



Left: MSSD students performed in *The Comedy of Errors*.

NO ERRORS IN THEIR COMEDY

MSSD Students Participate in Shakespeare Theatre

By Rosalinda Ricasa

American Sign Language and Shakespeare doth mix—at least for nine students from the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD). The students, the only deaf and hard of hearing performers, participated in the Shakespeare Theatre's Text Alive! program with students from high schools throughout the Washington, D.C., and Maryland area. To raves from the audience and praises from trainers, **Brent Benoit, Edward Corporal, Cierra Cotton, Xian Huang, Desmond Kerkulah, Camille Mitchell, Matthew Pollock, Hema Saylor, and Matthew Scott** performed the first scene of Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*.

The project was spearheaded by MSSD English teacher/researcher Judith Giannotti. "When I learned about the Text Alive! program from a friend, I realized that participation would be a

wonderful educational opportunity for our students," she said.

Giannotti applied immediately and the application was accepted.

Thus when her students returned to school last fall, they began a study of Shakespeare. In anticipation of their performance, Giannotti and her class studied *The Comedy of Errors* for three months. Every morning the students read and discussed the play.

"Reading the play was challenging for the students," Giannotti observed. "At the same time, they were stimulated by the plot and its complexities. Every day we would review where we left off the day before, calling on the students' skills in recall and retelling. Students took on the roles of the characters, which helped maintain their attention and their interest."

Students mastered the

vocabulary, Giannotti noted. "They were less inclined to be held up by single words when they were delivering a dramatic line. They were intent upon expressing the meaning of the passage. They familiarized themselves with the words and their vocabularies grew daily. After a few encounters with 'doth,' 'thou,' 'dost,' 'thy,' and 'art,' they signed the modern version of the verb or the pronoun without hesitating."

After studying the play, the students rehearsed for the first scene—assigned by the staff—in MSSD's Theatre Malz. Teacher-artist Niki Jacobsen from the Shakespeare Theatre worked with the students, teaching them how to prepare for a stage performance and how Shakespeare used language. Giannotti was also required to attend four two-hour professional development workshops provided by the Shakespeare Theatre's

education department.

The MSSD students performed in American Sign Language to the delight of the deaf and hearing people in their audiences. One hearing viewer noted, "I can understand [Shakespeare] without the voice interpreter!"

All of the students commented positively about their roles. Student Edward Corporal, who played a sailor, said, "I felt great about my part...because most people laughed and seemed to enjoy [the performance]." Matthew Scott, who played a servant, said he felt nervous at first, but he felt good when the audience laughed. Cierra Cotton, who played the wife of the main character, said she wants to audition for more roles. Matthew Pollock, who played the main character, noted he now prefers to act in plays by Shakespeare because he thinks they are challenging. After the performance, the students attended a matinee performance of *The Comedy of Errors* by the Shakespeare Theatre Company, had a final assessment workshop, and developed a web interview about the performance with the help of Julie Longson, Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center instructional technology specialist.

"The students were inspired by the audience response," said Giannotti. "It was an unforgettable experience for all of us."