

Shakespeare's Verse

The actors' process

All actors work in different ways, but there are particular demands and pleasures to be found preparing for the performance of a classical text. This is because in texts such as those by Shakespeare, or the Jacobean dramatists (Webster, Middleton, etc.) there is an enormous amount of information about who the characters are in the way they speak. Shakespeare's characters are highly articulate – as they think, they speak and for the actor, what the thought is and how the character expresses that thought in speech is the most important indication of who they are. People in Shakespeare's plays speak their thoughts, sometimes even aloud to themselves when they soliloquise. So actors will find much of the specific information and evidence they need to build up a characterisation by a forensic examination of the sense and sound of the words in the play.

Before rehearsal

Most actors will do some background research into the world of the play and may read historical background where useful. They will know that the real Brutus was probably very different from Shakespeare's invention and that where there are contradictions, it is Shakespeare's Brutus they are playing. They will want to research the political and historical background – but like all research, this is only useful to the actor where it gives imaginative stimulus to the creative process. Their process must always be subjective, which is why the relationship between the actor and the 'objectivity' of the director is so crucial.

Actors will often have conversations with the director before rehearsals start; about the concept of the production and how the director sees the character they are playing. It's important that the director and the actor share a view because although there are creative benefits in negotiating small points of interpretation during rehearsals, if there is a fundamental disagreement about who the character is, the process is impossible.

Homework

The work that actors do on their own outside the rehearsal room, before and during rehearsals, will inform their use of the rehearsal process with their fellow actors. This work involves investigation of the text, the results of which can then be fed back into the rehearsals. So if an actor makes a discovery about their character by spending a couple of hours looking at a particular scene at home, they can use that discovery in the rehearsal room where it will change the scene for them and for the other actors in it, and hopefully add to the depth of the interpretation of that scene.

Investigating the text

Actors start by reading the play several times so that they can become familiar with its structure and narrative. Gradually they begin to see the shape of the play, where the high points in the drama are, where the pace is slower, etc. Then they can begin to focus on the character they are playing, and ask some questions:

N.B. From now on 'I' refers to the character, not the actor.

- What do I do in the play?
- What do I say about myself?
- What do other characters say about me?

Actors always remember that they and the other characters in the play may not be telling the truth! As in life, they will have their agendas and reasons for saying what they say at any given moment...

An example of this is the moment in Julius Caesar (Act I Scene II) when Caesar says of Cassius:

*Let me have men about me that are fat;
Sleek-headed men and such as sleep o' nights:
Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look;
He thinks too much: such men are dangerous.*

ANTONY

*Fear him not, Caesar; he's not dangerous;
He is a noble Roman and well given.*

CAESAR

*Would he were fatter! But I fear him not:
Yet if my name were liable to fear,
I do not know the man I should avoid
So soon as that spare Cassius. He reads much;
He is a great observer and he looks
Quite through the deeds of men: he loves no plays,
As thou dost, Antony; he hears no music;
Seldom he smiles, and smiles in such a sort
As if he mock'd himself and scorn'd his spirit
That could be moved to smile at any thing.
Such men as he be never at heart's ease
Whiles they behold a greater than themselves,
And therefore are they very dangerous.*

Caesar gives us a description of Cassius, which powerfully conveys a sense of who he is. He is someone who denies himself pleasure, preferring to 'read' and 'observe' the world. He is lean AND hungry, suggesting again the denial of appetite, whether sensual or emotional. It's suggested that Cassius' leanness is a result of 'thinking too much', as though the energy of his thoughts keeps him thin. He rarely smiles and when he does, it is with a lack of humour or spontaneity...

This is very helpful to the actor playing Cassius and has been the starting point for many interpretations of the role (i.e. John Gielgud in the Joseph Mankiewicz film). It is helpful to the actor because it is consistent with the character portrayed by Shakespeare, allowing for its critical tone which is Caesar's only. Caesar is perceptive and accurate in his assessment of the fundamental essence of the man.

Brutus, played by Orson Welles in his 1937 production, is the tragic hero of Julius Caesar, a man persuaded into action by the 'lean and hungry' Cassius and whose moral and philosophical identity is tormented by the consequences. If we look at his soliloquy in Act II scene I of the play, we can begin to get an idea of who he is:

Brutus is alone and is thinking about the crisis posed by Caesar's ambition to become Emperor...

*It must be by his death: and for my part,
I know no personal cause to spurn at him,
But for the general. He would be crown'd:
How that might change his nature, there's the question.
It is the bright day that brings forth the adder;
And that craves wary walking. Crown him? – that; –
And then, I grant, we put a sting in him,
That at his will he may do danger with.
The abuse of greatness is, when it disjoins
Remorse from power: and, to speak truth of Caesar,
I have not known when his affections sway'd
More than his reason. But 'tis a common proof,
That lowliness is young ambition's ladder,
Whereto the climber-upward turns his face;
But when he once attains the upmost round,
He then unto the ladder turns his back,
Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees
By which he did ascend. So Caesar may.
Then, lest he may, prevent. And, since the quarrel
Will bear no colour for the thing he is,
Fashion it thus; that what he is, augmented,
Would run to these and these extremities:
And therefore think him as a serpent's egg
Which, hatch'd, would, as his kind, grow mischievous,
And kill him in the shell.*



Christian McKay ('Orson Welles') in 'Me and Orson Welles'. Dir Richard Linklater. Copyright CinemaNX Films One Ltd 2008. Photo: Liam Daniel

It must be by his death:

Brutus begins by stating that the only way to ensure Caesar doesn't become Emperor is that he should die. The first noticeable thing therefore is (and this is often how the actor makes discoveries) what Brutus DOESN'T say – he doesn't use an active term like 'kill', or 'murder', he communicates a passivity that may not want to be disturbed. The sounds are also passive – b's and d's – which soften the more pointed sounds of the first two words, as though Brutus retreats from the idea even as he thinks it.

*...and, for my part, I know no personal cause to spurn at him,
But for the general.*

It is striking that there are very few hard sounds in this line. Brutus underlines his unwillingness to take responsibility for the decision by saying 'and for my part', as though his view was just another view and not the view of someone at the centre of the political world and with close ties to Caesar. Again, Brutus can't quite engage with the reality of what he's contemplating. Notice the repetition of the sound in 'I know no...' He is clear that he has no personal reason to hurt Caesar (spurn at him) but for the general good. His action will be selfless.

He would be crown'd: how that might change his nature, there's the question.

Brutus states a fact. Caesar's ambition is now clear. It's a statement of one-syllable words – anchored in sound reality by the 'd' word endings, which give weight to the statement. He then asks the question that he will explore in the rest of the speech and Shakespeare uses repetitive sounds again to reinforce the threat contained in the idea – 'change his nature'.

It is the bright day that brings forth the adder; and that craves wary walking.

Crown him? – that; –

*And then, I grant, we put a sting in him,
That at his will he may do danger with.
The abuse of greatness is, when it disjoins
Remorse from power: and, to speak truth of Caesar,
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