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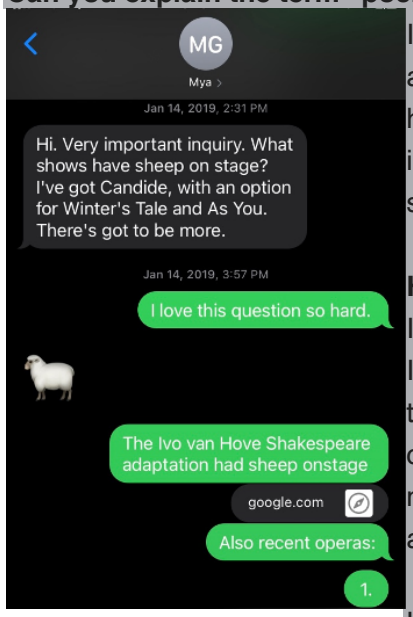
Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas

Shakespeare Webcomic Dramaturgy

Kate Pitt is the pocket dramaturg for the Shakespeare webcomic Good Tickle Brain, written and illustrated by Mya Gosling. The year-long project "Scene by Scene Stick Figure Hamlet" *is now available to read for free online.*

Can you explain the term "pocket dramaturg"?



I think it started with the sheep. I kept texting you random theatrical and Shakespeare-related questions and then you would very helpfully text back with a whole bunch of links to sources and interpretations. It was like having a dramaturg in my pocket, so I just started calling you my "pocket dramaturg."

How has dramaturgy supported your work?

It's given me another person's mind to bounce ideas off of and see if I'm heading in the right direction. I discovered in the last six years that I've been doing this without a pocket dramaturg, that drawing comics can be an incredibly isolating creative endeavor. It was just me sitting down and writing something and hoping that it worked and hoping it was funny and hoping it was understandable.

Having a dramaturg involved makes my work less isolating, more fulfilling, and just more fun. With longer adaptions like *Hamlet*, we can actually dig into the text and think about different interpretations of lines and performances. It's been amazing to have that kind of expertise and knowledge of the text with questions like, "Does Gertrude know about the poison and

what are the implications of that?" Having that dialogue has been really helpful to the point where I can't imagine doing another full play adaptation without having you to bounce ideas off of.

How is your work theatrical?
I love being in the audience and watching plays, but I don't want to be onstage and I hate speaking in public so my comics are the way that I get to be in the theater. They are where I get to be a director, I get to be an actor, I get to be a playwright. Comics are theatrical in that they are the marriage of words and graphics – I have to figure out not only how to tell a story in words but also how to draw it. I have to know how all the characters feel about what is going on and then figure out where they are standing. Having a theatrically-minded dramaturg fits perfectly into a situation where I have to block the whole play "onstage".

How do students use your work?
I've had lots of teachers from elementary school through grad school use my comics in the classroom. High school teachers use the comics as a guide, so each time they start reading a new scene, they'll give their students my comic as a framework for where the plot is going. Same with ESL students who struggle with the language – they can use the comic to give them a first step up to engage with the text and get grounded in the plot and the characters.

With high school students, a lot of the work is trying to show students that Shakespeare is *fun.* That is a huge barrier to people who are learning Shakespeare for the first time. Everyone is told that Shakespeare is boring, but I'm trying to show that not only are the plots violent and rude but also that you can make fun of Shakespeare. That license to look at Shakespeare and say, "this is really messed up" or "this is really stupid" or "as far as the plot goes, this makes no sense whatsoever" is important. We have to be able to point out his flaws and give ourselves permission not to take him so seriously.

Now that *Hamlet* is done, what next?
I would love to do all the Histories at some point: just start with *Richard II* and go all the way through. That's my dream. I've been thinking about *As You Like It* but the comedies are really hard to do! It's much easier to poke fun at *Hamlet. Twelfth Night* was a real struggle to try and find the humor because it is already funny on its own. Since I'm re-telling everything in my own voice, if the joke is there and it works, I'm just transposing or paraphrasing the original text and that doesn't interest me as much as finding something funny that's not in the text – a subtext or an observation – and bringing it out. That's much easier to do in the tragedies where everything is so serious and overwrought. The challenge for me is always to bring my own interpretations, sensibilities, and humor.