# Making Shakespeare accessible

***Francesca Ellis** describes the Coram Shakespeare Schools Foundation Theatre Festival's work with SEN schools.*

Every year since 2000, hundreds of thousands of school pupils across the country have taken part in the Coram Shakespeare Schools Foundation (CSSF) Theatre Festival. It is the world's largest youth drama festival and sees young people performing abridged Shakespeare plays on professional theatre stages. We engage a diverse range of children and young people from all backgrounds, and over 21 years we are proud to have worked with hundreds of special educational needs schools, supporting teachers to make Shakespeare accessible for their students and unlock their potential.

*"A level of creativity that can be magical"*

Working with Shakespeare's plays offers teachers and children the chance to encounter a host of fascinating characters in all kinds of scenarios and explore important themes that still resonate with us today. Inclusivity is at the heart of CSSF's work, and over the years we have seen just how much scope there is to get creative with Shakespeare's plays, particularly for SEN schools. We've seen Makaton Macbeths, dances on the theme of love, revenge and jealousy, a sung version of A Midsummer Night's Dream and a host of other imaginative approaches to the plays. CSSF Associate Artist Iain Jones, who works directly to support teachers and students at SEN schools, said: "SEN students often share a level of creativity that can be magical. In 2019, Bedelsford School performed The Tempest for the Theatre Festival. The students asked the question 'what is a Tempest?' They decided it was a 'Big Windy Thing'. This led them to make an amazing prop by attaching a

windsock to a large desk fan. The sensory approach that SEN teachers instinctively bring to the plays is highly theatrical and a joy to watch. Their energy, commitment and connection with the students is inspirational."

For this year's performance, Bedelsford School in Kingston-Upon-Thames have worked with Much Ado About Nothing. One of the themes they have been exploring came from the line of text "There was a star danced, and under that I was born" and each student had made a star with their face in the middle. Iain notes that for the children, "being born under a star meant that they would always find happiness. It wonderfully embraced a theme of remaining positive, even when things are tough."

Bedelsford assistant headteacher Jessica Webb also found the theme of deception and lying in Much Ado About Nothing made for a rich exploration with her students: "We have done lots of work with our music therapists looking at how we express our emotions and what we would do if someone was lying to us. Our students, and others with disabilities, are more likely to be abused in this way so we wanted to give them opportunities to sense when something might not feel right, and to think about the people who might be able to help them." For Jessica, the universal nature of Shakespeare's plays provides plenty of opportunities to link with the school's wider curriculum and support the students' social and emotional skills for the future.


## About the author

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**shakespeareschools.org**

*"Make the project even more inclusive for children and young people with clinical vulnerabilities"*

In the wake of the pandemic, CSSF worked hard to ensure that the festival could continue despite school and theatre closures, with a full online programme that schools embraced with impressive creativity and innovation. This enabled Bedelsford School to make the project even more inclusive for children and young people with clinical vulnerabilities. Jessica says: "A child might not be able to attend school because they've had a really bad night or they're in hospital, but they can always access the content and their learning online. We had a student who had their bedroom turned into a magical forest."

format was so successful that CSSF launched its inaugural Film Festival at the end of 2021 and SEN schools have found it particularly rewarding to have a film that they can play for students time and again.

Jessica received CPD sessions from CSSF that have enabled her to adapt the plays to meet her students "where they are at" and use a range of tools including play through song, dance, call and response, artwork, Makaton, projection, text, costume, sensory props and even hydrotherapy.

The online programme, which Bedelsford is running this year in parallel to a live performance featuring ten pupils at the Rose Theatre, is also a fantastic opportunity to include the children's families. Tim Godwin, an artist and drama teacher collaborating on the project with Bedelsford, said: "We have a boy who has been in and out of Great Ormond Street Hospital but using tech we can have a conversation with his family and find out when he can sing a song. We were at his bedside. We also have grandparents tuning in from around the country."

Tim also highlighted how the online format had unintended benefits for children and young people at SEN schools: "Our online performance last year took place over six weeks, we were able to do it each day. Very few of our children really benefit from a one-off event, they benefit far more from things being repeated." For Tim, it was also a way to keep the children motivated and engaged: "Using tech allows us to go in with a burst of energy and to keep going despite the pandemic. There is nothing that can stop us! This is what all the children need to aspire to, nothing is going to stop them." The online Shakespeare's plays are packed with characters who are extraordinary in some way and as Tim notes, this can be really validating for students in SEN schools: "In Much Ado About Nothing there is a character with autistic traits called Don John who says, 'let me be who I am and seek not to alter me'. And that is our children's experience every day in the neurotypical world". For Jessica, participating in the CSSF Theatre Festival was a recognition of everything that children in SEN schools can achieve: "Our learning was accepted and celebrated in a way that it hasn't been elsewhere. Our voice is valid". SEN

Coram SSF are currently recruiting schools to take part in the 2022/3 academic year. If you would like to know more, please visit **shakespeareschools.org** and contact the charity on **hello@coramshakespeareschools.org.uk**, **0207 601 1800**.