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## DOES CINCY APPRECIATE WHAT IT HAS?

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NEW SCHOOL STUDENTS  
LEARN OLD-SCHOOL LESSONS  
PERFORMING 'MACBETH'

# ELEMENTARY SHAKESPEARE

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THE ENQUIRER/GARY LANDERS

Students from The New School in North Avondale rehearse "Macbeth" in their after-school Shakespeare club. The students will take the play on the road under the direction of Jeff Groh, former actor and education director of Cincinnati Shakespeare, and now assistant director of The New School.



COVER STORY



**INSIDE THE REHEARSAL ROOM**

Watch The New School Montessori's Shakespeare Club rehearse scenes from William Shakespeare's "Macbeth." Video at Cincinnati.com.



THE ENQUIRER/GARY LANDERS

Owen Cummings, playing the part of Lord Banquo, rehearses a scene from *Macbeth* in the after-school Shakespeare Club at The New School. The students will be taking the play on the road under the direction of Jeff Groh, former actor and education director of Cincinnati Shakespeare Company, and now assistant director of The New School.

# KIDS CHANNEL THE BARD

Hark! Verily, I say, little ones from North Avondale's The New School Montessori are performing 'Macbeth'



**JULIE ENGBRECHT**

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Join me as I go behind the scenes to explore the arts in Greater Cincinnati. Email [jengbrecht@enquirer.com](mailto:jengbrecht@enquirer.com).

Watch these fourth- through sixth-graders from a distance and you'll see what looks like playground fun:

A game of ring-around-the-rosie over here, a mock battle over there.

These kids *are* having fun. But there's something more serious at work here. They are performing scenes from "Macbeth" – one of William Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, with a plot that includes war, murder, revenge and madness.

Ring-around-the-rosie? That's a gathering of witches chanting "Double, double toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble." That mock battle? It's a set-up to key parts of the story.

Jeff Groh, assistant director of The New School Montessori in



THE ENQUIRER/GARY LANDERS  
Aidan Adkins, playing a witch, rehearses a scene from "Macbeth" in the after-school Shakespeare club at the New School in North Avondale.

North Avondale, is standing on the edges of the school's Annex room watching the action.

Groh has been an actor and education director with the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company, and now, for the last 14 years, a Montessori educator.

Shortly after he arrived at the school in 2009 as a teacher for ages 9 through 12, he persuaded school director Eric Dustman to let him

start an after-school Shakespeare Club.

He had a notion that studying and performing Shakespeare – becoming "emotionally involved" in the material – would better help his students better engage with literature and teach important critical thinking skills.

Dustman agreed. "I think we have have a much larger responsibility as educators to do more for

kids than to simply teach them what's going to be on the test," he says.

But the kids were young, and Groh was a little nervous about how difficult Shakespeare's archaic language would be for them.

The surprise would be his.

"They were remarkable in their ability to absorb the language, committing it effortlessly to memory," Groh says.

## Taking the show on the road

This year the Shakespeare Club, which in past years had completed two performances at the school, is working toward something entirely new.

Lib Stone heard about the Shakespeare Club from Groh at a party and suggested the group perform its 45-minute version of "Macbeth" for other schools. She donated \$10,000 to make it happen, including a mobile set designed by a CCM graduate, costumes and transportation. There will be at least 10 performances.



THE ENQUIRER/GARY LANDERS

Jeff Groh works with students as they rehearse "Macbeth" in their after-school Shakespeare Club. Kids are "remarkable in their ability to absorb the language, committing it effortlessly to memory," Groh says.

## Shakespeare

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Including Shakespeare in an elementary school curriculum is not necessarily unusual, though Common Core curriculum only requires that students learn an "archaic" language (Shakespeare included) by the seventh grade.

But it is possible that The New School now has the only elementary Shakespeare touring company in the United States.

Research conducted for this story by the national Shakespeare Theatre Association turned up only one example that came close. The San Francisco Shakespeare Company has an annual residency for a group of home schoolers ages 8 to 13 each year, culminating in a single performance.

Maggie Lou Rader is a Shakespearean actress who is director of Cincinnati Shakespeare Company's new PROJECT 38, a collaboration with 38 schools culminating in a weeklong free Shakespeare festival in Over-the-Rhine. The New School is the only elementary school performing as part of PROJECT 38.

"The best part about bringing Shakespeare into elementary classrooms is that elementary-age students sometimes understand the plots better than adults at first," Rader says. "That age group of kids are used to using context clues to figure out what words mean. And at that age, they don't take it as an insult to their intelligence if they don't understand every single word like adults sometimes do."

### 'Pay attention to the words'

Tim Kalin, who just turned 12, is a mesmerizing Macbeth who credits his complete lack of nerves to being a competitive swimmer.

He got into Shakespeare Club early, as a third-grader, and was cast as a guard in "Macbeth" with just a few lines. He also performed in the Shakespeare Club's "Midsummer Night's Dream" and "Romeo and Juliet" in the fourth and fifth grades.

He likes "Macbeth" the best of the three. "I just like how it's direct," he says.

