



20  
STORIES  
HIGH ACTORS  
LAB

who the f-k is  
shakespeare?

UNITY  
Theatre



# Self Care Toolkit

*For individuals who have seen, or are about to see, the show*



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# Introduction

This self-care toolkit is designed for individuals who have seen, or are about to see, our show ‘who the f–k is shakespeare?’

Within it, you will find information about the show (a detailed synopsis of what happens) and information about the themes. You will also find tips on how to look after yourself during the piece, and some signposting to organisations who can help if self-care is not enough.

# About who the f–k is shakespeare?

A political occupation of Shakespeare, developed by Ameera Conrad with the cast.

Lady Macbeth - murderous.

Cleopatra - conniving.

Viola - witty.

Katherine - difficult.

Ophelia - tragic.

The so-called ‘facts’ of their stories; stories steeped in racism, patriarchy, and violence. But the facts are untrue, these stories just won’t do.

These five characters have had enough. They’re breaking the paper ceiling of Shakespeare’s Complete Works to tell their own stories and repurpose old tales for the next generation.

Watch them blow the dust off the classics, tear out the pages, and stage a multi-art form political occupation of Shakespeare with punchy verses, punky attitudes, and whole lotta wit.

“We stand here now, to speak but for ourselves  
Our lives will not be stories on your shelves.”

Get with it, or get the f–k out the way.

*who the f–k is shakespeare?* is a showcase of local talent created and directed by 20 Stories High Associate Artistic Director, Ameera Conrad. The showcase is the culmination of Actor’s Lab, a programme designed to train, develop, and promote the next generation of professional working class, culturally diverse, Deaf/Disabled and neurodivergent Actors in Merseyside.

## **Content Warning**

Discussions around gender, violence, patricide, suicide, war, murder, racism, patriarchy, I mean, listen, it’s Shakespeare. It will also be funny, light, and just a bit tongue-in-cheek.

Age Guidance 14+

# Self Care

We are really pleased that you have chosen to watch this show. In this performance we are dealing with difficult subjects. However, we hope that you will, in the end, find it a personally empowering experience. This toolkit has been designed to offer support to anyone engaging with the show, especially anyone who might be impacted by its content. We hope this toolkit provides you with specialist resources and tools from professionals that may help.

## **Take action if anything personal comes up for you**

Theatre can bring us face to face with our own joys and struggles. This piece of theatre contains moments that may trigger difficult emotions. Here are some tips for things that you can do to look after yourself if this happens.

### **Tips – how to look after yourself**

**Make space for feelings:** There may be times in the show where you feel strong emotions towards the characters or because of the content. This is understandable. Notice when this happens and take deep breaths to get you through those moments.

**Remember your breath:** If you become triggered, breathing is a great way to bring yourself back into a state of calm, lower your heart rate and create space in your brain to start thinking things through at an easier pace. Try breathing in for four seconds, holding your breath for four seconds, exhaling for four seconds and holding again. Repeat this for as long as you need until your breath feels in control again. Lots of mobiles and smart watches offer apps which can help you with this.

**Watch with someone:** Watch the show with someone that you would feel able to discuss the themes in the play with. Preferably someone who understands you well enough to notice what things might get to you the most. If you can't watch the show with someone you could make a plan to chat with someone about it afterwards. We will have an access and wellbeing table available front of house with a staff member should you like to speak to one of our team before or after the show. They will be mental health first aid trained.

**Read a summary of the show:** If you would like to know the content before you watch, so that there is nothing unexpected, you will find an overview of all the show and full synopsis of the piece on the next page.

**Get help:** If you need to take time out there will be a mental health first aider at every venue who you can talk to before, during or after the show. There is also a signposting section at the end of this document for helplines and organisations who can help.

# Synopsis

Note: the following description contains details of the show.

## Prologue

The stage is set with 5 different chairs arranged in an arch with microphones next to each one. There is a defaced picture of William Shakespeare hanging at the back of the stage in a gold frame.

Five actors enter the stage and take a seat in their chairs. They all breathe and begin a sonnet asking who the f–k is William Shakespeare? Saying he is one of the most famous playwrights, but they want to put a spotlight on some of his female characters as they weren't all treated as they should have been.

They talk about 90s and 00s teen romantic comedies that Shakespeare has inspired: 10 Things I Hate About You, She's The Man, Romeo + Juliet, Gnomeo & Juliet, West Side Story, the remake of West Side Story, Warm Bodies (the zombie version), The Lion King and Mean Girls.

They are five of Shakespeare's most iconic characters and they explain that they are going to be stepping out of their stories, rewriting their narratives and showing new perspectives.

