Shakespeare Without Fear

5 points to remember when performing the works of Shakespeare...

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INTRODUCTION

Asking why an actor should learn to perform Shakespeare is like asking why a marathon runner should learn how to walk. So many people are intimidated by Shakespeare and think it is out of reach. They mistakenly think that they should work on a "method" acting technique before approaching Shakespeare. In reality, just the opposite is true. If you work on Shakespeare first, it provides basic skills that are essential for all other venues of acting. No time spent with Shakespeare is ever wasted.

When directors see an actor who is able to interpret Shakespeare, they can be confident that the actor will be able to interpret any other text. While you may explore your own feelings as you study acting, in the end it is the feelings of the audience that matter most. The language of Shakespeare allows an actor to truly open up, both in emotion and articulation. The performance of Shakespeare provides a perfect vehicle for bringing out the actor in a way that will deliver the emotion to the audience.

The study of Shakespeare is a life-long process. Any time you spend working on Shakespeare will increase your confidence as a performer. Ultimately, if you allow it, the works of Shakespeare will enrich your soul.

I hope these points are helpful to you. Remember, plays are called "plays" for a reason. Once the work is done, playfulness is essential. Work hard on learning the text. Work hard on articulation. Work hard on finding your moments. Then ENJOY and PLAY!

Sincerely,

Jack Cornwell, Associate Director

BEING HEARD AND UNDERSTOOD

Yes, this is essential, and it is not simply a property of Shakespeare or the classics. Every player in every play must be HEARD and UNDERSTOOD. It is especially important with Shakespeare, since the language you will be dealing with is four centuries old. We live in the year 2014, and varying accents are acceptable, but ARTICULATING the words is vital to the performance art of Shakespeare. Even if you don't understand each word you are saying, ARTICULATE it! You may find (and you probably will) that the more you go over the lines the more sense they will make. Do not be afraid to OVER-LEARN the lines. It will ultimately benefit your performance and the satisfaction of the audience. Also keep in mind that consonants are even more important than vowels.

To assist you in developing this skill, an appendix is attached that will guide you through a basic vocal and physical warm-up. Read it, digest it, and make it your own. Incorporate a warm-up into your everyday preparation and articulation will come naturally to you.

THE DIAPHRAGM

Much money has been spent and wasted on books, lectures and training telling people that in order to act Shakespeare one must learn to "breathe with your diaphragm." The fact is you cannot breathe without your diaphragm. You've been doing it all your life. The diaphragm is a sheet of internal skeletal muscle that extends across the bottom of the rib cage. As your lungs contract and expand, so does the diaphragm at the base of your lungs. When actors talk about "breathing with the diaphragm," it is a simple technique being described. You simply must exhale, fill the bottom of your lungs before the top, and it will feel like filling your belly with air before you fill your upper lungs. It is a valuable technique since many Shakespearean phrases are long. It is not essential, however, and should not intimidate any beginner that does not catch on right away.

THE POETRY

Much of Shakespeare's work (though certainly not all of it) is written in iambic pentameter. This consists of five feet of verse (ten syllables) with the second syllable of each line accented. ("Shall **I** com**pare** thee **to** a **sum**mer's **day**?") It is meant to roughly imitate the beat of a human heart. I have known English teachers and even stage directors who make this much of the focus, but there are problems to this approach. First of all, many lines are irregular and do not perfectly fit the pattern. Secondly, many of the plays are written in prose, so any concentration on the rhythm of the pentameter is irrelevant. The formula I advise is simple: when you find the iambic pentameter, it can be a great help in learning lines. Once you have mastered the lines (and you must master them), then forget about the verse altogether. It will be there whether it is emphasized or not, and too much concentration on it will result in a "sing-song" delivery which can sound artificial. Once again, if you are learning a prose speech, all of this is irrelevant.

CHOOSING YOUR MOMENTS

Since people have a reverence for Shakespeare, there is sometimes a tendency to treat every line with reverence. Well, Shakespeare was not a man of few words. There are some lines and words that need to be spoken rapidly and "thrown away," and others that must be emphasized. This is another reason to OVER-LEARN the lines and OVER-ARTICULATE when possible. ***If every line and every word is important, then none are important.*** Find moments. Find pauses. Find emotion. But please FIND THEM CAREFULLY.

