Last Thursday evening parents and students at DAHLIA HEIGHTS ELEMENTARY school were treated to an evening of Shakespeare by Dianne Roberts' third grade class. The students had been working with Roberts throughout the year on an extended Shakespeare exploration culminating with this final performance of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Roberts had an inspiration last year to weave together the play and music from the Beatles in order to engage both students and audience and give the students easier access into the themes and issues presented in the Shakespearean comedy.

Roberts applied for an NEA grant (National Educator's Association) in order to make the project possible this year. She was thrilled when her grant, "Opening Doors to Higher Learning: The Bard Meets The Beatles," was selected by the NEA and funded. This allowed her to create a substantial in class library about Shakespeare as well as purchase requisite audio visual components, fabrics, props and multiple visiting artist workshops with theater professionals and Shakespearean scholars. Her in class library features the complete play in both traditional and graphic novel form, which she felt helped the students grapple with the advanced vocabulary and sophisticated poetry. The students read the play in its entirety and studied Elizabethan history and Shakespeare's life.

Theatricum Botanicum, one of Los Angeles' preeminent Shakespeare troupes, worked with the students in a series of in class workshops on such diverse topics as Elizabethan botany, verse and stage combat. The students then visited Theatricum Botanicum in their Topanga home and saw a production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in their lovely outdoor theater modeled after Shakespeare's Globe theater.

After their winter break, students were assigned roles in the play, and began working on the music and scenes with Roberts and Dahlia parent Suzanne Luke, a theater professional. Luke collaborated with Roberts to edit the play down to a streamlined and more manageable length while keeping the Shakespearean language completely in tact. As part of their grant work, Luke created an online presence where other educators can access this edited version of the play: www.amidsummernightsdreamforkids.com

Thursday night's performance featured 31 students. Roberts' 23 third graders took on all the roles in the comedy and 9 additional fourth graders played the Beatles, who became musical narrators of the romantic comedy. In traditional fashion, the students performed without sets, but with hand crafted costumes – most made by Roberts herself. Luke worked with the students and taught them the techniques used by actors performing in the round, so that the performance could forgo traditional proscenium seating. The audience was seated around the sides of the auditorium while the student performers ran, tumbled, fought, delivered their iambic pentameter and danced and sang throughout the space.

Roberts saw clear evidence that her students blossomed while working together on this challenging material and creating a final production. Not only did they learn

they could tackle the difficult Elizabethan language and master it, they also found they could overcome their inhibitions and speak out as their characters, making their audience laugh long and hard at the timeless humor in the play. From the laughter and cheering heard throughout the evening, the students understood they had succeeded. As she folds up the piles of green fairy costumes and packs them into boxes, Dianne Roberts is already thinking about what Shakespearean piece she wants to tackle next.