

MAKING SHAKESPEARE DULL

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When I think of Shakespeare, I think of Gulliver in Lilliputia: a giant tied down and held fast by hundreds of tiny ropes. We are the Lilliputians when we approach Shakespeare, busily fastening our slim theories, inspirations and critical interpretations to the great bulk in a foolish and futile attempt to hold the Titan still.

Another metaphor: a ship so covered in barnacles that the weight makes the sailing sluggish and slow. The generations of criticism, prejudices, assumptions and unchecked misperceptions cling to the great ship Shakespeare and all but drag it under. The barnacles are then blessed with the pomp and sanctity of hallowed writ and the once living ship descends to the depths, the Titan becoming a Titanic, distant, cold, dead.

The constant miracle, of course, is that all one must do is read the lines aloud and listen to them, unvarnished and alive and Shakespeare is among us again, breathing hard on our neck and pushing us about the stage. And if we hold three things in our heads and refer to them throughout the rehearsal process, Shakespeare again becomes accessible, simple and immediate.

The first thing to hold in your mind when working with Shakespeare is that he wrote for the stage, not for the page. The Globe was open to the sun, half the audience was standing and the reverent, hushed atmosphere of today's audience was something a player had to earn and fight to keep against great odds, not something assumed. For the actor, this translates simply to making the primary focus and scene partner not your fellow actor, but the audience immediately in front of you. It is not a job for psychological realism or imitative dexterity; it is a job for speaking clearly and standing still. The audience is directly addressed, of course, in the constant soliloquies and asides, but these moments are not departures from the world of the play but rather logical extensions. When playing Shakespeare, you are never in Verona, never in Arden, never in Egypt, Rome or England. You are always on a stage, playing a role in front of an audience. This consciousness will both heighten the urgency of your speech and action and add a necessary freedom and critical distance to the degree of your role-playing. By not burying yourself in character, you remain free to engage in the larger wordplay and dramatic conceits of the language. While this understanding is blatantly essential when playing a fool or a rustic, it is no less necessary in the more subtle and complex roles. There is always an awareness in Shakespeare that another living being is watching and listening. To disregard this is as crippling as disregarding the rhythm and meter of iambic pentameter.

The second principle, which follows from the first, is that Shakespeare used poetry to write drama, not the other way around. Since the formal, rhythmic constraints of blank verse shape the thoughts and expressions of his characters, the actor must understand and respect the rules of the verse. But neither the actor nor the director should ever be concerned primarily with the beauty of the language. Shakespeare has already created the language; your job is to make sure it is heard clearly. The creative team must be

concerned with action, character, and drama. The reason Shakespeare's plays are still performed is not because of their gorgeous language, but because of their theatrical economy, wit and intelligence. You are never reciting. You are always playing. The character is never engaged in wordplay for its own sake, but only to complete or initiate an action. One must accept that the characters speak in this fashion, understand the rules and governing principles of the style and then banish the idea of "poetry" and all of the word's passive associations in order to chase and follow the actions and thoughts of the character and the play.

The third essential thing to understand when playing Shakespeare is the simplest and yet the most widely disregarded. This is the principle of playing the opposite. Over and over we see "regal" kings and "comical" clowns and "virtuous" heroines and "noble" heroes plodding dully across countless stages in what seems to be a conscious conspiracy to render Shakespeare dull, obvious and dead. Playing a clown as comical is as good an idea as pouring sugar on ice cream. To approach a villain with the goal of expressing his malice is to twirl a mustache and wear a black hat. It is a universal truth that comedy is funny in direct proportion to the gravity of the comedians. If Lou Costello doesn't passionately want to know who's on first, the bit becomes quickly endless and endlessly annoying. If we remember that the fools in Shakespeare's time literally lived on their wits and depended on the understanding and appreciation of their words for their food, clothing and shelter, we would see far fewer slouching, winking, leering and unfunny fools on our stage. In the same way, a tragic figure is only tragic to us when we are allowed to see his frailty, her humanity. Play the man who bears the crown, not the king who wears it. Pay attention to the heroine's work, not her worth. You will find Shakespeare reaching towards you and handing you the tools if you begin to play the opposite and the weight of the great roles will lift from your shoulders and become wings.

When working on Shakespeare, stay on the stage, aware of the audience, study but never play the poetry and look for the opposite of the established understanding of the role. With these three things in mind, Shakespeare becomes your collaborator and partner and his plays live again, rescued from the depths of unthinking tradition, liberated from the thousand thin ropes of theory.

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