Shakespeare provides the ideal text for learning this skill. The words are wise, keen, and beautiful, and they are the foundation of the modern English language. Let the words guide you toward what is most important. Savor the feeling and texture of the language and you will find specific pieces of text that beg to be emphasized. Use this to help you choose your moments.

LAUGHTER, TEARS, AND IRONY

Finding irony is one of the most valuable tools that a player can develop. It is not a technique that is peculiar to Shakespearean performance, but it is enhanced with the performance of Shakespeare, since it is portraying a reality that is a bit larger than life. This involves the individual character finding the comedic value in a tragic scene or the tragic value in a comedic scene. In the simplest of terms, some directors will give you a note to "play against the lines." Imagine for a moment the simple line, "I'm happy." If an actor says it while smiling with wide-eyed joy, that is playing with the line. If however, the actor says it frowning with a sense of impending doom, that is playing against the line. Conversely, take the simple line, "I'm dying." If an actor plays the line with tragic intent, it can be moving if done well. But imagine playing against the line and laughing while saying "I'm dying." At times (about 80% of the time by my calculations) this can be the more dramatic and appealing choice.

In what are labeled Shakespeare's "comedies," (farces by today's standards) an important element to remember is that although the audience realizes it's all for fun, the characters involved more often than not think they are involved in tragic situations that cannot be resolved. By playing the tragedy (or overplaying it melodramatically), the comedy is many times enhanced. In the great tragedies, there generally comes a point in the play where a character realizes that he/she has brought the tragedy down by his/her own choices, and thus the use of laughter can be quite effective (think of King Lear or Lady MacBeth).

I used the word "comedies" in quotation marks earlier, since by modern standards the Shakespearean "comedies" would be considered farces. He also had a

series of what are now called “problem comedies” or “tragicomedies,” in which all things are more serious and realistic, yet happy endings occur (and some endings lack the palpable realism that modern audiences desire). These plays require a little special attention, but irony in any of the venues will serve you well.

Laughter and sobbing on stage are both achieved by a heartbreakingly simple technique. It was touched on earlier with the diaphragm, but everything happens with breath. It’s 2014, and thankfully most young men and women seem to be aware of their abdominal muscles. Use them. Employ and practice them. Although a valuable appendix is attached concerning warm-up exercises and articulation, I always advise actors that the most important exercise they can do is the contraction and expansion of the abdominal muscles, forcing breath in and out. Open your vocal cords during the exercise, and you will laugh and cry with great ease.

Once you master the lines, remember that irony is the single greatest tool you can use to capture an audience.

Appendix A: A NOTE ABOUT AUTHORSHIP

William Shakespeare was baptized on April 26, 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon, England. Since it was the custom of the time to baptize the child on the third day after birth, his birthday is generally believed to be April 23rd, although perhaps the date has been burned into communal memory since April 23rd was also the date of his death 52 years later in 1616. At some point between 1585 and 1592, he became an actor and playwright in the London of Queen Elizabeth, becoming a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men. To this day it is believed that he is the world's most popular playwright. By some estimates, there is not a moment that passes on earth when *Hamlet* (just one of his plays) is not being performed at some point in the world.

Conspiracy theories have often flourished regarding the man and the true authorship of the plays. Many of these theories start with the premise that we have so little documentation of Shakespeare's life. The fact is that there is more documentation of Shakespeare than of any other playwright of the age except for Ben Jonson (who made it a point to chronicle his own life). In a sense, authorship is irrelevant. The plays and their impact on our culture are undeniable. Several candidates are the most popular among conspiracy theorists: Francis Bacon shared a certain world view with Shakespeare; Marlowe shared a writing style, and the Earl of Oxford (for some reason the current darling of the conspiracy theorists) shared absolutely nothing with Shakespeare, Marlowe or Bacon.

Yet the debate lingers. Much of this goes on because some people simply will not believe that an actor could have written such glorious works. In the age of Shakespeare it was the accepted practice to hire poets to write plays for the acting companies. The

Lord Chamberlain's men were able to avoid this practice at times because one of their own actors was also a fine poet. Although the Elizabethan age is widely considered "The Golden Age" of English literature, very few plays outside of the Shakespearean canon are widely performed. The man who wrote these plays (and the evidence points resoundingly to William Shakespeare) had not only a command of English but a practical knowledge of the theatre and what would work on stage.

Is it possible that an actor could have written these works? It is my personal belief that only an actor could have done so. This is the reason that the plays are still popular among both audiences and performers four centuries later. This guy knew what works on stage.