One actor introduces each character: Kat, Cleopatra, Ophelia, Viola and Lady Macbeth. They describe themselves as The Shrew (Kat), The Last Queen of Egypt (Cleo), The Witch (Lady M), The Twin (Viola) and The Virgin (Ophelia), words which have been used to describe these characters over the years. And they are done with it.

## Act 1: Kat (from Taming of the Shrew)

Katharina speaks a poem into a microphone explaining the context of her story. Kat is a confident, outspoken woman, older sister of Bianca (who has many men wanting to marry her). Kat's father made a rule that she needs to marry before Bianca can and gives away her hand in marriage to Petruchio - the worst man in Shakespearean history.

They switch to a vocabulary lesson, explaining the meaning of negging - when a guy disguises insults as flirtation.

We go to a scene from Taming of the Shrew, between Petruchio (played by Cleo) and Kat, they have a conversation where Petruchio reveals that he has made an agreement with her father that he will marry her and he will tame her.

Kat speaks into the microphone and is angry, she complains that she isn't some wild creature that needs to be tamed. The rest of the cast try to interject to calm her down, but she can't be calmed. She ends her speech saying she has been forced to marry him and must do as he says.

We go to a scene from Taming of the Shrew, Kat tries to dismiss Petruchio (played by Lady M) but he won't take it. The scene ends with Petruchio describing all the ways he owns Kat: she is his property.

Kat picks up her microphone and talks about how her story is tragic even though it's classed as a comedy. Petruchio has stripped away her identity; she only exists as Baptista's daughter and Petruchio's wife. She talks about all the ways he mistreats her: not letting her drink, ripping up her clothes, not letting her sleep. And she doesn't know why he treats her that way.

We go to a scene from Taming of the Shrew, where we see Petruchio (played by Ophelia) gaslighting Kat. He says it is the moon that shines bright, she claims it is the sun, he makes her say it is the moon and then when she switches her mind to say it is the moon, he makes her say it is the sun. She is fed up and defeated.

Viola speaks up, saying they don't want to play the next scene because they don't want to put Kat through it. Cleo, Lady M and Ophelia encourage them to do it, that it's important to help each other tell their stories etc. Kat interjects, telling Viola to do it, that people need to know her story.

Viola walks towards Kat to play Petruchio in the final scene from Taming of the Shrew. When they walk to stand behind Kat's chair, they tell Kat to tell women how they should serve their husbands and then they push Kat off her chair. From the floor, Kat submits to his coercion in a final speech, declaring that women should place their hands below their husband's foot.

The rest of the characters speak up about how nobody should be putting their foot below anyone's feet, especially men whose only way of getting power is by diminishing someone else's. Viola helps Kat to her feet and Cleo hands her the microphone. Kat talks about how she is done with the way she was treated and declares that she was gaslit. The rest of the cast surround her and support her for finally speaking out.

## Act 2: Cleo (from Anthony and Cleopatra)

Cleopatra walks to her chaise lounge and stands on it, the rest of the characters sit at her feet. Cleo speaks into a microphone to tell her story - she is the last Queen of Egypt, leader of an army, took back her throne and helped Caesar to take over Rome. She is powerful. She ends the talking about her love for Anthony.

We go to a scene from Anthony and Cleopatra. Cleo calls for Charmian (played by Ophelia), her handmaiden, and the cast bring her chaise lounge to her. She drapes herself onto the chaise, asking Charmian for a drink to help her sleep while Anthony is away. In this scene, we see how much Cleo loves and cares for Anthony. A messenger (played by Lady M) enters and gives her a pearl that Anthony kissed several times as a gift.

Cleo speaks about her political standpoint, where she smuggled herself into Caesar's chamber in a carpet and the two conspired and murdered her brother so she could take the throne. She then talks about how she presented herself to Anthony when he summoned her, she was on a golden barge, dressed as Aphrodite. We see some of the cast fan her with golden leaves. She asks about how Anthony could possibly choose another woman over her?

We go to a scene from Anthony and Cleopatra, she is sitting on her chaise when a messenger (played by Kat) enters. He delivers the news that Anthony is betrothed to Octavia. This makes Cleo really mad, and she threatens the messenger.

Cleo talks about how she has been double crossed by Octavian Caesar by making Anthony marry his sister. She is angry at men grabbing for power and back stabbing her. She talks about all the cruel things people say about her behind her back but she will not take it, she is strong and she will stand against Octavian Caesar if he declares war against her.

We see a scene from Anthony and Cleopatra with Enobarbus (played by Viola) who tells Cleo that she shouldn't go to war with her army because women would be distracting for the men. Cleo dismisses him and says she will not stand down.

