

**At a Different Kind of Attention: Shakespeare at West Point**  
**By Tom Kelley, Lead Teaching Artist, Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival**

*(This post is a part of series highlighting the work of recipients of TCG's Blue Star Theatres grant program. Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival is a recipient of Blue Star Theatres grant funding to support its Shakespeare residency program.)*

*In spring 2016, Tom Kelley and his teaching partner Gillian Wiggin led a team of 12 experienced HVSF teaching artists (TAs) conducting an intensive Shakespeare residency for all 1,100 first-year cadets enrolled at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, NY. The USMA campus and the West Point community is just across the Hudson River from HVSF's home town of Cold Spring, NY; in fact, the historic fort at West Point (and the USMA athletic fields) are directly across the river from HVSF's spectacular theater tent where the company performs its 30th anniversary season in summer 2016. HVSF audiences are sometimes treated to the amazing sight of early evening parachute jumps by USMA cadets.*

*Each of the 1,100 cadets enrolled in the spring 2016 HVSF residency was responsible for selecting and memorizing a monologue from a Shakespeare play. Cadets were then divided into eight sections to participate in acting workshops taught by our team of TAs.*

We started out by getting into “actor neutral.” It can be challenging for the cadets to find a “relaxed” readiness position, a blank canvas, as opposed to being “at attention.” This led to a discussion about the importance of being open, relaxed, and ready so that as an actor you can find new and unexplored aspects of yourself as you begin playing other characters.

We played “Shay Shay,” a call-and-response warm-up exercise to get the cadets out of their heads and into a non-judgmental, in-the-moment mindset. The goal was to show that making big mistakes in theater can be something to celebrate because it means you made a big choice and committed to it. We also did a brief round of a sound and motion exercise, which builds trust. It was so fun to see the cadets realize that whatever they did was going to be supported and repeated and celebrated by their fellow cadets. By the last round of this game, the cadets were loose, and they were laughing. Later they said they were surprised to discover that they could come up with something to contribute without thinking about it. By the end of this exercise, most cadets were ready to take chances and to trust that no one was judging them.

We did an exercise called “Cut Lines,” in which the cadets read the same line of Shakespeare with different intentions—for example, first with the aim of helping someone, then to reprimand someone, then to welcome someone. This introduces the idea that, even with Shakespearean text, it's not always what you say, but how you say it. Next, the cadets were asked to create a gesture based on a single word found in their cut line. That gesture helped them connect the action of the line to the way they use their bodies. Gillian and I went around to observe cadets sharing their lines with their gestures. It was so engaging when the cadets really allowed their bodies and faces and voices to get involved in conveying the meaning of the line. The cadets felt the difference; they could see the difference in others when the commitment level was high. That also meant the vulnerability level was high, which was so cool to see from the cadets.

We finished off by going still farther with the physicality of a character. Depending on the character that was being explored, the energy in the room shifted in a palpable way. As we all moved from being led by joy, anger, sadness—not only the quality of the movement, but also the quality of the air in the room changed. The cadets told us they really enjoyed seeing the world through another point of view—simply by changing their physicality and movement.

It was awesome to see the growth in each cadet as they began to truly pursue their wants as a Shakespearean character. We encouraged cadets to use their own voices instead of putting on a “Shakespeare” voice. This allowed them to access vulnerability and truth in the way the character interacted with the world of the play and the moment of time in which the monologue took place.

Working with these cadets was a very rewarding experience. I was so impressed with their courage in sharing themselves with each other and us.

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**Tom Kelley** is an improviser, actor, and teacher based out of NYC. He performs and teaches at the Reckless Theatre and Training Center, where he is currently developing a long-form of improv that explores different playwrights in fully improvised plays. He toured France in a production of *Julius Caesar* that premiered at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Other credits include Off-Broadway: *Love Goes to Press*, *Wife to James Whelan* (Mint Theatre Company), *Dust* (Westside Theatre), *Phenomenon* (HERE Arts Center), *Dog Sees God* (The Red Door Theatre). Regional: *Cardenio*, *Julius Caesar*, *Donnie Darko* (American Repertory Theatre), *Pride and Prejudice* (Actors Theatre of Louisville), *Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Comedy of Errors* (Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival). TV: *How to Make It in America* (HBO). Tom has studied improvisational theatre at the Upright Citizens Brigade and Reckless Theatre. He is on the Reckless Theatre house team Too Big of a Dog, which performs a style of organic improv. He teaches acting and improv workshops for children and adults, including working as a teaching artist with the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival. He earned his MFA in acting from the ART/MXAT Institute for Advanced Theatre Training at Harvard University.

*Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national service organization for theatre, and Blue Star Families, the country’s largest chapter-based military families non-profit organization, are pleased to support the second round of the Blue Star Theatres Grant Program. Through support from MetLife Foundation, the Grant Program funds efforts that deepen the relationship between participating Blue Star Theatres and their local military community: veterans, children of active duty military, military spouses, and/or active duty military. Each theatre received \$5,000 to support activities that could include talkbacks, outreach programs, sponsored tickets, performances, playwriting workshops, readings, or workshops that focus on military themes and service.*