Appendix B: VOCAL WARM-UP EXERCISES

Using the steps below, you can create a vocal warm-up for yourself. Think of this as an outline. You can piece together the different elements in many ways. Generally, you should start with some physical awareness, relaxation, and breath exercises before moving on to the larger, more extroverted releases of sound. The goal is a free voice in a free body.

For a thorough study of the voice exercises introduced here, read Freeing the Natural Voice (Drama Book Publishers) and Freeing Shakespeare's Voice (Theatre Communications Group), both by Kristin Linklater.

Modify these exercises as necessary if you have any injuries or other physical limitations. Consult a doctor if you have questions about whether a particular exercise is safe for you.

1. Start with a generous yawn and stretch. Encourage a wide open throat, a release of breath and sound that originates deep in the belly, and a fully committed stretch that starts at center and moves out through the arms and legs, fingers and toes. Indulge.
2. Gently shake loose as you sigh out on sound. Imagine sending vibrations of sound down through your legs, arms, shoulders, buttocks and face as you loosen tie muscles. Loosen your shoulders, hip sockets, knees and ankles
3. Turn your attention inward (standing, sitting or lying on the floor). Take an inventory of your body looking for areas of tension. Let the breath carry away these pockets of held energy. Picture the bones of your skeleton and let the inner architecture of your body support you. If standing, let your head drop forward and then drop down through the spine, vertebrae by vertebrae. Shake loose at the base of your spine and sigh out vibrations. Roll back up through the spine sensing each vertebra as accurately as possible.
4. In this state of physical awareness and relaxation, notice the action of your natural breathing (jaw relaxed, lips parted). Let the outgoing breath be a release. Notice the moment when you are empty of breath. Yield to the next impulse for an incoming breath. Add the impulse for a sigh-of-relief just on breath.
5. Let the sound vibrations of your voice connect to an outgoing release of breath. Start with a simple touch of sound — *huh*. Add a double release of sound – *huh-huh*. Sigh the vibrations out on a feeling of relief. Look for an experience of sound that is as much like the experience of breath as possible. Aim for 100% vibrations. Don't let it be breathy or raspy. Indulge. Be playful.
6. Flutter your lips with breath to loosen them. Stretch your lips with your fingers. Flutter again while releasing sound. Release a sigh of relief on a hum. *Mmmmmmm*

7. Taste your vibrations on your lips. Enjoy them. Pay attention to them. Notice where you feel them buzzing around on the bones of your face and upper skull. Now use your fingers to trace your vibrations from their origin in the belly, to their arrival on the lips, to their release through an open mouth. *Huh-huh-mmmmmmmm-ahhhh*
8. Gently roll your head and neck. (Keep your neck long as it rolls around to the back. Don't collapse at the base of your neck.) Hum as you roll and continue to notice where you feel vibrations gathering. Now try dropping down through your spine quite freely and coming back up. Add a hum and then release vibrations out when you come back up. Bounce your shoulders and knees as you let the vibrations fly out. Check in with the touch of sound – *huh-huh*. Has it changed at all since you began?
9. Massage the muscles around the jaw hinge. Holding your chin firmly, gently jiggle your jaw loose as you let vibrations flow out. Put the tip of your tongue behind your front teeth. Roll the middle of the tongue forward to stretch the root of the tongue. Create space between the tongue and upper teeth by smiling up your cheek bones. Sigh vibrations through that space as you stretch your tongue. Breathe in on a whispered *kaa*. Notice how the soft palate and tongue spring away from each other. Encourage the soft plate to stretch up high. Let sound pour out. Add a tongue stretch. Check in again with your initial touch of sound – *huh-huh*. Do you notice any more space in your mouth for vibrations?
10. Drop your head back keeping your throat open. Sigh out the deepest, darkest vibrations of your voice. *Hahhhh* Wake up and explore this part of your voice. Now move to the mouth. Find the pitches that seem to fill your mouth with sound. *Huhhhh*. Explore. Drop your head forward. Feel vibrations buzzing forward on your upper teeth. *Heeeee*. Play with this part of your voice. After exploring each area several times, blend all three areas together on *Heyy*. Let the sound fly out. Shake vibrations out through different parts of your body.
11. Wake up each articulator. Play with different consonant sounds. Guh-duh-buh-duh- etc.
12. Wake up your entire range and energize your body. Speak some Shakespeare, sing a song. Enjoy your free voice.