The rest of the characters are in awe of Cleo's strength but talk about how it didn't last long. They explain how Cleo fought alongside Anthony, but they were defeated. Anthony was told Cleo had taken her life, so he did the same. He didn't die immediately so was carried to her temple so he could die in her arms.

We see Cleo mourning for the loss of Anthony and her worry that Caesar will come for her and her people. She does not want to appear weak and so she cannot let him take her.

In a scene from Anthony and Cleopatra, Caesar (played by Viola) states that he will show Cleo generosity if she lets him take her, but if she tries to kill herself, as Anthony did, her people will receive no kindness.

Cleo sees no benefit in joining with Rome, she talks of the future, how the Roman Empire will rise and fall and the important part Cleo played. She talks about how even today people will still talk about the Roman Empire, as though it is still the most important thing humanity has ever done. She tells her maids to dress her like a Queen and put a gold robe around her and a gold crown on her head. She is handed a golden snake, which she wraps around her arm. She stands and declares that she is fire and air.

The rest of the cast surround her and congratulate her on speaking her truth.

### **Act 3: Lady M (from Macbeth)**

Lady Macbeth scoffs at the talk of people speaking their truth because the truth is gory. She takes the microphone and introduces herself as the original Girl Boss, the biggest, baddest Shakespeare character, the one with the plans and the schemes. Known as a bad guy because she's a girl, but she won't back down no matter what.

We go to a scene from Macbeth, where a messenger (played by Viola) delivers a letter to Lady M. She speaks of how Macbeth is the Thane of Glamis and Cawdor and he will be King next, but she is worried about his character and that he lacks ambition. The messenger enters again to tell her that the King is on his way to stay with them.

Lady M calls upon the spirits to help her with her plan of murder, she wants to be stripped of regret and guilt so she can do what needs to be done. Macbeth (played by Ophelia) enters, and she tells him that the King will not live to see tomorrow, she encourages him to be charming but be ready to strike when he least expects it. She will concoct the perfect plan.

Lady M cuts the scene by calling for a history lesson. The cast all tell of the date their play was written, which were between 1592 and 1606. This was during the time when Queen Elizabeth was on the throne, she was the first and only unmarried Queen. Although she was on the throne and ruling a country and an empire, regular working-class women had no rights at all. Women weren't even allowed to perform so



all the characters would have been played by men in wigs. This play was also being performed for the first time right after the Gunpowder plot, which feels especially odd!

Kat sets the scene; Macbeth is waiting for the King to finish his dinner so he can stab him in his chamber. We then go to a scene from Macbeth, with Lady M encouraging Macbeth (played by Cleo) to kill the King and he is having doubts.

Kat calls out SHOTS and the cast gather round to do a shot together 'to the death of the King!'. Lady M makes a joke about gender being the only difference between being bitchy and ambitious. She takes the bottle and walks away, pouring more shots for herself as she talks about how her legacy has been tarnished as being an evil character when all she did was support her husband and encourage him and what is wrong with that? The rest of the cast creep up to her and take the bottle and shot glass from her. They try to calm her, but she is drunk, bold and excited.

We go to a scene from Macbeth. Lady M is waiting while Macbeth is upstairs killing the King. She is on edge every time she hears a noise. Macbeth (played by Kat) comes down and tells her he has done it. He is shaken and Lady M tries to soothe him when she sees the daggers in his hands. She tells him to take the daggers back upstairs but he cannot do it, so she takes them from him and gets blood on her hands.

She is looking at the blood on her hands and asking the rest of the cast for some water. Kat and Cleo sit her down on Kat's stool whilst Viola goes offstage to get a vase for her to wash her hands in the water. She talks about how she feels no guilt for now she is Queen.

Lady M starts describing the effect this has had on Macbeth, that the guilt will keep him up all night, eat away at him, he will make rash decisions and become paranoid. Lady M is a state, it is clear this is starting to influence her too. She is talking about the blood that has been spilled, the blood is everywhere, and it is on her hands.

We go to a scene from Macbeth, Lady M is rubbing at her hands to try to get the blood out, nothing she can do can get the blood out. Kat and Cleo move Lady M back to her seat and put her coat on her like a blanket. Kat says that she needs to have a little rest.

Lady M talks about how she didn't have a death scene, a messenger delivers the news of her death in six lines: 'The queen, my lord, is dead' and Macbeth has a monologue about it. The cast comforts her. Lady M talks about how she wishes she had her own identity as she was never given a first name, if she could have one it would be 'Kellina' and that would be what she would like on her gravestone.