He thinks he might want to be a surgeon or conduct scientific and medical research like his parents. Kalin's parents immigrated here from Russia to conduct their research, and Groh finds it remarkable that their son Tim has been able to master such an elevated level of English.

Through Shakespeare Club Kalin says he's "learned to be more careful with his reading."

"If I'd give advice about performing or reading, I'd say be very careful and learn what it actually means before you get into acting, so you know what to act, what your character is going to be when you say those lines," Kalin says. "You really have to pay attention to the words."

### Progress in the rehearsal room

The Shakespeare Club is limited to 18 students, who meet for roughly 90 minutes every Tuesday and Thursday after school. They are making impressive progress toward being able to perform for an audience in early March.

Groh started shortly after school began. The students read the entirety of "Macbeth," and Groh and his assistant director, teacher Laura Slanker, led discussions about the play. In September, Cincinnati Shakespeare Company performed its version of Macbeth for the group.

By the time of the first table reading in early October, the kids were able to discuss performance qualities, themes, lessons they had learned from Macbeth and toss out quotes that might be used for the set.

By early November, the group was "off book," meaning they had their roles memorized and no longer needed scripts. A dance scene was being choreographed, some costumes had been ordered, and the set was just a month away from being completed.

During a rehearsal in late October, Groh helps the nine witches chanting lines as they move into a growing circle. With escalating feeling, he encourages: "Weird ... weirder ... weirdest."

He praises the actor playing King Duncan for his regal quality, but gently suggests he get louder.

He demonstrates how he wants a fight scene and death to go, falling to the floor in the process.

The actors rehearse the fight scene a number of times, and catch on quickly. Do it one more time, Groh finally says, "Let's get this in our bodies."

At the end of rehearsal, the group circles up for acknowledgements. Kudos for the actor who performed a great death scene, a round of applause for a people already off book – appreciation for all the progress already made. Groh talks about what's next, and sets some goals for the week ahead.

### A stage for them to shine

During the school day, The New School's fourth- through sixth-graders are in the same classroom, with three different subject-area teachers.

On one morning, the sixth-graders are discussing their senior project, to be presented in May, with Slanker. In a nearby space, eight fifth-graders are getting their first hands-on algebra lesson from teacher Nancy Buchman. Owen Cummings, who as Banquo has one of the more prominent roles in Macbeth, is one of those fifth-graders. In fact, most of the morning's algebra students are part of the Shakespeare Club.

And just like that, Shakespeare has become a normal part of school culture. Every so often, on the playground or in the lunchroom, you can hear the kids quoting from Macbeth. Groh says his students sometimes use situations in Macbeth, or the other plays they've performed, to describe something they might be going through, or maybe just to make a joke.

Dustman sees the Shakespeare Club magic at work firsthand. He barely remembers learning Shakespeare, even in high school. But he's watched his two daughters benefit in numerous ways from being part of the group, and he says he'll insist his son be part of it when he's old enough, too.

"It reaffirms for me the need to never underestimate children and what they're capable of," Dustman says. "(Groh) has really set the stage for them to shine, to do great things." ■

## SHAKESPEARE SUITABLE FOR FAMILIES

The New School's performance of "Macbeth" will be a part of Cincinnati Shakespeare Company's first annual PROJECT38 Festival April 15-22. This weeklong festival features the theatrical, musical and visual art projects of hundreds of students throughout the region. All events will take place in Over-the-Rhine in Washington Park, Memorial Hall and more. Details on this free will be available at [cincyshakes.com](http://cincyshakes.com) early next year. The New School is one of only two elementary schools participating, and the only elementary school to be giving a full performance.

Cincinnati Shakespeare performs "A Comedy of Errors" Nov. 21-Dec. 13. It is one of Shakespeare's most accessible works, and a good introduction for the family. Student rush tickets are \$14 and are available 30 minutes before curtain. For information: 513-381-2273; [www.cincyshakes.com](http://www.cincyshakes.com).

## LESSONS FROM MACBETH

» If you do something bad and get away with it, can you ever really get away with it? "I really don't think you can," says sixth-grader Tim Kalin, who plays Macbeth. "You'll always remember."

» Ambition has a dark side. "Ambition took (Macbeth) to want to murder Banquo and Duncan," Kalin explains.

## A COMMITMENT TO ARTS EDUCATION

The New School Montessori, located in North Avondale in a Samuel Hannaford-designed mansion, currently has 105 students, ages 3 through sixth grade.

The school is committed to integrating the arts into its curriculum and providing after-school arts enrichment – including the twice-a-week Shakespeare Club. Earlier this month, a professional development day was devoted to Visual Thinking Strategies – using art to increase critical thinking, communication and visual literacy skills. The school campus includes an Enrichment Center, which houses its arts programs.

You can learn more about what's happening at the school via daily Facebook reports, at [www.facebook.com/TheNewSchoolMontessori](http://www.facebook.com/TheNewSchoolMontessori).

For information, or to schedule a Macbeth performance, contact Jeff Groh at 513-281-7999 or [jeff.g@newschoolmontessori.com](mailto:jeff.g@newschoolmontessori.com).