to romance are very sudden so it is a real challenge for a director.

Does it help that you have worked with Designer Katrina Lindsay before?

Katrina has designed all my shows for the RSC. I love collaborating with her. Although the concept of the costumes needs to be decided before rehearsal begins, Katrina always leaves space to consult with the actors and build her costumes on the things they are discovering in rehearsal.

When have you set the play?

Shakespeare based his story on a tale by Boccaccio and the plot has many fairytale elements. In keeping with that, we decided to present the piece as a timeless story without being specific about period. The set design is abstract and does not suggest any particular moment in time. Although the costumes have 20th century references, they are primarily based on the characters' qualities: The Young Hero, The Grieving Countess, The Lovesick Young Woman.

What are *All's Well That Ends Well's* strengths?

The play is neither a comedy or a tragedy and people are unsure whether its ending is a happy one. I think that is part of the reason it is called a 'problem play'. But I am really enjoying finding unexpected and surprising clues about the characters which give lots of opportunity for visual storytelling. One of its great strengths is its characters. They are bold, complex, romantic, and funny.

Tell us about the cast.

Our actors are currently performing in *Hamlet* and *As You Like It*. The work in the rehearsal room is all the richer because of the relationships they have built in those plays. For example Hamlet and Horatio now play Bertram and Parolles in *All's Well*. In both plays the relationship is incredibly close, but the characters are completely different. Also Celia and Orlando in *As You Like It* play the love interests in *All's Well*.

All photographs by Ellie Kurtz
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