#### **Act 4: Viola/ Cesario (from Twelfth Night)**

Kat looks to Viola and asks if they are feeling ok. Viola takes the microphone and walks to centre stage, saying that if they're going to talk about the role of gender, they can't do that without Viola. They set the scene of Viola's story, being a maiden in a shipwreck with no sign of her twin brother Sebastian or any other members of her family. She has an idea and asks the Sea Captain for some help.

Viola gets a Captain's hat out of their pocket and puts it on an audience member's head. They say their lines from a scene in Twelfth Night, where Viola asks the captain to disguise them as Cesario so they can become Duke Orsino's servant.

Viola talks about how this was the perfect opportunity to reinvent themselves, that when they were young, they would dress up as their twin brother all the time and cause mischief and there was always something so freeing about that. Being a woman is restrictive and boring. Lady M interrupts to say that some women like doing that stuff and Kat and Cleo interject to say they understand what Viola means, they aren't all good little ladies. Ophelia declares that she was a good obedient girl. Viola nods along with the discussion, questioning what a good little lady even is. They talk about a crossroads, in one direction there is a mountain, and the other is a river. Some people make it to the top of the mountain, or swim in the stream but others struggle or find the paths dangerous. There is also a meadow in between the two paths, with many different paths coming off it. Viola see's themself as the meadow. That is who Cesario is.

We go to a scene from Twelfth Night. Viola is talking to Duke Orsino (played by Kat). The Duke asks for Cesario to woo Olivia, Cesario agrees.

Viola talks about how they appear in 8 of the 16 scenes in Twelfth Night, and of those 8 scenes, they are Cesario in 7 of them. They begin to question their identity. They talk about how in lots of Shakespeare's plays, there are lots of female characters dressed as men and male characters dressed as women. They question why this is and wonder if it's because people want to explore gender expression.

Ophelia wants to talk about something joyful like love, and so asks Viola if they love Orsino. They say they do, but that he loves Olivia and wants Cesario to woo her for him.

We go to a scene in Twelfth Night where Cesario is talking to Olivia (played by Ophelia) to woo her. Cesario is kind to Olivia and she begins to take a liking to Cesario. She asks her what their family status is. Cesario replies that they are a gentleman and Olivia tells them that they must tell Orsino that she isn't interested in him.

Kat asks if this is a sticky situation and Viola agrees. It's sticky because Viola loves Orsino, Orsino loves Olivia, Olivia loves Cesario/Viola. They aren't surprised that Olivia has started to like Cesario because they are the first person who has spoken to Olivia like she is a human being rather than a pretty picture. Viola likes the way Orsino sees them, that in the disguise as Cesario their words has worth. They are worried that they need to reveal they are Viola to Orsino for him to be able to love them and they are unsure who they are: Viola, Cesario, both or none?

They talk about when the play was first being performed, all characters would have been played by men, including the female characters. So, when the female characters disguise themselves as men, it was boys dressed as girls dressed as boys. Gender was never questioned.

Ophelia asks if that means Shakespeare was progressive and the characters discuss this. They agree that some characters are, some are not, and some are a bit of both. Viola talks about the freedom they feel being able to explore gender within Shakespeare's rules of gender.

Viola wonders what Orsino would say if they revealed they love him as Cesario, not Viola disguised as Cesario.

We go to a scene from Twelfth Night where Cesario tries to hint to Orsino (played by Cleo) that they are in disguise, but the rest of the cast interject to say they didn't make it very clear at all!

Viola thinks Orsino loves them but doesn't know if he loves them for their mind, their body or their disguise. Cleo declares that they should go on Love is Blind because then they can fall in love with each other's personalities and not their gender, but Viola wants to be loved for who they are and that includes the way they express their gender.

Viola sets some context that their twin brother Sebastian is alive, Olivia mistook him for Cesario and married him. What they must do now is come out as both Viola and Cesario.

We go to a scene in Twelfth Night with Sebastian (played by Lady M), Olivia (played by Ophelia) and Orsino (played by Kat). Viola reveals their disguise and Orsino asks them to marry him. Viola says how free it feels to finally have the truth out there, and to be loved as both Viola and Cesario.

Kat is angry about Viola getting a happy ending and the rest of the cast begin to stick up for Viola. Kat admits that they are wrong to be angry but sometimes it's all they have. The cast support Kat and she questions who is next.

### Act 5: Ophelia

Ophelia sneaks back to her seat while the cast are trying to figure out who is next. When they figure out it's Ophelia, they go to her. Ophelia is shy at first and talks about how she hasn't done anything of real meaning, that all the other characters are known for doing something important such as ruling countries, killing kings, breaking gender norms and going against the status quo. Ophelia always did what she was told by her brother Laertes and her father Polonius.

