

Teaching Shakespeare Workshop

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Stage Directions Activity

Part 1: Stage Directions

Shakespeare's plays include "stage directions." These directions tell the actors when to enter or exit and well as what actions to take on the stage. They can even tell the actors what props they need for the scene. For example, this is the stage direction for Act 1, Scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Enter SAMPSON and GREGORY, of the house of Capulet, armed with swords and bucklers

Notice that it tells us who is in the scene (SAMPSON and GREGORY), who they serve (the Capulets), and the props they carry (swords and bucklers). [a buckler is a small, round shield]

Stage directions can also be inserted into the middle of a scene, such as when a character is stabbed or killed. Notice the very specific stage direction during the fight between Mercutio and Tybalt. Why do you think Shakespeare was so specific about how Mercutio is stabbed?

ROMEO

Draw, Benvolio; beat down their weapons.
Gentlemen, for shame, forbear this outrage!
Tybalt, Mercutio, the prince expressly hath
Forbidden bandying in Verona streets:
Hold, Tybalt! good Mercutio!

TYBALT under ROMEO's arm stabs MERCUTIO, and flies with his followers

MERCUTIO

I am hurt.
A plague o' both your houses! I am sped.
Is he gone, and hath nothing? (3.1.52-58)

Part 2: Internal-to-Dialogue Stage Directions

Many of Shakespeare's stage directions appear in the dialogue of his plays. For example, when Juliet is arguing with her father about marrying Tybalt, she says,

Good father, I beseech you on my knees,
Hear me with patience but to speak a word. (3.5.158-159)

1. If you were acting the role of Juliet, how would you perform these lines? What action would you take when Juliet says, "I beseech you on my knees"?

Juliet's father does not respond well to her request. Please read the following lines and look closely at the dialogue.

CAPULET Hang thee, young baggage! disobedient wretch!
I tell thee what: get thee to church o' Thursday,
Or never after look me in the face:
Speak not, reply not, do not answer me;
My fingers itch. Wife, we scarce thought us blest
That God had lent us but this only child;
But now I see this one is one too much,
And that we have a curse in having her: (3.5.160-167)

2. Can you identify any stage action implied through Capulet's words?

Now, please watch two stage performances of this scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. Note how each actor perform these lines. Pay special attention to Juliet's delivery of "I beseech you on my knees."

3. What differences do you notice in the actors' movements on the stage?
 - Juliet and Capulet, Stratford Festival, 2013
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pB9JwAHrsRg&feature=youtu.be&t=8>
 - Juliet and Capulet, Royal Shakespeare Company, 2018
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rkAe_5I7to&feature=youtu.be&t=128
4. Why do you think some actors choose to follow or ignore Shakespeare's stage directions?