We go to a scene from Hamlet. Ophelia is talking to Laertes (played by Kat). They discuss Hamlet, and he tells her that even if Hamlet does have feelings for her, he cannot be with her because of his duties to the throne. Laertes exits and Polonius (played by Cleo) enters. Polonius asks Ophelia what she was discussing with Laertes and Ophelia tells him that it was about Hamlet. Polonius dismissed the idea that Hamlet would have feelings for her and tells her that she is not to see him and to reject his advances. Ophelia reluctantly agrees.

Ophelia talks about how she is always obeying her father and her brother. She explains that she did as she was told, but it still didn't help. The cast encourage her to explain further, and she sets the scene, telling them she was sewing in her room when Hamlet enters looking all mad. His shirt was unbuttoned, his socks were down his ankles, and he had no hat.

We go to a scene from Hamlet, with Ophelia explaining what had happened to Polonius (played by Lady M). Ophelia tells him how Hamlet grabbed her by the arm, and stared at her for a long time. The act was frightening and upsetting to her. Polonius believes it is an act of love that has driven him to madness.

Kat is angry that Ophelia is being told that and keeps trying to explain why she is so furious but can't get it right. Cleo steps in and tells Kat to do a lap to cool off. Kat walks around the stage and Cleo, Lady M and Viola tell Ophelia that it wasn't right what her father told her. They tell Ophelia that she is not at fault for men behaving badly and encourage her to say it out loud until she means it.

Ophelia wants to move on to the next scene and gives the context that she was told to give Hamlet his letters back. We go to a scene from Hamlet where Ophelia approaches Hamlet (played by Viola) with a bundle of letters. She says she wants to give them back

and Hamlet denies ever giving them to her. In the scene, Hamlet pushes Ophelia down and tells her that he never loved her, insults her and tells her to go to a nunnery.

Ophelia is on the floor grieving the loss of Hamlet and is upset at the way she has been treated by him. She is confused as she doesn't know what she did to deserve it. She is upset because she didn't do anything wrong, merely followed what she was told to do, and she was the one who has suffered. She questions her identity; she's lived her whole life following orders, never speaking out, never thinking for herself but now she wants to have autonomy over her own head, heart and voice, but she doesn't really know who she is. The other characters interject, telling her she is funny, powerful, outspoken and ambitious but Ophelia replies that she isn't, she is soft and gentle and that's ok too. She is a work in progress and she's ok with that. She wants to spend some time figuring it out and the other characters support her, telling her they will be there for her while she does.

### Epilogue

The cast stand in a line on stage saying one final sonnet. They talk about how there are so many more stories to be told; new, old and stories that don't even exist yet. The characters encourage the audience to go find those stories and tell them in their own unique ways.

# Signposting

It is important that you take the time to think about the wellbeing of the young people you are working with - before, during and after the performance - particularly for those who will connect with the lived experience of the characters in the play. You can find a full synopsis of the show on pages 5 - 10 of this toolkit, we would suggest that you read through this and talk through anything that may be triggering, upsetting or uncomfortable for anyone in the space.

## Young Person's Advisory Service (YPAS)

[www.ypas.org.uk](http://www.ypas.org.uk)

0151 707 1025

## Young Minds

### **Mental Health support**

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk>

24/7 Text support: SHOUT 85258

## Liverpool Light

### **Crisis support for people with mental health needs.**

Out of hours 7days 6pm - 1am

<https://www.liverpool-light.org.uk>

## LDAS

### **Domestic Violence & Abuse**

<https://liverpooldomesticabuseservice.org.uk/>

## **GYRO**

### **Sexuality, Gender & LGBTQ+**

[www.liverpoolcamhsfyi.com/service/gyro-ypas](http://www.liverpoolcamhsfyi.com/service/gyro-ypas)

0151 707 1025

## **Mermaids**

### **Transgender Youth Support**

<https://mermaidsuk.org.uk>

0808 801 0400

## **Anthony Walker Foundation**

### **Race & Race related crime**

[www.anthonywalkerfoundation.com/hate-crime](http://www.anthonywalkerfoundation.com/hate-crime)

0151 237 3974

## Join Us Online

We are keen to connect digitally with our audiences, partners and participants. There are a whole host of ways venues and individual audience members can connect with us artistically and also engage in conversations about the show.

## Credits

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Content created by Natasha Patel from 20 Stories High and Graeae with inspiration from Clean Break Theatre Company & The Survivor's Trust.

[info@20storieshigh.org.uk](mailto:info@20storieshigh.org.uk)

0151 708 9728